

**Parent Involvement in the Early Elementary Grades:  
An Analysis of Mothers' Practices and Teachers' Expectations**

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## ***Introduction***

Increasing parents' involvement in their children's schooling has become a considerable focus of our educational system in the last three decades. What was once an innovative idea forming the cornerstone of Head Start is now an integral part of many schools. Researchers have collected a great deal of cross-sectional and qualitative data revealing a positive relationship between various types of parent involvement and children's educational achievement (Epstein, 1983, 1986; Henderson, 1987; Lightfoot, 1978; Muller, 1995a, 1995b; Powell, 1989; Snow, Barnes, Chandler, Goodman & Hemphill, 1991). However, the defining characteristics of parent involvement have been conceptualized in various ways: reform movements call for implementation of partnership models (see the special issue of the Harvard Educational Letter; Lynn, 1997) while at the same time policy makers are beginning to question the wisdom of stronger emphasis on involvement (Finn, 1998; Cavarretta, 1998). We investigated parent involvement in schools and at home for a sample of low-income children who have participated in a longitudinal study over eight years, as well as their elementary school teachers' expectations of parent involvement, by asking:

- 1) What are the primary involvement activities of mothers during preschool and early elementary school?
- 2) What are teacher expectations for parent involvement across the primary grades?
- 3) Are maternal reports of parent involvement related to teachers' assessment of parental support and commitment to the child's education?

We emphasize the ways that mothers get involved at the school site and form relationships with their children's preschool and early elementary school teachers, because these first few years are

crucial in establishing patterns of involvement that have implications in the later grades for parents' relationship to the school (Zigler & Muenchow, 1992). School-based parent involvement may help boost achievement for children already doing well and may foster parent-teacher relationships necessary for fair and effective interventions for children with academic concerns. This is particularly relevant to this sample, as approximately one-fourth of the children have been retained and/or have received some type of special education services.

From the mothers' perspective, parent involvement activities include interactions with school personnel, as well as home-based activities, such as bookreading and other literacy-related experiences. We take a particular look at the types of involvement that happen in the schools because in the preschool and early elementary grades a parent's visibility is often regarded by teachers as the only major evidence that they care about the child's education. These early experiences of involvement can set up expectations and patterns for later years.

Research suggests that teachers make quick decisions about children's ability based on first impressions with little attention to careful and systematic observation (Seligman, Tucker & Lambert, 1972). Children's initial ability grouping assignments can have tremendous implications for future academic achievement (Oakes, 1985); therefore an effective partnership between parents and teachers can facilitate the exchange of information about children's learning styles and abilities. Good parent-teacher relationships are important because in their absence teachers may infer that children will have inadequate encouragement or assistance in the home, further supporting the placement in lower ability groups (Epstein & Becker, 1982; Moles, 1993). Stevenson and Baker (1987) report that children with more involved parents had higher teacher ratings of school performance, although it is unclear whether parent involvement activities caused children's higher achievement or whether involvement led

teachers to view the child more favorably.

As the teachers in our sample described parent involvement, their emphasis tends to be more on home-based literacy and skills activities than on volunteer involvement at the school. We examine the intersections and contradictions between the views of teachers and parents and attempt to illuminate the changes that take place in both of these sets of expectations as children progress through elementary school.

### ***Methods***

This analysis is done within the context of the Home-School Study of Language and Literacy Development. Snow (1991) and colleagues designed this longitudinal study to investigate the precursors of language and literacy development for low income children. Eighty-two children were recruited at age 3 and now approximately 55 are currently being followed into their freshman year of high school. Data has been collected almost every year from either the homes, the schools, or both and will continue to be collected from these settings for the duration of the study. As the project has progressed through the years, researchers on the study have moved from analyses that focus only on home data or only on school data, towards attempts to link these two domains. Ours is a preliminary investigation of the way that home and school data are related in the area of parent involvement.

### *Sample*

Children and Mothers. This sample of low-income children and their families has participated over eight years in this longitudinal study. The majority are White (66%), a fifth are African American or of African descent, and several are Hispanic (English speaking). Almost half of the sample families are headed by single mothers. The average maternal education level is high school graduate. Approximately two-thirds of the children were eligible for free lunch throughout preschool and the elementary grades. (See Table 1 for descriptive statistics.)

Teachers. Selected data from teachers were compiled from extensive interviews and surveys administered to teachers of the target children for grades 2, 3, 4, and 6. Because children have different teachers each year and sample children do not attend the same school, we will present descriptive information on teachers by grade. Teachers were matched to the target child for several overlapping years for quantitative analyses, while our qualitative analyses were conducted on a group level by grade. We have information from a total of 223 teachers across the four grades. Participating schools are located in the greater Boston area and represent a mix of urban and suburban communities serving students of low to low-middle socio-economic status. Over half of the teachers have advanced degrees and, on average, 19 years of experience teaching. (See Table 2 for descriptive statistics.)

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for target children and families (n=71).\*

	n	%
<i>Gender</i>		
Boys	33	47%
Girls	38	53%
<i>Race/ethnicity of Target Child</i>		
Black/African Descent	14	20%
Anglo American	47	66%
Latino/Hispanic	5	7%
Bi-Racial	5	7%
<i>Family constellation</i>		
Single mother	29	41%
Two adults present	35	49%
Extended family	7	10%
<i>Income</i>		
Less than \$10,000	27	38%
\$10,000 to \$15,000	11	16%
\$15,000 to \$20,000	11	16%
\$20,000 to \$25,000	8	11%
More than \$25,000	14	20%
<i>Income source</i>		
Employment	42	59%
Welfare/AFDC	28	39%
Other (SSI, Alimony, Child Support)	1	2%
<i>Maternal education level</i>		
No high school diploma	13	18%
GED or Equivalency Diploma	14	20%
High School Graduate	44	62%

\*These statistics are gathered from the first wave of data collection reported in this analysis, when the target children were 4 years old.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics about teachers and their classrooms.

	Grade 2 (n=60)	Grade 3 (n=53)	Grade 4 (n=54)	Grade 6 (n=56)
Average class size including special ed students (range)	22 (12-33)	23 (6-29)	23 (12-32)	21 (4-31)
Percentage of sample children eligible for free lunch	66%	65%	69%	Didn't ask this year
Percentage of schools serving low to low/middle SES students	74%	80%	81%	64%
Average years of teaching experience (range)	18 years (1-37)	19 years (3-38)	19 years (1-42)	19 years (2-39)
Percentage of teachers having a Master's Degree or higher	52%	51%	70%	67%

### *Measures and Protocols*

Home Measures. Two measures of school-based parent involvement data were collected from mothers at four time points: target child ages 4, 5, 7, and 9. A third measure of parental report of the importance of home literacy activities was also collected when the children were 7. A fourth measure of parental help with homework was collected when the children were 9. Narratives from semi-structured qualitative interviews conducted when the target children were age 7 were analyzed as well.

*C* *Frequency of Parent-Teacher Contact:* Frequency, or estimated average maternal reported interactions with teacher per month, ranges from .25 (conference visits only) to 20 (daily) visits per month. This is time-varying at four time points.

*C* *Volunteer Activities at School:* Type(s) of volunteer activity or responsibility mothers reported at each interview (target child age 4, 5, 7 & 9), was ranked on a six point scale representing the amount of influence the mother might have in interactions with school personnel, ranging from drop-in visits to classrooms to policy council member active in school decision-making. This time-varying volunteer index is a sum score reflecting multiple volunteer activities in a given year. The categories for volunteer activities in ascending rank order are:

- 1) contributes supplies, visits classrooms, attends Parent/Teacher Organization (PTO) meetings
- 2) volunteers for special events, e.g., field trips
- 3) classroom parent, who volunteers on a regularly scheduled basis in the classroom, or parent who volunteers in the school library
- 4) classroom aide, who holds a part-time paid position either in the target child's classroom or in another classroom in the school
- 5) school staff, who may hold a full-time paid position and be colleague to the target child's teacher
- 6) policy council member or PTO officer, who helps make policy regarding the school operation

This range, from 1 to 6, represents the amount of influence the mother might have in interactions with school personnel, both on a personal level with the teacher, and in terms of decision-making for the school's operation. The category ratings were added together to form a total volunteer involvement score for each mother for each year data was collected.

*C* *Importance of Home Literacy Activities:* When the children were 7 years old, mothers were asked how important the help they provided at home was to their child's early learning of how to read and write. These were coded into four categories: "not important," "somewhat

important,” “as important as that provided at school,” and “more important than that provided at school.”

C *Maternal Reports of Help with Homework:* When the target children were age 9, we began to ask mothers questions about their practices of helping with homework. A composite variable was created from the following set of questions, which mothers answered as either “yes=1” or “no=0” including: “Do you help with your child’s homework,” “make sure that it is complete,” “go over it when it is finished,” and “sit down and work on it with child.” Scores for this variable ranged from 1 to 4, with an average of 2.25.

C *Narrative Data From Interviews:* From the interview data collected when the children were 7 years old, narrative sections were analyzed that related to parent involvement and the mother’s beliefs about her role in the educational development of her child. The following prompts from the interview protocol provide the framework for understanding maternal involvement at school and in the home and the mother’s beliefs about the connection between home and school:

- 1) Tell me about the last time you talked with your child’s teacher.
- 2) Thinking back over your child’s school experience can you think of a time that you felt you were able to get the school to listen to you/intervene/make changes that you thought were important for your child’s education.
- 3) Thinking back, can you recall an experience where you tried to make a difference with your child’s schooling and either the teacher, administration, or others connected with the school did not listen/help out/take you seriously?
- 4) Were there things you did with your child to help him/her learn how to read?

The first three prompts allow the mother to describe her relationship with the teacher and tell stories about particular opportunities for cooperation and dealing with conflict. The fourth prompt pulls for information about home-based involvement that reflects specific practices and beliefs about the mother as educator. Our goal in exploring these sections of the interviews was to uncover the different

meanings that mothers in the sample have about their involvement, both at school and in the home, and to describe the quality of the relationships between mothers and teachers, and the quality of maternal involvement.

School Measures. Teacher data was collected when the children were in second, third, fourth and sixth grade. For grades 2, 3, and 4, teachers completed pencil and paper surveys, while sixth grade data was collected in a structured interview format, which was tape recorded and transcribed. Survey and interview protocols included a wide variety of information about educational experience, teaching practice, and curriculum, as well as information on the target child's progress. For this paper we limit our analysis to the following variables:

*C*     *Expectations about Parent Involvement:* Teachers of grades 2, 3, 4, and 6 were each asked this open-ended question: "What do you think is the parent's role with regard to involvement in a child's education/schooling?." Answers were compiled and content coded by each of the authors. There was an initial 85% agreement between the raters. Discrepancies were reviewed and corrected, allowing more precise criteria for categories.

*C*     *Teacher Assessment of Parental Support for the Target Child's School Achievement:* When children were in grades 2, 3, and 4, teachers were asked to "characterize the role of the target child's family in supporting his/her school achievement." Teachers were asked to respond on a five-point rating scale from "strong and positive" to "negative." These measures are used to test whether mothers who do more at school are viewed by teachers as more supportive of their child's education.

*Analysis*

To answer our first research question, we coded data on parent-teacher contact and mothers' involvement activities and determined frequencies for each year we collected that data (target children ages 4, 5, 7, and 9). We conducted an exploratory qualitative analysis of the maternal interview administered when the target children were seven years old (containing retrospective data). The interview data includes attention to the context in which involvement takes place through the following variables: range of opportunities for parent involvement, flexibility of school personnel as reported by mothers, flexibility of parent (in terms of employer, own school commitments, family responsibilities), and mother's assessment of the school site environment for parent involvement. The interviews conducted in this year were audio-taped and transcribed. We used a content analysis (Huberman & Miles, 1994) to identify various areas of parent involvement and mother-teacher relationships. Against this backdrop, we highlight mothers' beliefs about their roles in terms of involvement in preschool and in elementary school.

To answer our second research question, we reviewed teacher surveys in which teachers were asked to describe the role of parents' involvement in their children's education and schooling. Open-ended responses were compiled from teachers across the four grades (2, 3, 4, and 6) and categorized into 15 types of involvement (or responses about involvement). We used a time-ordered matrix to analyze these data using content analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994) to determine if and how expectations for parents change as children move into the later grades. This qualitative analysis is contrasted and compared to results from maternal interviews. In addition, we calculated percentages of responses in each category at each year to examine the relative importance teachers as a group

attributed to these various forms of involvement and to examine how these expectations changed across the four grade levels.

We used a quantitative analysis to answer our third question. Data from the mothers has been coded from four years of maternal interviews (when children were ages 4, 5, 7, and 9). Our predictors include two variables of parent involvement. The first is frequency of contact with teachers ranging from once a year (annual conference only) to every school day (regular contact at drop-off and pick-up). The frequency variable is calculated as a monthly average based on maternal reports. The second is a rank-ordered parent volunteer involvement score, also based on maternal reports. The volunteer variable ranges from 1 (visiting the classroom, contributing supplies) to 6 (serving on governance body for school and helping to develop policy regarding the school's operation, e.g., PTO officer or Head Start Policy Council Member). These categories are deliberately ranked to reflect the power dynamic between the mother and the teacher, or other school personnel. Finally, we tested for the relationship between maternal reports of parent involvement and teacher assessment of the family's support of their child's school achievement for the years of overlapping data collection, using correlational tests.

### ***Results***

*Question 1: What are the primary involvement activities of mothers during preschool and early elementary school?*

In the preschool and earliest years of elementary school, mothers spoke primarily of their contacts, or communication, with their children's teachers when asked about parental involvement.

Because the focus of the Home-School Study is on language and literacy development, we also gathered information about language and literacy practices for each wave of home data.

Frequency of Parent-Teacher Contact: The frequency variable for teacher contact in preschool (target child age 4) had a bimodal distribution, with a third of the mothers meeting with teachers daily while a third averaged monthly meetings. Over the years this split became more pronounced as fewer mothers continued to maintain a high frequency of contact with their child's teacher, while more of the mothers had minimal contact (formal conferences only). Even as some mothers continued a pattern of frequent contact, the overall pattern of participation for the sample is one that diminishes over time. For target children at age four, mothers reported an average frequency of teacher contact of 8 times per month. This dropped down to 6.4 on average when children were age five, an average of 3.5 for children at age seven, and 2.8 times per month by the time the children were nine years old (Table 3).

Volunteer Activities: When the children were four, mothers tended to participate in a greater variety of ways, such as visiting the classrooms, volunteering for field trips and other special events, as well as coming in regularly to fulfill duties as classroom parents. As target children grew older, mothers tended to limit their participation activities to classroom visits and contributing supplies. Overall, most mothers have limited responsibilities and the few that do more in the preschool classrooms continue to do so as their child gets older (Table 3). What this may be telling us is that there are more options for parents of younger children and that as children get older there are limited opportunities for parental volunteer involvement at the school. As children move into the later grades, the focus begins to shift as teachers place greater emphasis on parental roles in helping with homework, as opposed to frequent contact or school-based activities.

Table 3. Maternal reports of parent involvement activities.

	Target Child Aged 4	Target Child Aged 5	Target Child Aged 7	Target Child Aged 9
Average teacher contact per month	7.9	6.4	3.5	2.8
Average level of volunteer activities	3.1	2.0	2.4	1.2

Using content analysis (Huberman & Miles, 1994) we explored the types of ways that mothers were involved at the school site. While few mothers advocated for academic changes and services for their child, many mothers spoke of working with school personnel to respond to non-academic or social problems, for example, transportation concerns or playground disputes. Descriptions of the quality of the relationship between mothers and teachers ranged from close friendship, empathic understanding, cooperative problem solving and communication, to minimal interactions, distrust, or adversarial conflicts.

Reviewing the various instances in which each mother discussed her involvement in the school, we were able to see that mothers give different meaning to similar involvement activities. For instance, helping out in the classrooms might be an opportunity for one mother to observe her child's behavior and for another mother it might be a fun and self-fulfilling activity that need not even take place in her own child's classroom. For some mothers, participating in special events or accompanying children on field trips is a chance to build the child's self-esteem by sending a message that the mother really cares about his or her school experience. Below, we provide some examples of the way mothers talked

about communication, volunteering, and literacy activities.

Communication: Speaking with their children's teachers was an important component of involvement for many of the mothers, especially during preschool and the earlier elementary school years. Mothers' reports of these practices reflected the positive aspects of parent-teacher relationships. This mother of a second grader reports how she and her child's teacher work together to help her daughter with homework:

*I talk to her teacher all the time, [my child] has some what of a problem getting her homework from home to school so we communicate quite often on that... the teacher and I had made a pact that if she doesn't sit down, you know, if her attention span wanders, you know, I would go to school, or the teacher would come here.*

But many mothers revealed a more problematic nature of these relationships in which they felt disenfranchised by teachers and other educational staff. One mother recounts her distress when her son is sent home on the wrong bus:

*I didn't feel like they helped me at all. There was like one person in the office, and she's like, 'Call me back in 10 minutes if he doesn't come in. Call me back in 10 minutes if he doesn't come in.' I called the school bus company, and they were like, 'They dropped a bus[load] off at [that stop] already, I don't know why your son's not there.' It's like [sound of sighing]. What do you do from there? You know, you panic. So I didn't have the car, so I started walking around, and stuff. I didn't see him nearby, so I came back up to make sure that he wasn't here. [He was found within the hour.] But, then the next day, it was like . . . there was no communication, I mean I told -- I even sent another note into the teacher, and I said, 'Can you please call me so we can talk about this?'*

Too often, mothers felt that their concerns were not addressed adequately. While the concerns that mothers expressed tended to be less about academics and more about socio-emotional, behavioral, or logistical issues, several mothers also described conflicts when trying to advocate for their children's academic needs.

One particularly involved mother described how important her own knowledge about her child

is and how it was discounted. This mother was particularly concerned about keeping a close watch on her son's progress because he was "tagged for remedial" reading by his kindergarten teacher at the end of the year. It was only as a result of this mother's repeated and strenuous objections that he only spent two weeks pulled out of his regular class for "remedial" instruction before she put a stop to it. She had a high assessment of his reading abilities, and when she turned to us for confirmation, researchers at the Home-School Study were able to assure her that his reading and language test results were quite high. If this mother had not intervened, her son might have spent years with lower ability groups rather than being a member of the first grade honor roll.

Volunteering. When mothers were asked about their involvement in general they often conceptualized involvement as some sort of volunteer activity they engaged in at their child's school. Those who didn't participate in those ways usually described barriers (time, younger children at home, work responsibilities) to school-based involvement and evaluated themselves as having low levels of involvement. Mothers who were consistently active at the schools often criticized other parents who were not as active because they felt these mothers did not care enough:

*Mothers need to get more involved. I mean, I realize we all have to work. But their children need more of their time. You know, quality time. I mean some teachers don't see the parents unless there's a meeting, you know. And then if there's five meetings a year they'll only show up at two... and they just don't get involved -- they don't know what's going on and they need to know what's going on -- they need to come and look at the child's classroom and see what's going on, come spend the day.*

Although the impetus for increased involvement is linked to the promise of improved achievement for children, volunteer activities are not in themselves organized around classroom learning. Mothers' explanations of the different activities they engage in at the school are overwhelmingly devoid

of ties to the children's academic activities.

*We would help, you know, do different projects with the kids. . . . make sure there was no disputes with them.*

*They needed the volunteers... you would go in and you would ride the bus. I rode the bus in the morning, rode the bus on the way home. Did all the bus stops, letting kids on and letting kids off.*

*I've participated in the seasonal activities that they had. And I, I enjoyed it. . . . fundraisers, like maybe book-selling things. I've done that but to be in the school and help out, I never did that there.*

*They had a policy council where you -- if you wanted changes you would bring it up to the board for different things like field trips, and educational stuff, but I never did.*

Even mothers who did not want to get involved, described helping out at the school as a non-academic activity:

*There are parents that have to do what their kids are doing every single day. I didn't do it [with my son, or] when my daughter was in school either. I never volunteered, I went to the, you know, the concerts or the shows or the plays. . . . there are visits where you could visit and stuff, but I don't. Because I think . . . my son goes to school and that's his business, in that, he doesn't need me there to take care of him.*

Volunteering in the schools, for most of the low-income parents in the sample, is at best limited to a caregiving opportunity, albeit an important one. Positive results from volunteer involvement would be expected, but more likely limited to socio-emotional outcomes and not academic achievement. Recent research on parent involvement in Head Start found that involvement in the program led to improved relationships between mothers and children, greater parental involvement in kindergarten, increased

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maternal self-sufficiency, and increased social competence of the child at posttest one year after Head Start participation (Parker, Piotrkowski et al., 1997).

Similar to school-based involvement activities, the mothers' early book-reading activities with the child were assessed for the meaning they made of those home-based involvement activities. All mothers engaged in some sort of early pre-literacy activities with their child, although they did not all agree on ways those activities had an impact on the child. Some felt reading books was merely a playful distraction, others felt it was a chance to promote the love of books and reading, and a few mothers stressed the importance of actively teaching their child how to read and write so that the child entered elementary school fully prepared.

Parent Involvement at Home: The Importance of Teaching Early Literacy. The majority of the mothers gave high ratings for the help they provided at home for their children's early learning of how to read and write: only 6% of the mothers replied that their help was "not important"; 19% claimed it was "somewhat important"; half (51%) said it was "as important as the help provided at the preschool"; and about a quarter (24%) said it was "more important than the help provided at the preschool." Mothers who give more credit for contributing to early literacy training, report engaging in various literacy activities and characterizing those activities as part of a partnership in the child's education. On the other hand, mothers who claimed their efforts were of less importance tended to describe the ways that they deferred to professional school staff for early literacy.

In order to better understand the meaning of these responses, we provide several examples from mothers in the study. Mark's mother<sup>1</sup> gives the most striking example of a mother in the sample who felt she could not provide much in the way of early literacy instruction, rather deferring to her

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<sup>1</sup>Pseudonyms are used to protect confidentiality of families.

child's teacher to teach him about literacy.

*I used to read books to him and stuff when he got into Home Based [Head Start]... He was more into cars and little men and stuff like that. When he was that age he wasn't really into books that much.*

*When [he] first started Head Start I told the teacher I don't like to be a conceited mother or something. I told them, I says he's too smart for this program - he don't even have to go really because he was a year and a half when he talked and he talked sentences and he was 13 months when he walked. I let him go just so he has playtime.*

*On working with him using flashcards: "It seemed like instead of teaching him I was more amazed at what he knew. What he'd say and things he'd do. I was more amazed at that. Like you'd hear him say words that you wouldn't think someone his age would know. Like you'd think - he'd act like a teenager, you'd think he was a teenager with things he'd say. So it was like I was getting more educated listening to him then he was, you know, learning from me. It was weird.*

Mark's mother has little confidence in her own teaching abilities and is surprised by what *she* learns from her seven-year-old. She was one of the few mothers who thought the help she provided at home was "not important" because "he knew his words." Because she already thought he was a bright child, "too smart" for Head Start, she did not feel it was necessary to work with him on early literacy skills. Mark might have indeed been a "smart" preschooler, but better home support might have provided the help he needed in order to avoid his Chapter One placement by the time he reached third grade.

As a point of contrast, we present a mother who felt that the help she provided was "more important" than that provided by the preschool. Her son, Bobby, is one of the highest achievers in the study. His mother does not have frequent involvement at the school, but in her encounters with teachers she takes on a partnership role, addressing her concerns about how his curriculum does not challenge him enough. Since he was an infant, she has promoted reading.

*I read to him almost every day, in the morning when he was an infant, I read to him every night before he went to bed um, I still will read to him... now he reads a half hour a*

*night for home work, his teacher gives him reading. Um, so we both sit at the kitchen table and we read for a half hour, I read my book, if he has any questions I stop reading and I help him, I've always talked to him like a grown up you know not like a child which I think helps a lot it helps them understand faster um, taking walks, we used to talk a lot, um sometimes about things he saw on things he saw on Sesame Street, sometimes just about the world around him, so that made him I think very verbal. Probably the best thing I could have done was started reading to him in the morning when I -- I'm not a -- I'm not a morning person, so when I went to feed him his bottle, his first bottle of the day, I had nothing to say to him. And so I'd grab one of the little books that I got from people and I'd read to him so he'd hear my voice and it just sort of worked out, that he started reading fast and furious now that he knows how. You know, and I can leave him notes around the house it's kind of nice, and helping him spell and print and anything he asks I try my hardest to answer.*

Bobby's mother not only understands the importance of reading to her son, early and often, but also the importance of building his language skills. She teaches him how reading is connected to everyday life by connecting stories in books to the world around them. Reading is emphasized as a tool for learning. Whenever Bobby has a question she can't answer, she takes him to the library to do research. During his preschool years, Bobby's mother felt that fostering his language and literacy skills was her "job" and she "enjoyed" doing it.

Question 2: *What are teacher expectations for parent involvement across the primary grades?*

We felt it was important to get an understanding of teachers' expectations for parent involvement in their own words rather than asking them to respond to forced choices or to provide rankings of possible types of involvement. This allowed us to gain an understanding of a broader range of the ways that parents can be involved, which we can in the future collapse into established theoretical categories of involvement (e.g., Epstein, 1995). As stated above, we asked the teachers to provide their expectations about the parents' role in children's education and schooling. This question was

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meant to be general and not necessarily about the particular target child's parents.

We established 15 categories of involvement (see Table 4 for coding criteria). Of those, we grouped 13 categories into four constructs. The first construct we named School Focus because it describes the ways that teachers would like parents to be involved with, or at, the school. This includes the following five categories: Communication, Awareness, Teacher Support, Partnership, and Volunteer Involvement. The second construct, Academic Reinforcement, describes the wish for parents to be actively engaged in concrete learning/academic activities in the home. This includes three categories: Reinforce Skills, Literacy, and Enrichment. The third construct, Value of Education, encompasses a more abstract idea that parents communicate to their children the importance and priority of education, which children will internalize. This includes Love of Learning and Responsibility. The final construct, Non-Academic Home Support, refers to parents providing caregiving in the home, which includes Socio-Emotional, Basic Needs, and Behavior. The other two categories were 1) General, which did not fit into a specific construct because teachers were unclear about their expectations concerning parent involvement; and 2) "Needs Improvement," which reflected both criticisms and empathy for parents who did not fulfill teachers' expectations of involvement. We call this last category Needs Improvement because often teachers expressed a desire for increased or improved parental involvement. Needs Improvement often overlapped with the 13 categories in the four constructs.

Table 4. Teacher Codes for Involvement Practices

<b>School Focus</b>	
Communication	Communication between parent & teacher that can be either parent or teacher initiated and may include advocating on the child's behalf. Form of communication could be direct contact (dropping by or scheduled conferences/meetings), written contact, phone conversations, etc...
Awareness	Parent communication with their child about what is going on in their classroom/school & about their daily activities. Parent expression of concern and interest about what is happening at school. Checking child's bookbag in an effort to be more aware of notices and schoolwork that the child brings home.
Teacher Support	Refers to general support of classroom practices & school policies. Some teachers request this type of support because it enables him/her to do his/her job more easily. Also includes teacher requests for compliance and deference to teachers/school officials.
Partnership	Teachers and parents working together (positively, collaboratively) as educators. Cooperative effort between home and school that involves mutual respect. Parents as educators equal in importance to teachers, work as a team, parents are the child's first teachers. An indication that the teacher values the parent as an educator.
Volunteer Involvement	Refers to parent donating time/resources to classroom (specific) or school (general). Includes audience participation for special events.
<b>Academic Reinforcement</b>	
Reinforce Skills	Helping with homework, reinforcing skills (academic/organizational) related to classroom activities. Assessment of academic needs (knowing child's strengths & weaknesses). Monitoring/checking to make sure child's homework is done.
Literacy	Parent reads with child, provides exposure to literacy materials and conversation about books or literacy.
Enrichment	Refers to parent initiating learning experiences for their child outside of the school context such as field trips to museums & cultural events.
<b>Value of Education</b>	
Love of Learning	Pass along educational values, be a good role model, talk about/show that education is a priority. Communicate positive attitude about school and learning, motivate children, place importance on making an effort/trying, and have expectations for their children.
Responsibility	Teach child to take responsibility for his/her education. Promote independence, goal setting, and self-management.
<b>Non-Academic Home Support</b>	
Socio-Emotional	Provide emotional support & foster self-esteem. Could include overt praise, positive reinforcement, acknowledgment, and general encouragement. Assessment of emotional needs (knowing child's strengths & weaknesses).
Basic Needs	Parental responsibility for providing proper care & nourishment. Getting them ready for school & for learning. Provide the child with a safe and quiet place to study.
Behavior	Refers to parents teaching their children about appropriate behavior and expecting them to exhibit these behaviors in school. "Instilling in them a respect for adults".

<b>Other</b>	
General	Teachers not very clear about their expectations concerning parent involvement. “Focus on child doing best quality work”. This category is used when the teacher doesn’t give information about “how” the goal is achieved or when there’s no elaboration on a general statement. This code is usually a stand alone code.
Needs Improvement	Teachers highlighting areas that parents need to improve upon. Could include comments about not receiving help, support, or involvement from parents. “Everyone seems busy lately”. These comments could be expressed negatively, neutrally, or positively.

Teachers typically mentioned two to three categories in their open-ended responses. In some cases, responses were double coded with Needs Improvement, as teachers described what they would like to see, but stated that parents were lacking in this area. In rare instances, teachers also reported that they themselves could do more to encourage or facilitate parent involvement, as this sixth grade teacher suggests, “Schools need to do more to connect with parents, especially with positive feedback.” In the following examples (see Table 5) from four different teachers (one from each grade level) we show how several responses were coded.

Table 5. Examples of coding of teachers' expectations of parent involvement.

Response	Coding
<p><i>Grade 2</i> Focus this child on doing his best quality work and growth inside class and outside of class. Happiness is a parent who comes in contact with a teacher and smiles with the teacher and does not approach the teacher with an attitude problem.</p>	<p>General Needs Improvement</p>
<p><i>Grade 3</i> Support at home for reading. Field trip support.</p>	<p>Literacy Volunteer</p>
<p><i>Grade 4</i> Communicate. Ask if something is unclear to them. Parents should ask the child frequently to see completed schoolwork that has been corrected. Parents should go over homework with child, helping with directions and providing examples. Parents should read to and with their child. Parents should attend open house meetings and try to support other school programs, e.g. field trips, bake sales, etc.</p>	<p>Communication Awareness Reinforce Skills Literacy Volunteer</p>
<p><i>Grade 6</i> Well a lot of that is a frame of reference. Just providing an atmosphere where it's clear that education is important and that's number one. As far as involvement specifically in either school activities or the child, that's really more of an individual kind of a thing. I'd like to see parents supporting their kids, while promoting independence. Let the kids learn how to do things on their own, but that they provide the atmosphere and support where necessary to allow that to happen.</p>	<p>Love of Learning Responsibility Socio-emotional</p>

For each grade, we compiled the coded responses into the 15 categories in order to determine the percentage of teachers who gave answers for each category (see Table 6). We found that in each grade teachers as a group consistently mentioned the importance of 1) helping with homework, which was coded as Reinforce Skills (ranging from 36% of teachers in grade 2 to 56% of teachers in grade

6); 2) instilling a Love of Learning (ranging between 18% and 30%); and 3) Communication between parents and teachers (ranging from 22% to 32%). Other responses were less consistent across the other 12 categories. In addition, we were interested in whether responses would differ across grade levels. We found that teachers' expectations about Volunteer Involvement were relatively low and declined as children advanced through elementary school (18% in 2<sup>nd</sup> grade down to 6% in 6<sup>th</sup> grade). On the other hand, a higher percentage of 6<sup>th</sup> grade teachers wanted parents to reinforce skills, encourage children to take responsibility for their own learning, and were more critical of parent involvement, compared to teachers in the earlier elementary grades.

Over half (58%) of the sixth grade teachers in this sample taught in middle schools, while the rest (42%) taught the final year of elementary school. We interpret 6<sup>th</sup> grade teachers' emphasis on socio-emotional needs, responsibility, basic needs, and behavior (compared to teachers in earlier grades), to reflect changes in the child's developmental status as he or she transitions into adolescence and middle school.

Table 6. Descriptive statistics for teacher coding of involvement showing percentage of teachers in each grade reporting expectation for particular category.

	Grade 2 (n=50)	Grade 3 (n= 45)	Grade 4 (n=50)	Grade 6 (n=54)
<b><i>School Focus</i></b>				
Communication	22%	27%	32%	28%
Awareness	24%	13%	32%	22%
Teacher Support	16%	22%	10%	11%
Partnership	12%	4%	12%	9%
Volunteer Involvement	18%	18%	14%	6%
<b><i>Academic Reinforcement</i></b>				
Reinforce Skills	36%	38%	44%	56%
Literacy	18%	24%	22%	15%
Enrichment	10%	2%	12%	4%
<b><i>Value of Education</i></b>				
Love of Learning	20%	18%	20%	30%
Responsibility	2%	2%	4%	17%
<b><i>Non-Academic Home Support</i></b>				
Socio-Emotional	12%	11%	12%	17%
Basic Needs	10%	4%	10%	17%
Behavior	8%	2%	4%	11%
<b><i>Other</i></b>				
General	14%	7%	4%	2%
Needs Improvement	10%	15%	20%	35%

Question 3: *Are maternal reports of parent involvement related to teachers' assessment of parental support and commitment to the child's education?*

Once we had determined that average parent-teacher contact diminishes over time, we checked to see if there was any relationship between this school-based involvement variable and teacher assessments of parental commitment to their children's education. For corresponding years when target children were in second, third, and fourth grade, we found no relationship between these two variables. Teachers on average, did not evaluate parents with whom they had more contact as more committed to their children's education, nor did they view low levels of contact as evidence of a lack of commitment.

As with frequency of parent-teacher contact, we tested for a relationship between volunteer involvement and teacher assessments of family support for school achievement. With similar results, we found no significant relationship between teacher assessment of family support for grades 2, 3, and 4 and corresponding volunteer activity level. Teachers in the sample did not systematically evaluate family support more positively for mothers who were more involved in volunteer activities as their children progressed through school.

Additionally, teacher ratings of family support were not related to maternal reports of involvement with homework activities. Assuming that homework practices are fairly consistent over time, we reviewed reports of help with homework when the target children were 9 years old and tested for relationships to 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>, and 4<sup>th</sup> grade teacher ratings of family support. We found no relationship between maternal reports of helping with homework and the family support rating from the teachers.

### ***Discussion***

While many educators have advocated for true partnerships between parents and schools (Fine, 1993; Powell, 1991), few mothers and few teachers in this sample talk about parent involvement in these terms. Researchers often cite the ensuing problems of power differentials and conflicts of status between participating parents and teachers and administrators (Delgado-Gaitan, 1991; Fine, 1993; Lareau, 1989), and our analysis of parent involvement practices in this study begins to explore some of these same concerns. Even in areas that both parents and teachers feel are important, the actual practice can be problematic, as we have described in our examples of communication.

By examining the lack of relationship between what mothers report they are doing and how teachers rate family support, we might question whether mothers are over-reporting their involvement activities both at home and at school. Given that homework type activities are seen by teachers as the most supportive type of involvement, we would expect at least some indication that mothers who are providing more help with homework are recognized as more supportive by teachers. We would not necessarily expect a relationship between support rating and volunteer activities since teachers in our sample gave a higher priority to reinforcing skills than they did to volunteer activities at the school. We should note that in previous analyses of this data, we did find a relationship between children's achievement (WRAT and PPVT scores) and teacher assessments of family support (Porche, 1999).

However, it was not clear that teachers were specific in communicating this priority to parents. In four years of visits with teachers at the schools, researchers rarely found examples of direct communication to parents regarding expectations for parent involvement. Even when parents received newsletters that were explicit in how they could be involved, most of the suggestions revolved around

helping out at school rather than exploring ways to help children with homework activities. This highlights the contradiction that most parents face in pursuing involvement options. Parents seem to feel that they are fulfilling an important need, one that schools promote, yet not such a critical need according to our teacher sample. Teachers' expectations need to be more direct and explicit in delineating ways parents can help with their children's education.

It is clear in our sample that both teachers and parents emphasize the need for reinforcing skills, such as helping with homework and reading books, which echoes recent findings in a large national study investigating attitudes of parents and teachers on the parental role in education (Public Agenda, 1999). The degree to which mothers in our low income sample feel capable of helping in these areas may not be as high as teachers assume or expect. This brings us to the larger question of what to do when parents, who feel they do not have the skills or the time to help their children the way they would like, cannot provide the assistance that teachers expect. Mothers in this study, overall, spoke of their firm desire for their children to succeed in school and expressed a desire to help them achieve this goal. Many felt that their contact with teachers and volunteer work reflected their commitment to education, and they might be surprised by teachers' downplaying the importance of helping out at school compared to reinforcing skills at home, especially as children get older.

Given that parents express interest in being involved in various ways, it may be beneficial to provide interventions for parents (of younger children) that consist of strategies to help foster children's emergent literacy as well as strategies to increase parental skill level so they may be better able to help children with skill building and homework (as their children grow older). If parents are limited by their own skill level and do not feel confident directly helping their children, then school staff could provide them with suggestions about how to keep abreast of the homework assignments and how to monitor

children to make sure the homework is completed. Many parents and teachers find that homework assignment books are an effective way to keep track of the assignments and are a useful means of parent teacher communication around homework issues. Additionally, it may be helpful for teachers to supply parents, who are more comfortable helping indirectly, with motivational and organizational tips they can reinforce with their children. Other suggestions about where to study and the types of materials that should be available when children are studying would also be helpful to parents. Finally, schools should provide parents with links to resources, such as tutoring, after school homework clubs, and mentoring, so parents can secure the help their children need if they are unable to provide it at home.

### **Conclusion**

In this analysis we have made an initial attempt to link parent involvement information collected from mothers and teachers who have been participating in the Home-School Study of Language and Literacy Development for the past decade. We found that, in our sample, the primary involvement activities that mothers report engaging in during preschool and early elementary school years are: keeping in regular contact with their children's teachers, volunteering in their children's schools, and reading books with their children. We discovered that 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup>, and 6<sup>th</sup> grade teachers, as a group, expect parents to reinforce skills at home by helping children with their homework, instilling a love of learning by demonstrating that education is a priority, and communicating with teachers about their child's progress. Therefore, we discovered that parents and teachers reports overlap in some areas such as the value and importance of communicating with one another but do not converge as much in

the importance of skill building and monitoring work at home. Teachers focused much more on this than parents did.

We also found that teachers who work with older children more often reported expectations that parents should encourage children to take responsibility for their own learning and schoolwork, teach children appropriate behavior and expect them to engage in appropriate behavior at school, and support the child's social-emotional development.

In future analyses it would be beneficial to explore further the lack of correlational data between maternal reports of involvement and teacher reports of family support. Given that these low income families have pressing resource constraints (time, financial, educational) it would be important to consider ways to bring teachers and parents closer together in their expectations and practices of involvement. We would also want to examine the impact of involvement practices, especially help with homework, on children's academic outcomes.

There are a number of reasons why this research is valuable for educators. The myth persists that low-income parents do not care about their children's education. By exploring this topic from the perspective of mothers, we show the various ways that parents do care, and are involved on their children's behalf. By reviewing both teacher questionnaires and parent interviews, we shed light on ways that implicit expectations without explicit communication may contribute to the barriers that exist between parents and teachers, which may, in turn, negatively impact a child's academic opportunities. At the least, the maternal narratives may allow educators to understand the difficulties low-income parents face, in a way not previously considered. At best, results may contribute to a body of research used in formulating new programs in the next millennium to facilitate parent involvement and children's academic achievement.

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