PARENTAL PERSPECTIVES ON THE TRANSITION TO SCHOOL: RECOLLECTIONS OF SCHOOLING, CONSTRUCTIONS OF READINESS, AND PREPARATION ACTIVITIES

By

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

(Human Development and Family Studies)

at the

UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN – MADISON

2012

Date of final oral examination: 5/23/12

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Dedicated to the families represented in this study
Acknowledgements

This dissertation was completed with support from many individuals along the way. First, I would like to acknowledge the commitment and dedication of my advisor, Dr. Janean Dilworth-Bart. She sacrificed endless hours of sleep and personal time to help me through my graduate training and dissertation. Many times she prioritized my work over her own. She never called attention to these occasions, but I noticed with true appreciation for her devotedness. She pushed my thinking and supported my often unconventional ideas and approaches to research and teaching. She kept me focused, realistic, and laughing. I will forever be grateful for the impact she made on my life as a scholar and person.

I would also like to share my appreciation for other committee members: Dr. M. Elizabeth Graue, Dr. Julie Poehlmann, Dr. David Riley, and Dr. Audrey Trainor. These scholars provided outstanding expertise and insightful feedback throughout the whole dissertation process. They strengthened the rigor of my work and remain valuable role models for my next stage of life. Similarly, I owe an enormous thank you to the research team that assisted this project: Courtney Belawich, Rebekah LeMahieu, Kristin Orlowski, Thomas Murphy and Amanda Hane. I was so lucky to find myself surrounded by such intelligent and dedicated students who contributed to every aspect of this document.

I would also like to extend gratitude to my family. I would like to thank my mother for traveling the continent with me to share my research, and reminding people that I am a lot smarter than I look. Donna Miller, there are no words to adequately express exactly who you are or what you have done for me. I would also like to thank my father for his unwavering commitment to my education, silent generosity, and work ethic – all of which continue to inspire
me. I strive to always make them proud. I offer a special thank you to Dylan, Olivia, and Braylen for making my life exponentially better during the past five years. I am excited to attend your graduations one day and watch you succeed.

I owe a big thank you to my other family, the Baumfelds, for sharing all of my joy and frustration during graduate school. Thank you, Anne, for knowing when to listen and when to talk. Your selflessness during this process will never be forgotten. I am so lucky to have you in my life. Perry and Harper were the greatest gifts during the past two years, their smiles and craziness kept me grounded.

Finally, I extend my deep gratitude to my department, Human Development and Family Studies, for the opportunities and resources provided to me during my doctoral studies.
PARENTAL PERSPECTIVES ON THE TRANSITION TO SCHOOL:
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PREPARATION ACTIVITIES

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Purpose: This study investigated parental perspectives on children’s transition into formal education within a low-income sample; explored how parents’ believe their memories of school inform their thoughts and self-reported behaviors as they prepare their children for school; and examined how mothers and fathers construct meaning around school readiness and how they describe their activities connected to the school transition process.

Participants: The study sample included 16 mothers and eight fathers of preschool aged children who qualified for the state’s child care subsidy program. All participants lived in a Midwest county and had children eligible to begin kindergarten in the fall.

Methods: Semi-structured interviews were utilized to gather information on participants’ memories of school and the transition to school process. A subgroup of eight families participated in a photo elicitation process to gather in-depth contextual information on
families’ preparation activities. A thematic coding and analysis procedure was used by a small research team to identify how parents understand what it means to be ready for school and how they believe their own educational history guides this school transition process.

Findings: Parents identified two areas related to preparing children for school: preparing children for success in the kindergarten classroom and preparing children for their general K-12 schooling. Parents’ constructions of readiness, including children’s disposition, academic skills, social/emotional skills, self-care and health, and familiarity with the school setting, contributed to how parents reported preparing children for kindergarten. Parents’ memories of their families’ involvement, school transitions, the social side of schooling and special education contributed to an educational worldview in their approach to socializing children for school. Parents identified a number of strategies, individuals, and resources that they believed supported the transition process.

Conclusions: Participants’ ideas about being ready for school match policy agendas and many of the readiness areas valued by schools. However, the activities and efforts directed at supporting those areas are often embedded in everyday activities or supported by a variety of individuals that schools and communities may tend to under-recognize. These findings may promote more meaningful and practical directions for facilitating a smoother transition for families.
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Chapter One

Introduction

Statement of Problem

In the last decade, there has been a focus on the role that families play in their children’s learning, and considerable interest in how families shape the process of child development (Barnett & Taylor, 2009; Morrison-Gutman & McLoyd, 2000; Machida, Taylor & Kim, 2002). However, less is understood about the specific ways in which parents socialize their children in regard to school-linked behaviors and outcomes (Taylor, Clayton & Rowley, 2004). Parental engagement in a child’s learning is one of the key mechanisms through which children are socialized for academic success (Hill, 2001). As the primary managers of children’s time and environments, how parents prepare their children for school is an essential piece to understanding the family transition into formal education.

It is critical that researchers explore the perspectives and activities of low-income parents, because it is their children who are at increased risk for failing in school (Piotrkowski et al., 2000). As the child’s first teachers, parents provide the experiences that promote life skills, abilities, and attitudes that support and make lasting impacts on children’s school success (Pelletier & Brent, 2002). Cultural norms and values shape parents’ school experiences, beliefs about family involvement in school, and their current demands and responsibilities - all of which inform the ways they participate in their children’s development (Mapp, 2003; Doucet & Tudge, 2007; Morrison-Gutman & McLoyd, 2000).

School is one of the first formal settings where children and families are faced with new ideas and ways of doing things. Although this process may seem unilateral, sociocultural factors
such as race, ethnicity, and social class play important roles in shaping how the transition to school is understood, how children are prepared for it, and how easily the transition is made (Doucet & Tudge, 2007; Swick, Brown & Boutte, 1994). Understanding how children are prepared for school requires careful consideration of the processes that may guide parental thoughts and behaviors, and ultimately successful transitions for children. Therefore, the school transition process should involve an appreciation for the unique experiences, histories, and perspectives that parents bring to the relationship with the child and school (Barnett & Taylor, 2009; Dockett & Perry, 2007).

**Purpose of Study**

This study was an investigation of parental perspectives on children’s transition into formal education within a low-income sample. I explored how parents’ memories of school inform their thoughts and self-reported behaviors as they prepare their children for school. I also explored how mothers and fathers construct meaning around school readiness, and how they describe their activities connected to the school transition process.

**Research questions.** Three main questions were investigated in this study, related to parental school recollections, constructions of readiness, and the context of preparing children for school:

1. How do parents think their school recollections are related to their self-reported thoughts and behaviors as they prepare their children for school entry?

2. What are parents’ constructions of school readiness, and how do these constructions contribute to how parents report preparing their children for school?

3. Which activities, individuals, and relationships contribute to the transition process for families?
To date, few studies have incorporated parental recollections of school as part of the transition to school process (Barnett & Taylor, 2009). Furthermore, most school readiness and transition studies that focus on low-income populations take a deficit-approach to exploring how children are prepared for school (Dockett & Perry, 2007). This study’s research questions address important gaps in our current knowledge on school recollections and parental perspectives, as well as recognizing the range of contextual factors that help shape the transition process for families.

To explore these questions, this multi-method study used in-depth interviews and a visual method called photo elicitation. Low-income parents of kindergarten-bound children were invited to take part in this project. Although the term parent implies the inclusion of both mothers and fathers, the vast majority of ‘parental’ investigations in early childhood are focused solely on mothers, with a notable lack of attention given to fathers (Downer, 2007). For that reason, both mothers and fathers were encouraged to participate in this study, to provide a more comprehensive view of parental contributions to the transition process. Additionally, all families were invited to participate in the photo elicitation portion of the study.

**Contributions**

My study generates new knowledge related to parents’ own school experiences and current school-related activities, and further informs our understanding of the relationship between ‘who parents are’ and ‘what parents do’ in a low-income population. This knowledge provides insight into the emerging educational views of parents and their understanding of this important school-related transition. My study addresses a gap in research and in current practice, which often neglects to consider that current parental practices may be connected to individual school histories and experiences. It also widens the field’s understanding of how both mothers
and fathers report engaging in the transition process to school, and how they understand what it means for their children to be ready for school. My study applies components of a popular academic socialization model (Taylor et al., 2004) and extends some of my initial work on maternal recollections of school (Miller, Dilworth-Bart & Hane, 2011).

The findings I report in my study have important implications for the early childhood community. With an emerging goal to strengthen home-school connections during this time period, centers and schools should be interested in bridging cultural and philosophical distances between home and school. By focusing on what families are already doing and exploring their perspectives on the readiness process, these findings may promote more meaningful and practical directions for facilitating a smoother transition for families. I devoted specific attention to the many contextual factors that shape this process for families, by considering context and the individuals, activities and resources that shape the transition. The next chapter presents these theoretical underpinnings, which guided my design and analysis.
Chapter Two

Theoretical Framework

This study was guided by Bronfenbrenner’s bioecological model of development and Bourdieu’s concept of cultural capital. Bronfenbrenner’s bioecological model of development offers a comprehensive model of human development, which captures the contributions of five systems, and emphasizes the importance of the relationships within and across those systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1986; 1995). Cultural capital, a concept attached to Bourdieu’s (1986) larger theory of social reproduction, pushes scholars to rethink why some children succeed and others fail in educational institutions, by considering the role of social class in privileging certain groups.

As described in later chapters, the concept of cultural capital did not provide the clearest theoretical frame for my data, and was not an appropriate match for this study. This study is better understood with the application of the bioecological model, which also allows for cultural and class considerations. However, the concept of cultural capital helped shape my interview protocols and was thoroughly considered through the research team’s ongoing discussions and analysis process. I include its description in this chapter, given its central role in shaping this study. In this chapter, I present the bioecological model of development and concept of cultural capital as ways to frame how parents transition their children to school. I will describe their main components, offer a brief critique, and highlight how they have been used to study the transition to school.

The Ecology of Development

Urie Bronfenbrenner (1986) believed that children should be viewed within the complex systems of their changing environments. His perspective considers interactions that occur at the
micro-, meso-, exo-, macro- and chronosystem levels, as well as the activities and relationships between systems that all contribute to the child’s development (Bronfenbrenner, 1986). Essentially, children’s development is shaped by multiple systems, including the family, religious community, school, friends, organizations, government, culture, and time (Bronfenbrenner, 1974; 1986).

Bronfenbrenner’s ‘ecological theory’ was eventually renamed the ‘bioecological model’ in order to call attention to personal characteristics (biological or psychological) of children’s development (Bronfenbrenner, 1988). Underlying the model is a stated recognition of genetic transmission. The genetic material does not produce finished traits but rather interacts with environmental experience in determining developmental outcomes (Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994). The bidirectional nature of these transformations is grounded in the fact that genetic potentials are not merely passive possibilities but active dispositions expressed in different contexts (Bronfenbrenner, 1995). The bioecological model suggests that development is a synergistic relationship between an individual’s biological and genetic factors and environmental factors (Bronfenbrenner, 1995; Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994).

A child’s development is determined by experiences in his or her most immediate settings (microsystem) (Bronfenbrenner, 1986). Development is also shaped by activities and relationships between these immediate settings, such as parent and school relationships (mesosystem), and by relationships in the environment where the child does not have direct contact (exosystem). More remote factors, such as federal laws, cultural values, economic patterns and national customs (macrosystem) as well as time (chronosystem) can affect the power and relationship of these more proximal settings.
The microsystem. The microsystem is comprised of face-to-face interactions with the child’s immediate environment (e.g., family, school, peers), and where proximal processes operate (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). Often referred to as the ‘engines of development,’ proximal processes are reciprocal interactions between persons, objects, and symbols in a child’s immediate environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1995; Bronfenbrenner & Evans, 2000). For these processes to be effective, they must happen regularly and for a given amount of time. Enduring patterns of proximal processes may be present in parent-child and child-child activities, play, learning new skills, athletic involvement, and performing complex tasks (Bronfenbrenner, 1995).

Proximal processes are linked to two major types of developmental outcomes: competence and dysfunction (Bronfenbrenner & Evans, 2000). Competence can be produced in any domain (e.g., intellectual, physical, social), and is distinguished by its development of knowledge, skill or ability to manage one’s behavior in different situations (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). Conversely, dysfunction describes the recurrence of problems in maintaining appropriate behavior across situations and domains of one’s development.

Bronfenbrenner also stresses the importance of time in relationship to children’s exposure to proximal processes. For interactions to be effective, it must occur on a fairly regular basis over extended periods of time (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). Exposure refers to the extent of contact maintained between the developing person and the proximal processes in which the person engages. Exposure varies along the following dimensions: duration, frequency, interruption, timing, and intensity (Bronfenbrenner & Evans, 2000). This may be reflected in the amount of time the child spends in preschool, with family members and peers.

The mesosystem. The mesosystem comprises the linkages and processes taking place between two or more settings in the person’s microsystem (e.g., family – preschool; family -
church). It is a system of microsystems, and relations between these systems are vital to the
card's development (Bronfenbrenner, 1974). The stronger and more diverse the links among
settings, the more powerful an influence the resulting systems will be on the child's development
(Snow, 2008). In these interrelationships, the initiatives of the child, and the parents' involvement
in connecting the home and the school, play roles in determining the quality of the child's
development (Bronfenbrenner, 1986).

**The exosystem.** The exosystem encompasses the linkages and processes taking place
between two or more settings (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). This system involves one setting that
does not itself contain a developing person, but in which events occur that affect the setting
containing the person. For example, for a school-age child, it might include the parents’
workplace, the school attended by an older sibling, the parents’ network of friends, a teacher’s
home life, and activities of the local school board (Bronfenbrenner, 1995). While some of the
settings do not contain the developing person, they may involve ‘significant others’ in that
person’s life. For example, parents’ work schedule or work-related stress can influence their
daily interactions with children and general availability (Bronfenbrenner, 2005).

**The macrosystem.** The macrosystem consists of sociocultural factors, which in turn
shape all facets of everyday life (Bronfenbrenner, 1993). Bronfenbrenner (1988) defined the
macrosystem as an overarching pattern of beliefs and organization of social institutions common
to a particular culture or subculture. It shapes the pattern of micro-, meso- and exosystem level
characteristics of a given society. The macrosystem is a “societal blueprint” for a particular
culture, and captures the remote influences that drive the more proximal influences that are part
of children’s daily lives (Bronfenbrenner, 1988). Government, policies, culture, national norms,
and historical events can all influence more immediate interactions and outcomes for children and their families.

The chronosystem. Finally, Bronfenbrenner (1993; 1986) proposed the term chronosystem in order to explain and examine the contribution of time on a person’s development. This system refers to not only the passage of chronological time (e.g., days, months, years), but also to historical and social dimensions of time. The chronosystem encompasses the evolving interconnected nature of the person, environment, and proximal processes over time. It accounts for changes or continuities, not only within the person, but also in the environment and the dynamic relation between these two processes. The simplest form of the chronosystem focuses on life transitions. Two types of transitions are distinguished: normative (e.g., school entry) and nonnormative (e.g., moving) (Bronfenbrenner, 1988). Such transitions occur throughout the life course and often serve as a direct impetus for developmental change. A more advanced form of the chronosystem pertains to the cumulative effects of an entire sequence of developmental transition over an extended period of the person’s life, and the impact of personal and historical life events on family and individual processes (Bronfenbrenner, 1995).

According to the bioecological model, school readiness is a child, family, peer, school, community and political process that is shaped by proximal processes that lead to dysfunction or competence in preparation (Bronfenbrenner, 1986; Rimm-Kaufmann & Pianta, 2000; Taylor et al., 2004; Machida et al., 2002; Kohl, Lengua, & McMahon, 2000). Children’s readiness must be considered in relationship to proximal processes and a broader social context (Snow, 2008). Bronfenbrenner (1979) argued that one of the most powerful ways to capture developmental processes is to study ecological transitions, such as the normative transition into school. While at
the surface, the process may seem unilateral, sociocultural factors at the macrolevel, such as race, ethnicity and social class play an important part in how the transition process is perceived, how children are prepared for it, and how easily the transition is made (Doucet & Tudge, 2007).

The bioecological model of development has provided a framework for a number of studies on the transition to school and school readiness (Snow, 2008). However, one problem with this theory, in the context of this topic, is that it underestimates the influences of culture, race, and social class on individual development and the transition process (Garcia Coll et al., 1996; Suizzo, Robinson & Pahlke, 2008). This limitation of the bioecological model, and can be addressed by placing greater emphasis on culture and class, when applying the model.

Culture as Capital

Like Bronfenbrenner, Bourdieu (1971; 1991; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977) attempted to explain the complex interactions between systems. However, his theory and explanations concentrate on how social systems of domination persist and recreate themselves across time in relationship to culture, social structures, and individual action (Swartz, 1997). Unlike Bronfenbrenner, Bourdieu places culture and class at the core of his work in explaining outcomes for children and families. As such, Bourdieu’s concept of cultural capital can be used to address Garcia Coll et al.’s (1996) criticism that the bioecological theory does not accurately reflect the lives of children of color, especially those living in lower-income homes.

Bourdieu (1986) put forward the term ‘capital’ to describe cultural advantages that groups of people possess that benefit them within a particular social context. These advantages are linked to certain traits and resources, such as ethnicity, language, appearance, wealth, education and deportment. He suggests that capital can present itself in three guises: as economic capital, cultural capital and social capital. Variations in the amounts and types of capital
individuals possess are thought to affect their social positioning. Cultural capital is of specific
interest to the study of schooling, because it is used to explain the unequal scholastic
achievement of students coming from different social classes.

Cultural capital can exist in three forms: embodied capital, objectified capital, and
institutionalized capital (Bourdieu, 1986). Embodied capital refers to the mannerisms and social
practices exhibited by a person. Saying the right things, dressing in an appropriate way and
using a particular set of manners constitute the possession of embodied capital (Compton-Lilly,
2003). Objectified capital includes documents or other artifacts that are recognized as having
value within a certain community (e.g., pictures, books, dictionary, machines, etc.).
Institutionalized capital includes academic credentials and certificates that demonstrate particular
accomplishments, such as a college degree. Institutionalized capital develops as a result of
having embodied cultural capital and successfully converting it in the educational system
(Bourdieu, 1997). Parents must possess cultural capital; they must invest time and effort in
transmitting cultural capital to their children; and children must absorb this capital and transform
it into educational success (Bourdieu, 1986; Jaeger, 2009).

Individuals with less cultural capital encounter constraints that stifle equal access to
institutional resources (Bourdieu, 1986; Lareau, 2001). Just as economic capital represents the
power to purchase products, cultural capital, for parents, represents the knowledge and power to
promote their children’s academic pursuits (Grenfell & James, 1998). Cultural capital, or what is
valued by the dominant culture, is more likely to manifest in families of higher economic status
and translates into a greater likelihood of educational success (Vryonides, 2007). Conceived of
as a mediating factor between social origins and educational outcomes, cultural capital is a useful
explanation of how social inequality is reproduced (Bourdieu, 1986).
Schools are viewed not necessarily as neutral institutions, but as places where preferences, attitudes, and behaviors of the “dominant class” are represented. Although children living in lower-income homes may acquire the knowledge and skills necessary to succeed in school, they are less likely to achieve the same ‘natural familiarity’ that middle and upper class students have, and thus are at greater risk of failure (Lee & Bowen, 2006; Lareau, 2003). Although an individual’s social position is not a result of personal attributes such as effort or intelligence (Bourdieu, 1985), cultural training in the home is awarded unequal value in dominant institutions. Due to the close compatibility between the standards of child rearing in European American, middle-class homes and the arbitrary standards proposed by schools, these children are afforded an easier transition into the school setting and subsequently greater academic success (Lareau, 2003).

By only focusing on cultural capital, scholars ignore essential components of Bourdieu’s larger notion of social reproduction – *habitus* and *field* (Bourdieu, 1977, 1984). It is necessary to consider both one’s resources (capital) and the orientation one has toward using those resources (habitus) to understand his theoretical framework in the educational field (Dumais, 2002). Habitus, or one’s view of the world and one’s place in it, is a system of dispositions that stem from social training and past experiences (Bourdieu, 1984). It is “the disposition to act in a certain way; to grasp experience in a certain way, to think in a certain way” (Grenfell & James, 1998, p. 15). It refers to how people’s pasts are embodied in ways of *being* and *knowing* that recognize the power and influence of social and political institutions. Habitus is linked to the accumulation of cultural capital over time - ways of talking, acting, interacting and recognizing one’s place in particular contexts.
A field is a structured system of social relations at a micro and macro level of an individual’s ecology, much like Bronfenbrenner’s conceptualization. When an individual’s habitus is congruent with the field, in that the field is familiar to and understood by the individual, he or she enjoys a social advantage (Lee & Bowen, 2006). Habitus also incorporates ‘a sense of one’s place’ (Bourdieu, 1985); however, a sense of one’s place is dually a sense of the place of others. Power relationships are internalized in the habitus as categories of perceptions and cognitions about these relationships and the school environment.

Cultural capital and habitus play a central role in the field of education and are responsible for the reproduction of social inequality over time for two reasons (Bourdieu, 1997; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). First, familiarity with dominant high-status cultural signals or “the rules of the game,” is advantageous in the field of education (Lareau, 2003). It increases the likelihood of receiving preferential treatment by teachers, getting higher grades, and generally performing better. Second, children from culturally advantaged backgrounds have more cultural capital than children from less advantaged backgrounds, so they are better equipped to understand the rules of the game. (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; Dumais, 2002; Jaeger, 2009). The rules of the field shape a child and family’s experience and outcomes.

The concept of cultural capital suggests that relationships are dependent on the dominant culture and their arbitrary rules and expectations designed by individuals in power (Lareau, 2003). Families with more cultural capital are awarded for their cultural compatibility, and families with less cultural capital are devalued and suffer exclusion. It determines the type of relationships that families have with schools, by how their home culture is valued, how comfortable families are in connecting with teachers, and how well they can use the capital they posses. Bourdieu describes the effect of these rules and expectations as the difference between
being ‘heard’ and being ‘listened to’ (Bourdieu, 1980). Families with more cultural capital are more likely to be listened to and hold more clout in the school setting.

Cultural capital and habitus shape our understanding of school readiness by investigating students, their cultural practices, skills, attitudes, and knowledge in relation to their beginning experiences with formal education (Dumais, 2005; Vryonides, 2007). In a narrow way, scholars identify cultural capital as events or activities connected to ‘the arts’, and consider the influence of children or parents’ cultural participation or tastes on children’s preparation for school (DiMaggio 1982; Dumais, 2002). This may include children’s involvement with long-term activities also appear in children’s academic or cognitive resources, such as how parents’ reading habits or literary preferences affect children’s educational success (De Graaf et al., 2000; Compton-Lilly, 2003). For preschool aged children, this might be found in the types of literacy activities parents provide for their children and attitudes toward reading, as well as having access to a computer or educational toys. Another focus is on how parents transmit cultural capital to children, by how parents use different types of communication or social interaction to transfer capital (Cheung & Andersen, 2003; Downey, 1995).

Based on the assumptions of cultural capital, school readiness is framed as a family’s familiarity with the mainstream culture and expectations for school entry. School readiness is ultimately about preparing children for the ‘culture of school’ (Cooney, 1995). In addition to meeting socioemotional and preacademic objectives, school readiness involves dressing appropriately, using the right style of speech, having valued goods and materials in the home, and parents possessing the right credentials. The child is an extension of the family’s cultural capital and therefore his or her preacademic and social skills will be judged by how well they overlap with European American, middle-class norms as he or she transitions into school.
A main strength of this concept is its focus on how structures and institutions play a part in producing inequality in children’s academic success. It supports the idea that the transition to school is not just about children and families, but also the “readiness” of schools and communities. Originally, I believed these ideas would be important to this study, in terms of home-school relationships that parents currently occupy with children’s early childhood centers and the anticipation of relationships they will be forming with teachers as their child enters kindergarten. I also believed this concept would present itself in parental discussions of differences in readiness expectations between the home and school settings. However, this concept did not fully emerge in participant interviews. Components of this concept appeared at times, but were not salient enough to fully embrace. Since the present study only incorporates data prior to school entry, how families are received or how their preparation efforts are valued by the elementary school is unclear. Speculation could be made, but my data at this point do not fully support Bourdieu’s theoretical ideas.

**Summary**

The bioecological model provides an angle to studying the multiple layers of influence on an individual’s development. Influences are multidirectional, with processes most central to the child holding the greatest impact on development. The concept of cultural capital suggests that social class differences begin in early childhood, accumulate overtime and affect educational outcomes (Dumais, 2005). However, for this sample and study, the ideas attached to cultural capital were not salient enough to fully support this concept in this study. However, the ideas did guide protocol development and stages of analysis. This concept could be reapplied once families actually enter elementary schools and potentially face dissonance between the home and school.
By drawing upon the bioecological model, I am able to examine the perceived multi-directional and multi-layered influences that parents report about the transition to school. This theory frames my examination of parents’ constructions of readiness, parental recollections of schooling and management of the transition to school. In the following chapter, I will provide an overview of the literature connected to these domains of school readiness and the transition to school.
Chapter 3

Overview of the Research

Numerous national task forces, commissions, and initiatives have endorsed the importance of children’s early years to promote kindergarten readiness. The idea of school readiness has emerged during the past few decades from its introduction in the National Education Goals Panel (Shore, 1998), to efforts to define exactly what it means to be ‘ready for school’ (e.g., Ackerman & Barnett, 2005; Kagan, 1990). Although constantly under debate, the general understanding is that children need a certain set of skills and knowledge to be successful in kindergarten (e.g., Crnic & Lamberty, 1994), which are supported through early learning experiences and involvement in programs. In the policy world, the defining components of school readiness were presented by the NEGP (Shore, 1998).

By the year 2000, all children in America will start school ready to learn.

Objectives:

1. All children will have access to high-quality and developmentally appropriate preschool programs that help prepare children for school.

2. Every parent in the United States will be a child’s first teacher and devote time each day to helping such parent’s preschool child learn, and parents will have access to the training and support parents need.

3. Children will receive the nutrition, physical activity experiences, and health care needed to arrive at school with healthy minds and bodies, and to maintain the mental alertness necessary to be prepared to learn, and the number of low-birthweight babies will be significantly reduced through enhanced prenatal health systems.
As stated in the NEGP goals, families play an important role in their children’s educational development and help shape the process of child development (Barnett & Taylor, 2009; Morrison-Gutman & McLoyd, 2000; Machida et al., 2002). However, limited research looks specifically at ways in which parents socialize their children in regard to school-linked behaviors and outcomes (Taylor, Clayton & Rowley, 2004). Parental involvement in a child’s learning is one of the key mechanisms through which children are socialized for academic success. As the primary managers of children’s home environments, how parents transition their children for school is an essential piece to understanding children’s school readiness (Doucet & Tudge, 2007; Kraft-Sayre & Pianta, 2000).

In this chapter, I review the literature on school readiness and the transition to school. I begin by explaining what is meant by “the transition to school” and how it has been studied. I then present the relevant literature on how families contribute to the process of preparing children for kindergarten, by exploring studies on academic socialization, parental constructions of readiness, recollections of schooling, and father involvement. I finish by drawing upon literature related to parents as managers of their children’s time outside of the home as part of the transition process (e.g., involvement in early childhood education), the role of the community, and home-school connections. All of these areas are commonly linked to this early transition period (Booth & Crooter, 2008; Dockett & Perry, 2007).

The Transition to School

In the literature, the concept of transition is tied closely to the concept of readiness (Meisels, 1999; Pianta, Rimm-Kauffman, & Cox, 1999). Ensuring that children start school ready to learn requires attention to one of the most complex and significant changes they will experience - the transition to formal education. The transition to kindergarten is regarded as an
influential developmental period, as patterns of achievement and behavior presented in the early school years can create profound impacts on children’s developmental trajectories for school success or failure (Pianta, Cox, Taylor & Early, 1999; Pianta, 2007; Mangione & Speth, 1998; Ramey & Ramey, 1994). The first few years of school often forecast later success, such that individual differences in early school achievement remain notably stable throughout the years (Lee & Burkam, 2002). Such findings suggest that the early school transition period can be identified as a sensitive period for children and requires significant support in order to promote optimal outcomes (Pianta & Walsh, 1996). However, it is important to clarify what is actually meant by the term ‘transition’ in relationship to beginning school.

Kagan and Neuman (1998) suggest that a number of interpretations can be included in what is defined as ‘transition’. Transitions may reflect a one-time set event provided by programs, families, and children at the end of the year (e.g., a visit by parent and child to the next setting) (Dockett & Perry, 2003). Transitions may also reflect ongoing efforts to link children’s natural environments (e.g., home) to supportive environments (e.g., programs). Further, transitions may involve creating pedagogical and curricular continuity between programs (e.g., early childhood center and kindergarten classrooms). Whatever the focus of a particular transition effort, the transition to kindergarten should be understood in terms of the influence of contexts, and the connections across these contexts at any given time (Pianta, Rimm-Kauffman, & Cox, 1999). Kraft-Sayre and Pianta (2000) acknowledge the shared responsibilities of many individuals and institutions for the transition to elementary school. They suggest that the transition is a dynamic process experienced by children, family, teachers and communities rather than an event that solely happens to a child. Through this perspective, transition is recognized as a process these stakeholders contribute to and support, Much of the research on school readiness
has not recognized the contextual factors that impact this multi-year period of time for a child. A transition to school framework that incorporates these multi-level and intersecting influences, is now viewed as a more accurate portrayal of how children become ready to learn (Pianta & LaParo, 2004).

**Family Constructions of ‘School Readiness’**

As stated in the NEGP, parents play an important role in preparing children for school. However, how parents construct meaning of readiness and understand their role in this process is still unclear (Diamond, Reagan & Bandyk, 2000), and is therefore one of my guiding questions for this study. One of the ways in which families construct an understanding of readiness is through informal checklists that are provided by local districts (Graue, 2006; Anarino, 1998). These lists are typically a list of desired skills, knowledge and dispositions that are viewed as important for entrance into kindergarten. These lists recommend to parents the importance of specific preliteracy, numeracy and social skills that are considered important for kindergarten. Parents’ ideas are also shaped by the perspectives of the local elementary teachers and administrators, and by the other ideas of other parents within the community (Graue, 1992, 1993).

Several Australian studies incorporate the perspectives of parents on the transition to school (Dockett & Perry, 2001; 2003; 2004a; 2004b) involving focus groups, interviews and extensive surveys with families. These studies document parental attention and desire to help children adjust to formal education. Participants in their studies identify the importance of promoting a positive attitude toward school, forming a relationship with the school, learning the rules of school, as well as supporting the development of self-care skills (e.g., washing hands, eating adequately) and basic academic knowledge. Overall, parents in these studies felt their
needs and concerns were overlooked as their children entered school, and that schools judged their parenting practices and efforts (Dockett & Perry, 2007). Such evidence supports the idea that the adjustment to a new school setting is challenging not just for the child, but for the parents, as well.

Using data from the National Household Education Survey, Diamond and colleagues (2000) investigated parental conceptions of kindergarten readiness. More than 2500 parents, including non-parental guardians, were asked about their preschool-aged child’s early education program, home and community activities, ideas about kindergarten readiness, and information about their child’s development. Based on their analysis, the scholars suggest that parents have a global view of kindergarten readiness when applied to children in general, but they place the most emphasis on the child’s academic abilities when making decisions. In their study, African American and Hispanic parents were significantly more likely than White parents to express concerns about their child’s readiness for kindergarten. However, White parents were significantly more likely to comment that they would delay sending their child to kindergarten until he or she was older. Given the emphasis on academic performance and achievement in the media, as well as in the increasing number of high stakes statewide testing programs in the elementary grades, one might expect to find that parents are increasingly concerned about their child’s academic abilities (Pianta, 2007; Gill et al., 2006). That concern appears to be an issue even for parents whose children have not yet entered school (Diamond et al., 2000).

McAllister et al. (2005) explored the perspectives and experiences of low-income, predominantly African American families regarding children’s school readiness and preparing children for school. Their study involved qualitative interviews with 150 parents and seven ethnographic case studies with families participating in the national evaluation of Early Head
Start. Starting from the premise that conceptions of school readiness are culturally diverse, they aimed to bring the voices and perspectives of local families to the forefront of public health and policy issues on this topic. Three robust themes emerged from this study: 1) parents expressed concern regarding strengthening their children’s social capacities and ensuring their emotional health in preparation for school entry, 2) parents viewed the school environments as challenging and potentially threatening, and 3) parents reported undergoing their own transition in preparing for their children’s school entry, and their own need for social and emotional support to respond to their children’s new challenges. This study presents a more complex picture of parental perspectives, by suggesting that school readiness concerns extend beyond academic and social competencies in a low-income sample. These parents also questioned whether, and to what extent, the schools were ready for their children, their specific cultural backgrounds, and their individual needs. Several parents asked interviewers, “Are schools ready for our children?” (McAllister, 2005, p. 621), demonstrating that parental views on readiness and entering school are not just child-focused.

Many children and families consider the transition to public school a major event for which they feel unprepared (Love et al., 1992). Parental worry about the transition to school is common, often leading parents to take preventive action and engage in activities to better prepare their children for school (Ramey, Lanzi, Phillips & Ramey, 1998). Parents report using a number of strategies to help minimize or eliminate the school transition problems they anticipate. Among those reported most frequently are showing interest in the child’s school, engaging in learning activities at home and ‘playing school’, preparing children for school by talking about school and new settings, and helping children acquire needed social and behavioral skills. The
strategies and approaches parents use to prepare children for the school setting are often referred to as academic socialization and will be explored next.

**Academic Socialization**

School entry is a normative transition that influences a child’s developmental process and is supported through academic socialization (Taylor et al., 2004). Socialization by parents frames the development of children’s prosocial and antisocial behaviors, and is therefore particularly important to the process of preparing children for school (Thompson, 1993; Hill 2001). Academic socialization, as a formal construct, has received only limited attention in the literature. However, what has surfaced in research is how some parenting behaviors promote positive school experiences for children and other types of parenting hinder children’s academic success (McGillicuddy-DeLisi, 1992). A recent study found that even students’ perceived support from parents and parental expectations of school behavior had a positive influence on their academic test scores (Bowen, Hopsen, Rose, & Glennie, 2012). Academic socialization, including parental expectations for and involvement in children’s education, has been found to be an important predictor of school achievement (Grolnick et al., 1997; Jimerson et al., 1999).

Wentzel (1999) posits that parents socialize children in a way that promotes the internalization of specific social and educational goals, through ongoing interactions within the family context. This early proximal relationship provides children with structure and clear behavioral expectations to promote success in school. By engaging in educational activities with their children at home (e.g., supporting homework, modeling reading behavior), parents communicate clear expectations for achievement, while integrating school curriculum goals within the home (Christenson & Sheridan, 2001).
Taylor et al. (2004) provide a comprehensive review of the literature about parents’ influences on their young children’s academic development. They conclude that much of what is known comes from one of two perspectives: ‘what parents do’ and ‘who parents are.’ The first perspective focuses on the behaviors in which parents engage that support or hinder their children’s school-related success. The second perspective considers ‘who parents are,’ or the attitudinal, cultural, socioeconomic, and other personal characteristics that are thought to influence parents’ academic socialization practices. Parents, through their personal experience, social and cultural characteristics and behaviors, provide a foundation for their children’s early academic experiences. Their review extends the transition practices literature, by applying a developmental perspective on the process, within an ecological systems framework.

Based on their synthesis of pertinent literature within the family context and their ecological approach, Taylor and colleagues (2004) created a model of academic socialization that has been applied and widely discussed in the early childhood field, to study and understand the parent-driven process of preparing children for school. Moving from left to right, the model suggests that parents’ own experiences in school lead to parental cognitions about school. Next, cognitions lead to their school-related behaviors, such as transition activities (e.g., reading to child, practicing numbers), the home environment (e.g., quality of home environment, learning materials), and school involvement aimed at supporting children’s early adjustment to school and academic success. Finally, all of these activities occur under the broad umbrella of socioeconomic and cultural influences. While this model is helpful in displaying important parental contributions to the academic socialization process, it relies heavily on White and middle-class activities that are often identified as the “right” way to socialize children for school setting the stage for more research with a deficit focus (Doucet & Tudge, 2007).
**Race and class as part of the socialization process.** The national movement behind addressing disparities in school readiness stems from numerous studies on the academic achievement of children from different economic groups at the start of school (Booth & Crouter, 2008; Lee & Burkam, 2002). For example, children from low SES households score significantly lower than middle- and upper-class children on math and reading tests at the beginning of kindergarten (Raver et al., 2007). This problem is especially troublesome for children of color from low SES households (Duncan & Magnuson, 2005). Because poverty and its negative consequences are more pronounced during early childhood than later on (Arnold & Doctoroff, 2003; Duncan, Yeung, Brooks-Gunn, & Smith, 1998), this period is a critical time to be both addressed and supported at national and local levels.

How parents choose to engage in the academic socialization process often looks different across households, based on the family’s racial or class differences (Taylor et al., 2004; Morrison-Gutman & McLoyd, 2000; Cooper et al. 2010; Gallimore & Goldenberg, 2001). Based on mainstream rhetoric and societal assumptions, many educators have a tendency to assume that lower-income families are not investing in children’s learning and academic achievement (Orthner, Jones-Sanpei, & Williamson, 2004; Edin & Lein, 1997). Contrary to mainstream rhetoric, many low-income parents do provide positive learning experiences and respond effectively to the developmental needs of their young children, which often remains unnoticed and underappreciated (e.g., Machida et al., 2002). Research has shown that home-based parental involvement, also referred to as academic socialization, may be as important as school-based involvement (Fantuzzo & McWayne, 2002). Recent research has found that African American parents highly value academic socialization practices, and engage in a variety of home-based activities (Jeynes, 2003; Caughy, O’Campo, Randolph, & Nickerson, 2002).
Contrary to expectations, Cooper et al. (2010) found that frequency of home-learning activities did not explain the lower achievement levels of children living in low-income homes, based on data provided by over 20,000 parents in the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study-Kindergarten (ECLS-K) data set. In general, parents living in low-income homes reported engaging their children in home-learning activities as often as higher-income parents, but this form of involvement did not appear to improve children’s early achievement. Examining the home-learning activities separately revealed that activities related to reading and science significantly, mediated associations between family poverty and kindergarten achievement. It is suggested that these forms of involvement are more closely in line with the academic demands that children face in the classroom than other home-learning activities.

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

**Everyday activities and socializing children for school.** As described above, research links class to family routines and activities (Rubin, 1976; Daly, 1996; Lareau, 2000), which is especially relevant to the study of low-income families and their preparation activities for school. Lareau (1987; 2000) found that middle-class children’s out-of-school activities mirror many school activities, while in contrast, working-class children’s after school routines are less structured and include informal play, time with peers, and “hanging out”. These unstructured activities may be viewed as lacking in children’s learning and educational promotion, some research investigates the benefits of promoting children’s learning and development in everyday naturally occurring opportunities (Dunst & Bruder, 1999; Dunst, Bruder, Trivette, Raab, & McLean, 1998).

Descriptive studies of children’s everyday experiences have found that any one location, such as a playground, is the source of many different kinds of activity settings (e.g., sandbox, swings, slides, etc.) and provide different kins of learning opportunities and experiences (Dunst & Bruder, 1999a). Research now indicates that everyday family and community life provides young children with many different kinds of learning opportunities and experiences (Dunst, Hamby, Trivetter, Raab, & Bruder, 2000; Goncu, 1999). Natural learning opportunities are afforded as part of daily living, child and family routines, family rituals, family and community celebrations and traditions, and other everyday activities, which across time constitute the life experiences of a developing child (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). These include, but are not limited to, meal times, bath times, caring for pets, taking walks, playing with water, picnics, bedtime stories, bus rides, play groups, and shopping (Dunst et al., 2003). The learning that occurs
during everyday activities, whether intentional or incidental, has been found to promote acquisition of competences that is culturally rooted, functional and adaptive, and makes possible the increased participation in everyday family and community activity settings – both social and nonsocial (e.g., Cole, 1996; Cole, Engestrom, & Vasquez, 1997; Hart & Risley, 1995).

**Parental Recollections of School**

The kinds of experiences parents recall from their many years of first-hand exposure to school settings, may impact the way they view school and academic outcomes (Raty, 2007). However, to date, few studies address this influence (Barnett & Taylor, 2009), making it one of my primary areas of exploration in this study. Taylor and colleagues (2004) contend that parents’ own experiences in school are important considerations in understanding children’s academic socialization. They offer that attitudes deriving from personal educational experiences guide the parents’ processing of information they acquire about their child’s schooling. Thinking about children’s academic socialization in terms of intergenerational influences provides a way to consider parents developmental histories and their current behaviors.

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

A recent article out of Finland (Turunen, 2012) explored the school memories of eight retired/elderly individuals. Participants were asked to write stories about starting school, which were later analyzed using discourse analysis. The aim was to find out what kind of memories about starting school people constructed after many years and life stages had passed. Specifically, what issues were so important and impressive that a person remembers and tells people about them? The study found that participant memories were most frequently related to a) leaving home and saying goodbye, b) feelings of uncertainty in new situations, and c) realizing differences. Further, results indicated that memories of entering school were still strong after decades. Even though the sample size was small and the study was not designed to elicit how memories inform parenting and socialization practices, it does support that memories remain with individuals throughout the life course.

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

A recent article by Barnett and Taylor (2009), draws upon Taylor et al.’s (2004) model of academic socialization to explore intergenerational influences on children’s transition to school. A primary goal of their study was to address the contributions to parental transition processes, including parental recollections of school, and current parent and family factors such as income and self-perceptions. This was the first study to examine this phenomenon, and they hypothesized that parental recollections as well as parent and family factors would contribute independently to the use of transition practices (e.g., reading to the child, saying the alphabet, talking about meeting a new teacher, rules, etc.) Their study, that involved structured interviews with 76 mothers from a diverse community sample, examined the general positivity or negativity of mothers’ recounted recollections of their own school experiences and their influence on preparation activities. Mothers who recalled the school involvement of their parents more positively reported engaging in academic transition activities with their own children, even after controlling for income.

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

Intergenerational influences (i.e., parent to child) have been highlighted as important influences within parents’ own school recollections and in guiding parents’ cognitions about education, and may also drive parental involvement. Putallaz, Costanzo, and Smith (1991) proposed a model of intergenerational continuities relevant to school behaviors, involvement, and connectedness. Their model suggests that if one’s own parents displayed high levels of school involvement, cognitive and emotional support, and who clearly communicated value for education, those individuals may be more likely to have internalized a positive attitude toward school. These individuals will approach the schooling of their own children in a similarly supportive and involved manner. Likewise, parents whose own parents were less involved in school, less supportive, and who failed to communicate a high value for education may be at greater risk for providing a similar lack of support for their own children as they transition into the school setting.
A recent qualitative analysis of maternal interviews revealed four themes related to mothers’ own memories as the most meaningful in guiding their behaviors in preparing their children for school (Miller et al., 2011). As part of a larger study on school readiness (Dilworth-Bart, PI), 47 mothers of preschool aged children participated in a semi-structured interview on their school experiences. Mothers reported that intergenerational influences of family involvement, school transitions, the type of school they attended (e.g., public/private, rural/urban, etc.), and the diversity of the student body were the strongest memories guiding their current behaviors. Almost all mothers reported that their school experiences contribute to how they think about preparing their children for school. This implies that school recollections claim a role in the school transition and preparation process for families, as well as more long-term thoughts on schooling. However, since participants in this study reported a wide range of incomes (i.e., $0-200,000, M=$59,690), it is unclear if these themes are as robust in a low-income sample as they are in the mixed sample. It is important to apply this work to a higher-risk sample, given the greater educational disadvantage that many of these children face (Murnane, Willett, Bub, & McCartney, 2006; Lee & Burkam, 2002), as well as to incorporate the educational histories of fathers which may also inform current practices with their children.

**Father Involvement**

Family demographic data suggest that fathers (whether biological or not) are present in children’s lives to some extent, regardless of their living situations (Greene & Moore, 2000). Even when fathers do not have extensive contact with their offspring, it appears that they can and do influence children’s functioning (Coley & Chase-Lansdale, 1999; Cabrera et al., 2000). Given that fathers remain present in children’s lives, the next question relates to whether fathers have an influence on their children during the transition to school. Historically, there has been a
pattern of not including fathers in research of child issues (Phares, 1992) and it is not surprising to find this pattern in research on developmental issues. There are many possible reasons for the lack of inclusion of fathers in research, including theory-driven research that has marginalized fathers and centralized mothers (Silverstein, 2002), challenges in recruiting fathers into research (Costigan & Cox, 2001), and an overall lack of attention to fathers’ potential influences on their children (Zimmerman et al., 2000). None of these reasons, however, negate the fact that researchers should be more cognizant of the roles of fathers in children’s early development and school preparation.

Although the term parent implies both mothers and fathers, the vast majority of investigations on parenting are studies of mothering, with a notable lack of attention to fathers and their roles during children’s early schooling (Downer, 2007). More recently, investigators from a variety of disciplines have developed increasingly complex conceptualizations of fathering within the context of diverse family life (e.g., Anderson, Kaplan & Lancaster, 1999; Bianchi, 2000; Hawkins & Palkovitz, 1999; Downer & Mendez, 2005). These conceptualizations propose a number of ways in which men can be involved and make unique contributions to children’s development during the early childhood period.

There are compelling reasons for studying father involvement during early childhood and the transition to school. First, fathers make direct and indirect contributions to children’s development of cognitive and socioemotional competencies (Amato & Rivera, 1999; Cabrera et al., 2000). Second, fathers tend to be more involved with their children during infancy and early childhood than during middle childhood and adolescence (Yeung et al., 2001), and fathers who are most involved early on are also the most involved during later childhood (ECCRN, 2000). These early years set the stage for long term involvement.
The father involvement research suggests that fathers play a unique role in early childhood that is complementary to mothers’ roles (Downer, 2007). However, most research is mother-focused. Applying a mother template to father-child relationships allows for easy comparisons with mothering, but there is the possibility that fathers are interacting with young children in distinct ways from mothers, aiding the transition to school in their own distinct ways (Paquette, 2004). Fathers may challenge young children to be more independent, self-reliant, and self-regulated (Grossman et al., 2002). Such experiences offer the child a chance to develop assertiveness and confidence as well as learn how to regulate during physical and emotional stimulation.

Understanding paternal involvement in low-income families is particularly important, since some studies suggest that the presence of a father may be a buffer against the negative effects of poverty (e.g., McLanahan, Astone, & Marks, 1991). However, it is not always clear what features are even related to positive father involvement, given the general lack of clarity around role expectations for fathers in society today (Doherty, Kouneski, & Erickson, 1998). Recently, a qualitative study was done on four Early Head Start sites to explore the question of how low-income mothers and fathers view the role of fathers in their families (Summers et al., 1999). Data collected from 56 parents were analyzed for common themes, which included: financial support, “being there,” care giving, outings and play, teaching discipline, providing love, and protection. The men in this study reported that being there and being involved were important aspects of being a good father. These Early Head Start fathers described traditional roles (Brayfield, 1995), but also included more contemporary roles such as caregiving and providing love. While these studies enhance our broad understanding of the role of fatherhood,
they do not teach us about how this role is connected to children’s schooling, and more specifically, children’s transition to school.

Fathers are less likely than mothers to attend school-related functions (Fagan & Palm, 2004). In perhaps the most comprehensive study of father involvement in schools, as part of the 1996 National household Education Survey, parents were asked about their participation in four types of school-related activities during the kindergarten through 12th grade period: attendance at a school meeting, attendance at a scheduled parent-teacher conference, attendance at a school/class event and serving as a volunteer at the school (Nord, Brimhall, & West, 1997). Within two parent households, mothers were much more likely to report a high level of involvement in these school activities (56% involved in 3-4 activities) than fathers (27%). In fact, 48% of fathers in these families reported involvement in only one or fewer school activities.

Smaller studies provide information about fathers’ involvement in early education and child care settings, again suggesting limited school involvement (Downer & Mendez, 2005; Fagan & Iglesias, 1999). Fagan & Iglesias (1999) reported a set of findings from research with fathers and father figures who had preschool age children. Seventy-one percent of these fathers rarely or never volunteered in their children’s preschools, 73% rarely or never attended parent meetings or conferences, and 49% rarely or never communicated with the preschool teacher. Research has also reported relatively low levels of preschool center involvement for fathers within white, middle-class families (Garinger & McBride, 1995). With another sample of preschoolers who lived in two-parent households, even when fathers did report coming into the preschool setting, they were much less likely to communicate with teachers than were mothers (Fagan, 1997), suggesting a discomfort or uncertainty about interacting with teachers. Another recent study of low-income, African American fathers of Head Start children indicated that they
were more likely to report involvement with their children at home than at school (Downer & Mendez, 2005). These findings suggest that only acknowledging center and classroom-based involvement may underestimate fathers’ involvement in learning-related activities and the importance they place on education for their children.

Fathers may be more likely to engage in home-based education involvement, such as reading a book, helping with a school project or asking a child about his or her school day, than attending activities at school (Downer & Mendez, 2005). Rather than focusing on what fathers are not doing, it may be more advantageous to further study and create efforts to support and expand fathers’ involvement outside of the school setting. Similarly, there is a real need for research that targets how and why fathers assist children during the transition to school, to best accommodate and support this process for fathers (Downer, 2007).

**Community Context and the Transition to School**

**Contributions of early childhood education.** Mothers and fathers make many direct influences on preparing children for school, as discussed in previous sections. However, there are also a number of activities that go on outside of the home that contribute to how families understand and experience this process (Pianta, 2007; Pianta et al., 1999). One way in which parents manage out-of-home learning, is by enrolling children in early childhood education programs. The influence of early childhood education on children’s school readiness and the transition to school is important to this study because early childhood programs are important at the micro- and mesosystem levels of development (Bronfenbrenner, 1988). Families are preparing children for school within the context of other systems, and these settings can work together or in competition with one another (Kagan & Kaurez, 2007).
Decades of research support that high-quality early childhood education contributes to academic and social gains for children as they begin their formal education (Camilli et al., 2010; Barnett, 1995; Burchinal et al., 1997; Abbott-Shim, Lambert & McCarty, 2003). There has been such a large push for early childhood education as a means to promote school readiness, that readiness and early childhood education have become practically synonymous (Brooks-Gunn, 2003; Kagan & Kaurez, 2007). Given that the public discourse has made early childhood education and readiness nearly interchangeable, parents may begin to rely on it as a primary source of preparing children for school.

The current legislative landscape, with multistate support of pre-K programs as well as federal initiatives, has prompted early childhood educators to demonstrate specific skill development in children they serve (Harbin, Rous, & McLean, 2005; No Child Left Behind Act, 2002). Participation in comprehensive, high-quality preschool programs can boost the school readiness of children and has demonstrated extended benefits over time (Barnett, 1995; Ramey & Ramey, 2004). Further, high-quality programs have been shown to buffer the negative effects of high risk home and neighborhood environments (Lee & Burkam, 2002). As scholars and practitioners continue to highlight the benefits of preschool participation, it is important to explore how preschool programs may influence the academic socialization practices of parents. At the same time, parents have identified a lack of high-quality, accessible child care, as undermining their efforts to ready their children for school (McAllister et al., 2005).

The number of children attending early childhood education programs has increased dramatically in recent years. In 2001, 66% of 4 year olds in the U.S. were enrolled in a center or school-based based program, rising from 23% thirty years earlier (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2003). However, different rates of attendance exist between children from
different income levels, and children from low-income homes and with less educated parents remains relatively low. In fact, children whose mothers report a college degree are almost twice as likely to be in center based care, than those whose mothers did not complete high school (NCES, 2003).

Findings from the NICHD study of Early Child Care confirms that children that children who spent more time in center-based care over the first five years of life demonstrated higher language and memory skills, even after controlling for the quality of care received (NICHD Early Child Care Research Network, 2003). A study conducted using the ECLS-K data set, found that children enrolled in center-based preschool programs the year prior to school entry score higher in reading and math skills (Magnuson et al., 2004). Further, this advantage persists to the spring of first grade. Larger effects were found for children from disadvantaged backgrounds, suggesting that these programs might make the largest impact on targeting this population.

**Community resources and involvement.** Along with enrolling children in early childhood centers, parents also manage out-of-home time by organizing and supervising children’s educational opportunities in the community. Clark (1990) states that achievement is best understood in the environmental contexts of children’s everyday lives, which include the home as well as community settings like schools, churches, and recreation centers. Moreover, parents interact with community institutions such as the school on their children’s behalf. Although these interactions are probably no less consequential for children’s academic achievement than more direct parenting practices within the home, rarely do studies consider how parents manage or fail to manage their children’s education outside the household (Furstenberg, et al., 1999).
Lareau’s (2003) ethnographic work on family influences on school readiness has drawn attention to social class differences in the organized activities that parents arrange for their children. Lareau found that higher SES parents schedule their children for a variety of arts, sports, and other activities, whereas lower SES parents allow for more unstructured and natural development. In contrast, Cooper and colleagues (2010) found that in an African American sample, children living in low-income and middle-income homes are equally as likely to participate in organized activities, but less than middle-income White children. Examination of the organized activities separately suggests that African American children, regardless of their SES status, are more likely to be involved in sports or organized performances (e.g., church choir) than other activities.

Understanding how children’s time is managed is important, because research has suggested, for families living in economically depressed neighborhoods, that parents’ management of their children’s involvement in community activities has important consequences for children’s achievement. For example, a study conducted by Morrison-Gutman et al. (2000) surveyed 62 African American parents of children entering sixth grade, and found that high achieving students were not only involved in more extracurricular and religious activities than low-achieving students but also involved in a wider variety of activities. High achievers were involved in more art, music, academic and religious activities than low achievers, whereas both high achievers and low achievers were involved in a similar number of sports activities. Parents of high achievers viewed their children’s involvement as a necessary part of their children’s social, academic, and moral development. Parents of high achievers also saw their children’s involvement, particularly in religious activities, as a way of providing a pathway to a successful life. Although parents of low achievers did not discourage their children’s involvement in
outside activities, they did not create such opportunities for them. Even though this study targeted older children, it suggests that involvement in certain community activities may positively benefit children’s educational success.

**Home-School Connections**

Research continually highlights that home-school relationships also positively benefit children’s education. These relationships have demonstrated their capacity to enhance children’s motivation to learn (Christenson, 2000), as well as the development of key emergent skills that are necessary for academic success (Pianta, Rimm-Kaufman, & Cox, 1999). Little work addresses partnerships in the early childhood years, and most is directed at primary and secondary settings (Gabler & Kafuman, 2006). However, as children’s involvement in early childhood settings increases, it is important to consider models of home-school partnerships before and after children transition to school (Pianta, 2007).

Epstein’s (1995) work on home-school partnerships is the most widely discussed model for increasing connections. In her framework, she presents six essential components of effective partnerships: parenting skills, communication, learning at home, volunteering and collaborating with the community. Through this perspective, overlapping spheres of home, school and community are considered in how they operate on their own and how they can be brought together to support children’s learning and development.

Such models have been useful in designing and evaluating partnership initiatives; however, they emphasize involvement at the school level and understate other types of involvement (Auerbach, 2007). Further, such types of partnerships fail to consider the needs and perspectives of many low-income and ethnically diverse families (Lareau & Horvat, 1999), by neglecting the ways in which race, ethnicity, class, gender and marital status may influence why
and how families are able to be involved (Doucet, 2008). In addressing the issue of home-school connections, it is important to consider the family perspective, and how their ‘involvement’ is shaped by power and privilege in their communities (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997).

Parents’ school involvement is a critical factor for children’s education at all grade levels. Pelletier and Brent (2007) suggest that a strong home-school connection aids the development of important school-related skills and contributes to a smooth transition for children and their family. The family-school connection is especially important in those minority and low-income communities where parents may feel less efficacious about being involved (Morrison-Gutman & Mcloyd, 2000). Traditional forms of parental involvement (e.g., attending school events, conferences) are most strongly related to positive child outcomes for white middle-class families, suggesting that parental involvement among diverse groups may be qualitatively different in its form, operation and impact. Socioeconomically disadvantaged students may require greater investment to yield similar benefits, yet their parents may have the lowest levels of available social capital to bring to bear on school activities (McNeal, 1999).

The mothers in Suizzo et al.’s (2008) study stressed the importance of being involved both at home and at school; however, some voiced concern that they might be unwelcome or stereotyped should they be too present in the school setting. Parents who have had positive experiences at their children’s school and who believe that school personnel want to work with them in order to help their children succeed in school are more likely to initiate contact with their children’s school (Morrision-Gutman & Mcloyd, 2000). However, a substantial portion of Early Head Start parents rarely expressed the expectation that they would be actively involved in the school itself, which raises the question of whether parents find the environments of local schools intimidating or unfriendly (McAllister et al., 2005).
Although many low-income parents want to be involved in their children’s education, the financial and time constraints that poverty brings may constrain their involvement (Newman & Chin, 2003). In addition, schools may discourage parental involvement if they have negative perceptions about low-income parents’ attitudes and values or their children’s academic potential (Alexander et al., 1987; Lareau, 2003). Regardless of why economically disadvantaged parents are less involved in their children’s schools, research suggests that their lower involvement levels do not bode well for poor children’s ability to transition into school (Barbarin, Downer, Odom & Head, 2010). If less involvement at school translates into less communication with school personnel, then uninvolved low-income parents may lack critical information about their children’s performance and progress, about how to reinforce learning at home, and about school services and resources (Lareau, 2003).

The Current Study

In this chapter, I reviewed relevant literature on the transition to formal school. The transition to school has generated national attention based on marked disparities in children’s school readiness, which is linked to children’s economic background and race. To better understand these gaps at the starting gate, many scholars suggest further investigating the role of the family in this process (Booth & Crouter, 2008). The way in which mothers and fathers socialize their children for school, based on their own educational histories and current home-based practices, can make a profound impact on children’s early beginnings in school (Taylor et al., 2004). Further, how parents manage children’s time outside of the home, by enrolling children in high-quality early education and involving them in community activities, as well as their connectedness to these settings, is important to the transition process for school (e.g., Abbott-Shim et al., 2003; Furstenberg et al., 1999; Pianta et al., 1999).
My review of the relevant literature on this topic has brought me to this point, and informed my development of the current study. This dissertation sought to build on this literature and address some of its gaps related to understanding low-income perspectives, parental memories of school, and father involvement. By taking a strength-based approach to understanding families during this process, I am able to highlight the many efforts and activities families bring to this important milestone for children. In the next chapter, I will provide an overview of my proposed study on parental perspectives on the transition to school.
Chapter Four

Methods

This is a qualitative study that draws on ethnographic techniques to answer three research questions about the transition to school:

1. How do parents think their school recollections are related to their self-reported thoughts and behaviors as they prepare their children for school entry?
2. What are parents’ constructions of school readiness and how do these constructions contribute to how parents report preparing their children for school?
3. Which activities, individuals, and relationships contribute to the transition process for families?

I explored these questions using semi-structured interviews, visual methods, and sociodemographic surveys. These methods were a way for me to gather local points of view from parents and households (Moll & Greenberg, 1990). Further, they provided a means to identifying significant categories and meanings of human experience, up close and personal. This approach supported the enhancement and widening of commonly used top-down views, enriched the inquiry process, and generated new analytic insight, which will be presented in my final chapters.

There were three components to this study: mother interviews, father interviews, and photo elicitation interviews. I will describe and discuss these components as two phases. The first phase of this project involved an initial set of interviews with all 24 participants, including 16 mothers and eight fathers. The second phase was comprised of a subset of eight families who volunteered for the photo elicitation portion of the study. Figure 1 provides a graphic representation of the study’s components and phases.
The entire research process, from initial recruitment efforts to analysis and writing, was assisted by a team of students enrolled in a research experience course with my advisor. The
team was made up of four female and two male students. Five of the students were undergraduate students and one student had just completed her master’s degree. All of the students were in the fields of psychology and Human Development and Family Studies. These individuals comprised the research team, which I will refer to throughout this chapter.

**Phase 1 Procedure: Initial Interviews with the Full Sample**

**Recruitment and eligibility.** Recruitment took place in local early childhood centers and through community organizations that serve children and families living in low-income homes. I contacted the directors and/or personnel of programs to arrange recruitment efforts with families by displaying flyers, passing out information, or attending family events (Appendix A). To be eligible for inclusion in the study, participants’ household income could not exceed 200% of the Federal Poverty Threshold, which made families eligible for the state’s child care subsidy (Wisconsin Department of Children and Families, 2011). All participants had a child entering kindergarten in the fall of 2011, requiring that children turn 5 years old by September 1st. This was an ideal age, because participants’ children were already registered for kindergarten, which is a clear marker of the transition to school in parents’ minds (Pianta, 2007). Lastly, participants identified as African American or White and lived in Dane County. During the recruitment stage, families were informed that each participant would receive a $20 gift card for involvement in the project.

Contact information was collected at events or provided by program staff if the family informed them of their interest in the study. I called all families to verify their eligibility and answer questions about the study. A phone scripts was submitted through IRB and guided these phone conversations (Appendix B). I scheduled an interview time with participants at the conclusion of the interview. All families that provided their contact information were enrolled in
the program, unless they did not meet eligibility requirements or did not return my phone call after several efforts. In total, one family was ineligible because the child was too young and two mothers were unresponsive to phone calls.

Primary efforts were directed at recruiting mothers of preschool aged children living in low-income homes, and after enrolling mothers I asked them to provide access to children’s fathers. In line with previous research, mothers were critical to accessing fathers for interviews and participation in studies (Costigan & Cox, 2001). Studies on Early Head Start fathers have relied heavily on mothers for enlisting fathers into their studies on low-income fathers (e.g., Summer et al., 2006) and I used this approach to connect with fathers. Both advantages and disadvantages to this approach will be discussed in my limitations section. Father participation was desired, but not a requisite for families to become involved in the project. Mothers identified who they viewed as the child’s father, with no preference given to biological or residential fathers.

Originally, I aimed to enroll an equal number of African American and White participants to stratify the sample. However, as I began interviewing participants and reviewing responses, the most pronounced and meaningful divisions in the sample were related to class and not race. Therefore, I directed attention to stratifying the sample by higher and lower resource families within the low-income group for further comparisons. Even though White and African American households are equally represented in the sample, my emphasis shifted to including families that represented higher and lower levels of education and income, while still qualifying for the state’s child care subsidy. Participants were added to the sample until emerging themes and ideas reached data saturation, which was indicated by data redundancy (Bowen, 2008;
Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Additionally, enrollment could not extend past the beginning of September, when kindergarten began and children officially transitioned into formal education.

**Sample.** For the initial set of interviews, I interviewed 24 parents in total from 16 families. Sixteen of the participants were mothers and eight were fathers. All of the fathers were partners or husbands of the mother participants, providing eight mother-father dyads in the project. As previously stated, by applying Bourdieu’s theoretical ideas, the sampling was stratified to include eight African American and eight White mothers in order to create racial contrasts in my design and analysis. The eight fathers provided additional areas for contrast in considering marital configurations and partnerships. Participant characteristics, for the full sample of 24 participants, are provided in Table 1. Participants’ race/ethnicity were determined by the sociodemographic survey made up of predetermined categories. All participants identified themselves, based on those categories, as African American or White. One participant marked other and identified herself as Black American. Fourteen participants (58.3 %) identified as African or Black American, 10 participants (41.7 %) identified as White. Eight families were grouped as higher-resource families (50%) and eight families were grouped as lower-resource families (50%), based on their household incomes and levels of education. Seven of the 16 (43.8%) families were married or partnered at the time of the study. Eleven participants reported a high school degree/GED or less (45.8%), 11 reported some college (45.8%), and two reported a 4 year degree or above (8.3%). Dyads are grouped together on the table to identify family connections. Pseudonyms are used to protect participant confidentiality. Although all of the families fit the low-income definition of this project, within group income and level of education differences emerged during the preliminary analysis, which prompted me to distinguish higher
and lower resource participants in the sample. Higher and lower resource families are identified in Table 1, and will be referenced as I present the findings in the next chapter.

Table 1

*Full Sample Participant Characteristics*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age (M, F)</th>
<th>Education Level (M, F)</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Income</th>
<th>Employment (M, F)</th>
<th>Marital Status</th>
<th>Children</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Alexus/</td>
<td>30, 34</td>
<td>GED, High school</td>
<td>African American, African American</td>
<td>Less than 10,000</td>
<td>No/Yes (part-time)</td>
<td>Partnered</td>
<td>5 yrs; girl 6 yrs; girl 12 yrs; girl 16 yrs; boy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Darryl</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Stephanie*</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>Law Degree</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>20-25,000</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Separated</td>
<td>9 mths; girl 5 yrs; boy 6 yrs; boy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Megan/</td>
<td>28, 29</td>
<td>College degree/ some college</td>
<td>White, White</td>
<td>Over 30,000</td>
<td>No, Yes</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>8 mths; girl 3 yrs; boy 4 yrs; girl 7 yrs; girl</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Josh*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Ashley/</td>
<td>26, 24</td>
<td>Some high school, Some college</td>
<td>African American, African American</td>
<td>Less than 10,000</td>
<td>Yes, No</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>4 yrs; boy 10 yrs; boy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chris</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Carly /</td>
<td>30, 36</td>
<td>Some college, Some college</td>
<td>White, White</td>
<td>20-25,000</td>
<td>No, Yes</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>5 yrs; girl 6 yrs; boy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Steve*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Amara</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>High school diploma</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>10-15,000</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>6 mths; girl 5 yrs; girl</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Lisa</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>High school diploma</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>15-20,000</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>5 yrs; girl</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Regina*</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>Some college</td>
<td>Black American</td>
<td>20-25,000</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Separated</td>
<td>5 yrs; twin boys 9 yrs; girl 12 yrs; girl</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Lesley /</td>
<td>46, 44</td>
<td>Some college, Some college</td>
<td>African American, African American</td>
<td>More than 30,000</td>
<td>Yes, Yes</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>5 yrs; boy 16 yrs; boy 18 yrs; boy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michael*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Age</td>
<td>Education Level</td>
<td>Race/Ethnicity</td>
<td>Income</td>
<td>Married Status</td>
<td>Children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---</td>
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<td>-----------------</td>
<td>----------------</td>
<td>--------------</td>
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<td>-------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Jasmin</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Some high school</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>Less than 10,000</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Single 5 yrs; boy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Sonya*</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>Some college</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>20-25,000</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Single 10 yrs; twin girls</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>11 yrs; boy, 13 yrs; boy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Lori/Eddie*</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>Some college, High school</td>
<td>White, White</td>
<td>20-25,000</td>
<td>Yes, Yes</td>
<td>Married 3 yrs; boy, 10 yrs; girl, 12 yrs; girl</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Deirdre/Marcus</td>
<td>24, 26</td>
<td>Some high school, Some high school</td>
<td>African American, African American</td>
<td></td>
<td>Partnered</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Sharisa/Rashad</td>
<td>41, 43</td>
<td>Some high school, Some college</td>
<td>African American, African American</td>
<td>Less than 10,000</td>
<td>No, Yes</td>
<td>Married 8 mths; girl, 5 yrs; boy, 11 yrs; girl, 13 yrs; boy, 17 yrs; girl, 19 yrs; boy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Hannah</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>GED</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Less than 10,000</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Single 6 mths; girl, 2 yrs; girl, 5 yrs; boy, 10 yrs; girl, 13 yrs; girl</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Holly*</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>Some college</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>20-25,000</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Separated 5 yrs; boy, 7 yrs; boy</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. Higher resource families are identified with *; based on household income and level of education*

**Data collection.** The data collection procedure for the initial interviews involved one session, scheduled at the participant’s convenience. The mother selected a two-hour time period to be interviewed at her location of choice. Mothers requested a home visit or suggested a neutral location to meet. Eleven interviews took place in mothers’ homes and five took place at a neutral site (e.g., restaurant, community center). If the father was willing to participate, I attempted to coordinate the father interview during the original home visit. If the father was not available at that time, a separate home visit was scheduled at his convenience. Six of the father
interviews were conducted in a home setting, one was conducted at the father’s workplace, and one was conducted at a restaurant. I was accompanied by a member of the research team to provide child care during the time of the interview.

At the beginning of the visit, I reviewed the consent form with mothers and fathers before acquiring their signatures (Appendix C). I clarified the goals of my research study with participants as I reviewed the consent form, and described what their involvement would entail before requesting written consent. I made clear that identities would remain confidential in the project and all names would be replaced with a pseudonym in written documents. In addition to a signature, participants were required to give permission for the use of direct quotes from their interviews. All participants agreed to be quoted directly with pseudonyms. Once the paperwork was complete, mothers completed the audio-recorded interviews and one sociodemographic form. Fathers completed a separate audio-recorded interview and a supplementary sociodemographic form. Upon completion of the interviews, participants were given a $20 gift card.

**Instruments.**

**Sociodemographic forms.** I used a sociodemographic form to collect basic information from families (Appendix D). The form requested information on family characteristics (e.g., age, race/ethnicity, income, education, number of children), as well as preschool and community involvement. Forms were reviewed upon completion of the home visit to follow-up on any missing data or to clarify parental responses. Forms were helpful in describing sample characteristics, as well as providing necessary demographic information for comparing and contrasting participants during analysis.


**Mother interviews.** Mothers participated in a semi-structured interview with two sections. The first interview section was aimed at identifying their understanding of school readiness and how they manage their child’s transition to school (Appendix D). The interview script included general questions about what it means to be “ready” for school and who supports the process of preparing children for kindergarten. It also included probes related to preacademic and social-emotional areas of readiness. The second section of the interview explored recollections of schooling and how school memories inform how they think about preparing their children for school (Appendix D). The semi-structured interview protocols were shaped by this study’s theoretical framework and previous research in the area (e.g., exploring the variety of individuals and activities supporting the transition process, exploring the difference between home and school expectations). Certain questions were fixed, but the format allowed for digression based on maternal responses (Berg, 1998). The full interview was audio-recorded and transcribed for analysis as one document.

**Father interviews.** Fathers participated in a father involvement interview (Appendix D). Some questions were modified from an Early Head Start study with fathers (Summers et al., 2006, p. 148); however, questions were made more specific to the transition to school. The semi-structured interview explored how fathers viewed themselves as involved and how they support the school transition process for children. I also asked fathers to report on their school memories, and discuss any connection between those memories and current thoughts or behaviors with their children. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed for analysis. Although the mother and father interviews were not identical in wording, they explored the same ideas and are guided by the study’s research questions, allowing me to compare responses collectively. Father interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed for analysis.
Phase 2 Procedure: Photo Elicitation Interviews

Recruitment and sample. As part of a more in-depth exploration of parents’ constructions of school readiness and management of transition activities, participants were invited to take part in the photo elicitation portion of this project. Photo elicitation participants were recruited from the full sample of participants in phase 1 of the study. All of the original participants were eligible for this portion of the study because they already met eligibility requirements and completed the initial interview as part of the larger project. At the end of the initial interview, I told participants of an opportunity to participate in a photography portion of the study. If the participant expressed interest, I explained the procedure and made participants aware that they would receive a complete set of their photographs as compensation. Some of the families scheduled visit times immediately and others requested a follow-up phone call.

The subsample for phase 2 consisted of eight families. This sample size is typical for this type of visual work (e.g., McAllister et al, 2005, Vaughn, Forbes & Howell, 2009; Ornelas et al., 2009) because it involves multiple visits to their homes to complete the full process. Of those sixteen families, twelve volunteered for the photo elicitation portion of the study; however, four later changed their minds. Participants that did not participate cited reasons related to lack of time or moving conflicts. Table 2 provides family characteristics of participants involved in the photo elicitation portion of the study.
Table 2

*Photo Elicitation Family Characteristics*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Education Level (M, F)</th>
<th>Race (M,F)</th>
<th>Income</th>
<th>Marital Status</th>
<th>Family members present at interview</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alexus / Darryl</td>
<td>30,34</td>
<td>GED, High school</td>
<td>African American, African American</td>
<td>Less than $10,000</td>
<td>Partnered</td>
<td>Alexus and daughter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Megan / Josh*</td>
<td>28,29</td>
<td>College degree/some college</td>
<td>White, White</td>
<td>Over $30,000</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Megan and daughter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regina*</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>Some College</td>
<td>Black American</td>
<td>$15-20,000</td>
<td>Separated</td>
<td>Regina</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lesley/ Michael*</td>
<td>46,44</td>
<td>Some college, some college</td>
<td>African American, African American</td>
<td>Over $30,000</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Lesley and son</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jasmin</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Some high school</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>Less than $10,000</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>Jasmin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sonya*</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>Some college</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>$20-25,000</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>Sonya</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lori/ Eddie*</td>
<td>37,35</td>
<td>Some college, High school</td>
<td>White, White</td>
<td>$20-25,000</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Lori, Eddie, 2 older daughters, 2 sons</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deirdre / Marcus</td>
<td>24,26</td>
<td>Some high school, some high school</td>
<td>African American, African American</td>
<td>Less than $10,000</td>
<td>Partnered</td>
<td>Deirdre, Marcus, 3 daughters</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* *Higher resource families*

**Data collection.** Data collection involved a series of three visits to the participant’s home and a number of steps, which are outlined in Table 3 and described here. Taking the ‘autodriven’ approach (Clark, 2004), parents were in charge of capturing visual images of activities with their children over the course of a week. During the first scheduled visit to the home, participants signed consent forms and I answered any questions or concerns about this phase of the study. Since this portion of the study involved images of participants, steps taken to protect their confidentiality in the study were described. Family members and individuals on the
research team were the only individuals permitted to view the photos once they were developed. Actual photographs would not be included in any publications or documents, based on IRB stipulations, and would be deleted upon completion of analysis. Although phase 2 was equally inclusive of mothers and fathers, in all cases, mothers served as the contact for the family.

**Photo elicitation.** Social scientists have been using photo elicitation since anthropologist John Collier (1967) introduced it as a valid and useful method for collecting data. Several recent articles and books explain the PEI methodology (Banks, 2001; Harper, 2002; Pink, 2001). Photo elicitation, also referred to as photo interviewing and photo feedback (Hurworth et al., 2003), involves using photographs to evoke comments, memory, reflection and discussion in the course of a semi-structured interview (Harper, 2002). Specific examples of social interactions and activities depicted in photographs can serve as the foundation for a discussion of broader abstractions or fine-tuned details of the images (Banks, 2001).

Parents were instructed to take pictures of any activities that might help their child in school. Families were instructed to think broadly about these instructions and use their own interpretation of what activities might be linked to their children’s readiness for school. Families had complete control over the camera during that week and chose what activities to capture. Because this method is naturalistic, parents were given minimal instructions and training on the process, other than how to use the camera. Instead, my intention was for parents to use the cameras as part of their everyday lives to record activities and scenes that convey their own understandings of school-readiness and capture how they are part of this transition process.

After one week, I collected the camera and uploaded the photos on a laptop computer. Families were given the opportunity to delete any photographs they did not wish to be viewed by me or the research team. With the family’s permission, copies of the photos were printed for the
interview portion of the photo elicitation process and then given to the family for their personal use. A home visit time was scheduled with the family, at their convenience, and any members of the family were permitted to participate in the viewing session and interview. Of the eight interviews, two interviews involved the entire family (i.e., parents and children), three involved the mother and child, and three involved solely the mother.

During the interview session, I spread pictures across the table for the family members to view. The family began by grouping or discarding any redundant pictures. I then asked participants to select photos to label and elaborate on. As the facilitator, I acknowledged that all images represented meaningful moments and that I would like to know more about what was going on in the pictures. Parents took the lead in discussing the pictures. I employed additional probes to address deeper meanings of these activities for the family and how they understand their connectedness to the child’s preparation for school. The interview was audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim for further analysis.

Photographs served as prompts rather than data, and the information provided in photographs helped guide the interview with families (Collier, 1967). The images often contained new information, and triggered meaning for the interviewee beyond previous discussions (Collier, 1967; Schwartz, 1989). Photographs contextualized previous discussions and identified important objects, individuals and relationships related to the transition to school. Photographs used in the study held a dual purpose. I used the photographs as a tool to explore the contextualized lives of families, and simultaneously, participants used photographs to provide a unique way to communicate activities in their everyday lives.
Table 3

*Photo Elicitation Process*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Steps</th>
<th>Researcher-initiated activity with each family</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>I arranged a time to drop off the digital, gain consent, and provide instructions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Families took pictures of activities for one week.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Towards the end of the week, I contacted the family to confirm a time to pick-up the camera.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>I picked up the camera and allowed the family to delete any photographs they did not wish to be developed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Families selected a time for a follow-up interview.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>I uploaded photographs on a computer and photographs were developed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>I returned to the home with the photographs and facilitated the follow-up interview.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Families were given the printed photographs as compensation.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Data Analysis**

Data analysis began immediately following the first set of interviews, and continued throughout the data collection process. The analysis began with the transcription of the data and was accompanied with the creation of memos. The data analysis of phases 1 and 2 of the study followed similar analysis procedures and will be presented together, starting with the coding process.

**The coding process.** I followed Boyatzis’ (1998) process for developing codes and thematically analyzing data. A code is an abstract representation of an object or phenomenon (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Memos and transcripts needed a classification system in order to make sense of them (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Bazeley, 2007). Coding was a way of linking data to ideas and from ideas back to supporting data (Richards & Morse, 2007). The process
involved five prescribed steps to inductively developing a code: 1) reducing the raw information, 2) identifying themes within subsamples, 3) comparing themes across subsamples, 4) creating a code, and 5) determining the reliability of the code.

The first step involved summarizing each fully transcribed interview. Through this process, the research team read each transcript and created an outline of paraphrased items based on fully transcribed interviews. The outlines served as a discussion for coding and analysis meetings. Next, we compared outlines of interviews to identify similarities and differences across participants. The research team’s discussions served for the development of preliminary codes, as we continued to compare themes across interviews. The codes identified by each set of transcripts (i.e., mothers, fathers, photo elicitation) were compiled into three separate codebooks for each group of transcripts. For each code, the research team constructed a set of statements or definitions that clearly defined when each code should be applied to data, by determining the presence and absence of the codes (Boyatzis, 1998). The codebook included the labels, definition of codes, words to be used as indicators, criteria for inclusion and exclusion of codes, and examples of relevant quotes. These codes were not fixed, and were frequently modified, combined or omitted as the coding process evolved, based on group discussions and decisions. The codebook was then applied to each full interview and final codes were entered in Nvivo 9 for further analysis.

Reliability was achieved by determining our degree of consistency of full transcripts between coders, by comparing independent coding of transcripts. We followed Bazeley’s (2007) approach to lumping data for coding purposes. This approach allows researchers to look for general themes in passages by including the context and meaning of the text sources. The purpose is to identify passages that fit our preliminary themes, rather than focus on specific
words or fine-grained themes. For example, the coded passage “He needs to know most of his letters and numbers and shapes” was counted as reliable with another researcher’s coded passage “For me, he needs to know most of his letters and numbers and shapes and stuff like that.” Although the coded passages are not identical in word count, they both identify the same central message and common theme of academic skills and counted as a match. Passages were not counted as a match if one coder neglected to highlight any content described under the description of our codes. For example, the coded passage, “I was diagnosed with ADD really early” was not counted as reliable with another researcher’s passage “I was diagnosed with ADD really early on in school and it really changed school for me.” Although the passages overlap on the participant’s recollection of a special education in school, the first coder neglected to capture the end of the quote that links the diagnosis with his school experience. Therefore, it would be regarded as an unreliable coding match.

For mother interviews, I teamed up with one member of the research team to establish interrater reliability. We separately coded four of the 16 interviews in a word document, meeting after coding each interview. Based on Boyatzis’ (1998) recommendations for establishing thematic interrater reliability, we compared the codes we applied to the transcript, page by page. I then calculated the number of times our codes matched and divided it by the number of final codes that we determined existed in each transcript. The equation provided a percentage that was averaged across the four interviews. We averaged 82.6% reliability across the four interviews, which was above the desired 80% originally desired for reliability. We then independently coded the remaining transcripts, I coded eight of the remaining transcript and the student coded four of the transcripts directly into Nvivo 9. During this process, we met periodically to discuss any issues or questions with the application of codes. Since only eight
father and eight photo elicitation transcripts existed, I decided to collectively code three of each type of transcript with several other research team members. The remaining transcripts were then double coded by myself and another research team member. Codes were then compared and discussed until we reached a final agreement.

**Memos.** As the research process developed, I wrote methodological, reflective and theoretical memos, along with general insights, questions, and confusions as we coded and sorted through data. Memos were created in NVivo and linked to interview texts when appropriate. Glaser’s (1978) definition of memos is a classic one: “the theorizing write-up of ideas about codes and their relationships as they strike the analyst while coding…it can be a sentence, a paragraph or a few pages…it exhausts the analyst’s momentary ideation based on data with perhaps a little conceptual elaboration” (p. 83-84). My memos were primarily conceptual in purpose. They did not just report data, instead they connected different pieces of data into a cluster, often to show that those data are instances of a general concept. Memos documented the creation of codes and their relationships to any aspect of the study, whether it be personal, methodological or substantive.

**Software assistance.** NVivo 9 was used to support my qualitative analysis by managing data, managing ideas, querying data, and creating graphic models from the data (Bazeley, 2007).

**Managing data.** This software helped organize interviews, memos, and family demographic information. For example, all transcripts were uploaded as sources and grouped by folder.

**Managing ideas.** The software helped organize and provide efficient access to conceptual and theoretical knowledge that was generated through memos and linking them to raw data. For example, notes were created after each interview and linked to the participant’s interview.
Querying data. This software allowed for retrieval of data through basic or complex text-based searches. For example, text searches on father involvement or specific types of memories from school. Results were saved for further interrogation and were part of an ongoing and iterative process of analysis.

Graphic models. This software helped to show relationships and concepts built from the data, and the relationships between them, including models and matrices. For example, a model was created to compare father responses based on level of education. As all qualitative software, NVivo 9 did not analyze data, but it provided a system to support the process of coding and analysis.

Based on the ongoing process of coding and interrogating data with software assistance, the team began to identify the most frequent and meaningful themes to report in the findings. Frequency was one of the most important indicators for the strength of a theme. However, frequency was coupled with the significance of the theme for participants. If a code was reported consistently by participants, but was not framed as a meaningful component of the process of preparing children for school, it was not reported.

Timeline

Phase 1: Initial interviews. After gaining IRB approval in late February, recruitment efforts took place from the last week of February to the beginning of April. I began enrolling and interviewing families during the recruitment process. The first interview took place in late March and interviews concluded in early July. Preliminary analyses began during the data collection process and full analyses of the data were conducted during the fall of 2011. Writing for the study began in July during initial stages of data analysis, and continued through the winter and early spring of 2011-2012.
Phase 2: Photo elicitation interviews. IRB requested modifications for the photo elicitation portion of the study, and approval was gained in late March. The series of visits to participants began in mid-April and continued to the end of August. The week of photograph was scheduled at the family’s convenience over the course of one week. All follow-up interviews took place within one week from collecting the camera from the family. Preliminary analyses began during the summer of 2011 and the full analysis occurred in the fall of 2011. Writing for this portion began in July, and continued through the winter and spring of 2011-2012.

Increasing Trustworthiness

Depending on one’s methodological perspective, some qualitative researchers reject the framework of validity that is more commonly accepted in quantitative research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993). Instead, qualitative research is often described in terms of its trustworthiness to support the argument that the inquiry’s findings are “worth paying attention to” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 290), or that they are plausible and defendable (Healy & Perry, 2000). For that reason, I applied a number of strategies to demonstrate the trustworthiness of my findings.

Like most qualitative work, this project relies heavily on the researcher as the main tool to collect data. I was in charge of asking questions and eliciting information from participants. For that reason, I attempt to make my research process as transparent as possible by leaving an audit trail (Johnson, 1997). I have documented my research steps that have led to the development of conclusions and eventual reporting of findings (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

One way in which I strengthened the reliability of my study was by involving a team of researchers to assist the process. Across multiple individuals, I was able to make sure transcripts
did not contain errors and make sure definitional codes were clear. By determining interrater reliability for mother transcripts and double coding father and photo elicitation transcripts, I am able to demonstrate consistency across coders and reliability of the coding scheme (Huberman & Miles, 1994). Coordinating with coders and arranging regular analysis meetings, allowed me to review and refine results by cross-checking preliminary findings with a team of individuals familiar with the interviews and participants (Patton, 2002; Gibbs, 2007).

Researcher bias is a major concern in regard to a study’s trustworthiness and tends to result from selective observations and selective recording of information (Eisner, 1991). It also results from allowing one’s personal views and perspectives to affect how the data are interpreted and how the research is conducted (Maxwell, 2005). Self-awareness and critical self-reflection is essential to increasing trustworthiness through memo writing and discussions in order to address potential biases or predispositions that might affect my study (Johnson, 1997; Berg, 2004). This process of reflexivity is described next by reviewing my personal background and positionality.

**Personal background and positionality.** As a researcher, I have a strong background in qualitative research, particularly in working with families and underserved communities. I have also had a large amount of experience conducting interviews with children, youth and adults of diverse cultures, ethnicities, and income levels. As a practitioner, I served for a number of years in a high-risk school in Boston, Massachusetts as both a teacher and family services coordinator. While most of my training comes from a school perspective, I have spent a great deal of time working with families and attempting to strengthen home-school relationships.

I should note that even though analyzing the qualitative data collected involved a structured coding procedure, and collective discussions with a team of undergraduate and
graduate students. These team discussions helped to explore and expose underlying assumptions or potential biases while visiting families, reviewing transcripts and discussing data. Discussions of race, class and gender were thoroughly integrated into team discussion and debates about the research process and the analysis of data.

The success of the project was tied to both my abilities as a researcher and the influence of my own beliefs and background. Whereas every effort was made to reduce any interference of my own biases on the project, I do not believe it is possible to conduct research with complete objectivity. As such, some personal information about me may be useful. I am a White, single, educated woman in my early thirties. I was raised in a middle-class, two-parent home in a suburban setting in the Midwest. As such, my personal circumstances are not completely aligned with the personal circumstances of many of my participants. In some instances, my gender and age matched with mother participants. However, many of my differences (e.g., education, occupation, family background, etc.) was continuously acknowledged and explored throughout the study.

**Power and positionality.** Positionality is determined by where one stands in relation to ‘the other’, and these positions can shift throughout a study (Milner, 2007). The power of my position as a researcher and my connection to the university must also be acknowledged during the research process. My position is helpful in connecting me with gatekeepers of centers and organizations, but can also greatly influence my relationship with research participants (Merriam et al., 2001). There are ways in which participants may subtly negotiate power, by deciding where the interviews will be held, who will be present, and most importantly what information will be shared.
Weis (1992) recommends that researchers know who they are before going into the field, acknowledge their perspective, respect those with whom they work, and conduct themselves with the utmost integrity at all times. Despite a school discourse that blames parents for the difficulties of students, I have tried to withhold judgment about students and parents by listening carefully to the messages parents convey. Banks (1998) points out that researchers are all members of cultural communities where the interpretation of our life experiences is mediated by the interaction of a complex set of status variables, such as gender, social class, age, political affiliation, religion and region. Power is also an issue that needs to be acknowledged, and will be negotiated throughout the research process. In a way, participants are able to negotiate the power dynamic by determining where and when the interviews will be held, who else will be present and what information will be shared.

**Personal reflection.** Continual reflection upon my positionality and influence on the research process is important to qualitative projects and will be a focus in my memo-writing at all stages of data collection and analysis (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). To recognize and attend to my positionality as it influences this study, careful documentation of my observations, feelings, ideas, and developing analyses will be essential. “Disciplined subjectivity” is the practice of rigorous self-reflection, in which one self-reflects upon the impact of one’s presence in the study, and how one’s own preferences, prejudices, hopes, and concerns can affect the course and results of research (Schensul, Schensul, & LeCompte, 1999). Working with a team of researchers, I had multiple opportunities to discuss the ongoing research process and developing findings with other individuals. As a dissertator, I had the luxury of receiving consistent feedback on emerging ideas and iterations of the analysis, which pushed my thinking on how I was interpreting and categorizing responses based on my personal identity.
In order to remain aware of personal biases and lens through which I analyzed the data, I welcomed the input of others. By working with a group of undergraduate and graduate students, who shared the process of data organization and analysis, I was able to gain several perspectives. Additionally, I sought out other opportunities to formally and informally discuss the research with faculty and graduate student colleagues. None of these activities were intended to ‘cleanse’ my mind of preconceptions, or remove bias. Instead, they allowed me to acknowledge the ideas I brought to this study and that I was not approaching the data with an empty mind, but with an open one (Richards, 2009).

**Building rapport with participants.** Building rapport was also a very important component of this project, given that data gathered was dependent upon participants’ willingness to share personal information about themselves and family. Rapport is a valued aspect of interpersonal relationships in the research setting because it assumed to further the investigation of the researcher (Jorgenson, 1992). It helped me elicit more candid and complete information from participants. Because rapport is jointly achieved, it was important for me to be nonjudgmental, courteous, interested and understanding with the participants and family at large – during all stages of the project (Berg, 1998). It was equally as important for me to be aware of participants’ anxiety in participating in one-on-one interviews and, in some cases, inviting me into their homes. Assuring participants that there were no ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ answers, and describing levels of confidentiality that would be maintained, appeared helpful in making participants feel more at ease. However, it should be noted that most participants were excited about the opportunity to share their ideas and experiences with me.

Several participants asked if I was “really” a researcher, and said that I seemed much more like a “regular” person. These comments made me constantly think about what I was doing
to elicit this type of reaction, or making them feel relaxed during my time with them. Primarily, I did not pose myself as an expert in their lives. Quite the contrary, I introduced myself as someone who was interested in learning about them particularly because their experiences were under-reported in research. It is also important to note that rapport was not something that was ever fully achieved, but instead involved ongoing efforts and attention to the relationship between me and the interviewee.

**Drafting and Presentations**

As I began writing, I continuously revisited indicators of trustworthiness. I integrated my personal and group memos, coding, and models to create a coherent story of how parental histories and understandings of readiness inform this important milestone for children. During the process of writing, I constantly reviewed my codes and their relationships to one another, as well as the bigger picture for this study. Occasionally, I found gaps that needed to be filled or relationships that needed to be reanalyzed. For example, extra-curricular activities initially existed as its own category in parental recollections of schooling. However, the basic features of this code and the responses it represented fit with the social side of school theme. These codes were collapsed and its addition revised the message of this theme to include positive contributions of the social space of school.

Much like drafting, presenting my study for multiple audiences helped me rework and refine the findings and discussion. I had a number of opportunities during the past year to share my project and preliminary results with several departments across the country. Faculty members at these institutions helped me clarify some of my ideas and connect my findings with the most relevant research in the field. Each time I revisited my data with these groups, I brought a more critical eye to my analysis and was able to address some of my original superficiality and analyze specific themes with greater depth and complexity. I continuously
asked key questions – *What are my questions/have my questions changed? What is my argument? What is my reasoning?, and How do I support my argument?* (Charmaz, 2006). My advisor also raised these questions with me throughout the process, which allowed me to question my own work, clarify my claims, and create a higher-quality product. Next, I will present the findings from this year-long, collaborative qualitative process.
Chapter Five

Findings

I designed this study to explore the perspectives of low-income parents as they prepare their children for school. Through in-depth interviews with parents, I explored how parents understand what it means to be ready for school and, in turn, prepare children for school. I also asked parents to describe their own experiences in school and how those experiences contribute to the transition process, as well as the range of individuals and activities that support the process. Finally, I devoted specific attention to the perceived contextual contributions that parents believe shape this transition.

Based on previous research and a model of academic socialization, I approached this project with the notion that, together, parents’ recollections of schooling and constructions of readiness informed how they thought about and prepared their children for school. By framing the project and questions as preparing children for school, I was referring to starting kindergarten and used the words school and kindergarten interchangeably. However, as I conducted interviews and reviewed transcripts, it became clear that while I used these words interchangeably, parents did not. Rather, they were talking about two processes that operated simultaneously: preparing children for kindergarten and preparing children for school.

For parents, the process of transitioning children to school was rooted in short-term visions of preparing children for success in the kindergarten classroom, as well as preparing children for success in the larger system of K-12 schooling. I discovered that parental memories of school contribute to a general world view of formal education and constructions of readiness contribute to supporting the practical knowledge and skills that are necessary for succeeding in the kindergarten classroom. Both inform the process of preparing children for school, but in different ways (see Figure 2). For that reason, I was unable to group school recollection codes
and constructions of readiness codes together, because those two areas of interest did not intersect and lead to similar transition-related thoughts or behaviors. Instead, findings are presented from both interviews in two separate sections: recollections of schooling and constructions of readiness.

Figure 2

*Visual Representation of Findings*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Educational World View</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parental memories of school, as remembered through the lens of their current experiences and circumstances, shape their general view of children’s K-12 schooling.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teaching the ABCs and 123s</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Messages from schools and society, as well as transition experiences with older siblings, inform parental perspectives on what knowledge and skills children need to successfully enter kindergarten.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Based on mothers and fathers explanations, recollections of schooling guided early and ongoing activities intended to promote school achievement as part of a larger-scale effort to prepare children for *school* (kindergarten and beyond). Participants were asked to recall academic and social memories of schooling from early childhood through high school, and these memories created an educational world view for parents. Since memories spanned a number of educational years and stages, memories guided current and anticipated activities to support the child’s holistic K-12 schooling. Simultaneously, parents’ constructions of readiness informed a smaller-scale effort aimed at promoting achievement in the kindergarten classroom and
children’s first stage in the formal school community. Participants discussed what their child needed to know or be able to do to start school, how ready the child was for school, as well as how they go about supporting the preparation process. Mothers and fathers constructions of readiness and transition activities more narrowly focused on requisite skills for kindergarten entrance. How parents understood what it meant to be “ready” for kindergarten motivated them to support practical knowledge, skills, and attitudes they believed would help them successfully adjust to school.

Parental recollections of schooling were comprised of themes related to intergenerational influences, school transitions, the social side of schooling, and special education. Themes related to mothers’ and fathers’ experiences in school were quite consistent and are presented collectively, with the exception of one theme that was father-dominated and will be identified as such. Parental constructions of readiness and transition activities were comprised of themes related to children’s dispositions, academic skills, social-emotional skills, self-care and health, following rules, and familiarity with the school environment. Findings in this section are also presented collectively for mothers and fathers, since there was consistent overlap. However, there are also unique findings connected to mother and father responses that will be identified throughout the findings sections. The photo elicitation portion of this project provided greater depth into how participants understood and supported the transition to kindergarten and is presented as a separate section. Findings from the photograph-based interview provide a rich context for the development of readiness skills that parents identified in their initial interviews. Throughout this chapter, I will present the individuals, activities and resources named by mothers and fathers that are thought to act upon this transition process.
All mothers and fathers in the sample reported a household income below 200% of the federal poverty threshold, which classifies them as low income and makes them eligible for the state’s child care subsidy (Wisconsin Department of Children and Families, 2011). As discussed earlier, within this sample of low-income families, divisions emerged between participants that reported slightly higher incomes and higher levels of education. For that reason, my findings describe participants as higher resource or lower resource based on this sociodemographic divide. Although I am referring to a number of participants as higher resource, it is still important to remember that these participants are still classified as lower income through state and national guidelines. Resource levels are marked on Table 1 for all participant households. While these differences were not as salient for parents’ recollections of schooling, they are more pronounced in their constructions of readiness, which will be highlighted in that section. Appendix E provides an overview of themes, findings and examples that are explicated in this chapter.

**Parental Recollections of Schooling**

The category of parental recollections of schooling includes mothers’ and fathers’ memories of their experiences in school and how they believe those memories may or may not influence preparing their child for school. As discussed earlier, this category is connected to school preparation in a more holistic sense, not merely for kindergarten readiness. Parents reported and reflected upon academic and social experiences from early childhood through high school and identified the most lasting and defining moments over the years. Mothers and fathers recalled a wide assortment of experiences; however, for the purposes of this study, I was only concerned with the educational past that currently informs the present. For that reason, only memories that were linked to current thoughts and behaviors were placed in this category. The
most meaningful themes that contributed to how parents approach children’s schooling included: (1) Memories of family involvement, (2) The influence of transitions across schools, (3) The social side of schooling, and (4) Special education labels and services. Themes and subthemes are presented and described below, with evidence provided in the form of quotes and narrative descriptions. Many of these thoughts and behaviors are already occurring with older siblings that are in the formal education system and just beginning with their kindergarten-bound child, which is reflected in a number of quotes.

**Theme one: Memories of family involvement.** All of the 24 participants reflected on how they, themselves, were primed for school as they considered their involvement in preparing their children for school entry. All participants perceived that their families’ level of involvement, or lack of involvement, presently influences their reported behaviors with their own children. This theme split across three subthemes: intergenerational continuity, intergenerational discontinuity and father-son relationships. When participants assessed that certain parenting (or family) strategies were effective, they planned to continue with those strategies. Conversely, when parents viewed their families’ interactions unfavorably, they planned to avoid them. Father-son relationships was the third subtheme, and focuses on father reflections on relationships with their fathers. Originally, this subtheme was coded within the continuity and discontinuity subthemes, however, the father passages were so distinct when it came to their relationships with their fathers, and guided their reported involvement with their children, that it was split into its own subtheme.

**Intergenerational continuity of family involvement.** Mothers and fathers who reported positive memories of their parents’ educational participation voiced a desire for intergenerational continuity and a replication of these practices with their own children. The common thread of
this subtheme was participants saying, “I want to do what my family did.” The continuation of involvement included a range of activities, such as attending school activities, observing in the classroom, assisting with homework and projects, and attending extra-curricular events. Most parents who recalled high levels of hands-on involvement with their schooling also reported growing up in a middle-class or higher resource family. Their parents had the time, knowledge and resources to assist them in learning and developing skills for school success. Parents that grew up in lower-income, lower-resource households often acknowledged some of the challenges their parents faced in providing scaffolding for their learning or lack of availability due to work schedules.

Sonya, a higher resource mother, recalled her parent’s commitment to education for themselves, as well as to the academic success of their children. Her parents were not involved at the school-level, but consistently supported home-based learning. This mother remembered the high educational expectations of her father. With a master’s degree in engineering, he highly regarded the benefits of education. He set the bar high for his children, and actively invested in their academic development.

[My parents] were involved a lot. My dad would come home from work, pick up a book, read something, do your homework, and then make more work. Study, study, study, study, study, study. It was like that. My dad, in his eyes, you couldn’t get no less than a B. And if you got less than a B, then it was like, the apocalypse, and you were going to burn in hell. My mom was like, “You tried, and a B will not be the end of the world”. My mom like wasn’t involved at the school and in PTA or whatever, but they were involved at home.
This mother reported reading with her son on a regular basis and acknowledged how important early book experiences were for her son. This mother also discussed some of the challenges that precluded her from being more involved with her son. As a full-time nursing student, her availability was limited during the day. However, she identified her sister, who lives with them, as an important family figure for her son. Her sister reads with him, takes him on outings and monitors his daily activities.

Discussions of family involvement primarily revolved around mother and father involvement; however, some participants pointed out that other family members or kin-like adults made important contributions to the child’s learning and development. Like the previous quote, if a parent held other work obligations, another family member adopted that role. Marcus, a lower resource father, revisited memories of his older sister’s involvement:

My mom would be involved when she can. I’m pretty sure my big sister was pretty much involved more than anything, because my mom would always be working - just trying to provide for the house. So my big sister was pretty much involved with me school-wise and activity-wise. I mean she was like my mom. She was the one that was involved in all the activities, made sure I was doing activities, and tried her best to keep me away from the wrong people.

Marcus recognized the positive effect of his sister’s efforts to keep him involved in activities. He aims to continue this effort by enrolling his children in educational and recreational programs:

Keeping them involved with the community centers and programs to keep them off the streets. Programs that prevent them from getting into trouble. Like, community centers
and lots of places - they tell you about these programs. It’s just up to the parents to put them into these programs.

At the time of the interview, he was seeking out summer programs for his daughters. He felt his daughter was ready for kindergarten, but did not want her to regress during the unstructured summer months. While he desired to begin these programs early with his daughter, he believed they would be most relevant during the middle school and high school years when students can “get off track.”

Lesley, a higher resource mother of three boys, is repeating a pattern of involvement that was modeled by her parents. She believes family involvement was, and is currently, the cornerstone of academic success for students:

My parents didn’t have much education, so they couldn’t really help me with homework, but they did know my teachers and always talked to them. When I was growing up, my teachers would see my mom at church and she would tell my mom everything I did wrong or right. I want to see more of that, because that is when a child really prospers and learns. But now-a-days that doesn’t happen – but it does with me. I show up at the beginning of school and let them know – if you got my kid, you got me. Even at his preschool, I will have lunch with him. I talk to his teachers. He sees us communicating. The more your child sees you communicating with a person, the more respect they will have with that person.

Lesley also recalled the value her parents placed on education. The extended family pooled together money to send her to a private school in hopes that she would achieve a higher level of education than their less than high school status. In fact, even though her parents are deceased,
she keeps pictures of them in the house to remind her boys of how important education was to their grandparents and how proud they would have been of their school accomplishments. Lesley also credited her parents’ unconditional love and support as the basis for her academic success. Currently, physical affection and verbal affirmations are part of her parenting plan for her preschool child, as well as her teenage boys. “I don’t care how old they get – cuddling is important. I spend at least 15 minutes a day cuddling with my youngest. It makes him feel safe and he needs that for school.” She is convinced that emotional support has its payoffs in regard to children’s growth and development as students.

Lisa, a lower resource mother, recalled high levels of involvement on the part of her parents. Since her father worked at her middle school as a custodian, he was involved on a daily basis. Although they could not provide actual assistance with homework due to their limited educational knowledge, they did communicate academic expectations:

My parents really pushed me in high school, because they didn’t graduate. They wanted to make sure I got through. College was optional, but high school was not. He would try to help me with my homework, but some of the stuff they didn’t know how to do. But they gave me lots of encouragement. And I do want her [my daughter] to go to college one day, so I am going to do whatever she needs to get there.

Lisa’s parents are still actively involved in providing child care for her daughter and financial assistance when possible. She hopes to provide her daughter with similar levels of support. However, she also acknowledges that as a single mother she is unable to provide the father-daughter relationship that was so meaningful in her upbringing and school experience. The child’s father left before the daughter was one, and is no longer in contact with the family. He
pays child support, but the mother said, “I would rather he kept his money and spent some time with her. Because that’s what I had, and I want her to have that too – it is important.”

**Intergenerational discontinuity of family involvement.** Some mothers and fathers desired to continue forms of family involvement experienced as students; however, others desired to break the pattern of low involvement. Mothers and fathers who reported negative or limited memories of their parents’ educational involvement voiced a desire to discontinue this approach with their own children. They aimed to correct what they judged as unfavorable from their pasts. A number of mothers and fathers identified a lack of school involvement or awareness on the part of their parents. They viewed these experiences or circumstances as disadvantageous and expressed motivation to invest socially, emotionally, and educationally in their children.

Josh, a higher resource father, expressed a great deal of disappointment in how disengaged his parents were throughout his schooling. He was provided all of his basic needs, but did not recall any educational backing from his family:

> My parents weren’t involved, as far as I can remember. The only involvement they had really with my schooling was, “Did you get your homework done?” That’s it. I couldn’t really go to them for help, cause their biggest excuse was like, “Things have changed so much from when we went to school. We don’t know or we didn’t have to do this stuff this way.” I love my parents, but it was always excuse after excuse.

Josh reported working over 80 hours each week, but prioritized family involvement in his free time:

> I wish I could be around more, but I try to do as much as I can. I try to make their swim meets, their swim lessons, sporting activities. Anytime my daughter has a [pre]school
function, I try to be there. I know she’s got this huge graduation thing planned for mid-May, so I’ve already taken the day off to be able to attend. So I try to do as much as I can.

Josh’s desire to invest more time and energy than his parents did, is complemented by his wife’s wish to repeat the strong academic focus in her own upbringing. Megan, Josh’s wife, also confessed annoyance with her husband’s family and their lack of prior and current involvement with her husband and children. Based on Megan’s positive and beneficial memories of family involvement, these parents pursued similar forms and levels of involvement, while abandoning the father’s low levels.

Other participants reported little to no family involvement due to an unstable family setting or access to family members. As a foster child, Jasmin, a lower resource mother, recalled a number of individuals that assumed the role of her ‘family’ over the years, and remembered them as just ‘being around’ and not necessarily involved.

I was at DCSS [social services], so they wasn’t really my parents - they just send me to school. I go to school, get clean, go to school. I thank ‘em for that much. It was just up to me to do what I wanted to do. But, I chose the wrong path, because I didn’t know any other path. So, it was kinda hard growing up in grammar school for me.

Jasmin recalled such tenuous emotional and academic support from extended family members and social services, that she prioritizes involvement with her son’s education. She views herself as involved directly and indirectly with his learning and development. She maintains communication with his preschool, provides school-like opportunities at home, and models the importance of learning by completing her GED and attending community college classes:
I didn’t finish school. That’s what happen when you don’t show ‘em [children] that when they’re young. And I found that out myself and that’s why I try to show that to my son. And I try to give him that so he won’t feel like that. Wake up one day and be like, fifty years old and say, “I shoulda got my GED.”

Sharisa, a lower resource mother, described her family’s involvement as, “There was none.” Her mother only had a fourth grade education due to severe health problems, so she could not help her with her work or help her cope with her learning disability. She described her father as “He was there, but not there.” She felt very alone in her schooling – “Elementary, middle and high school…I had to do it all on my own.” Although she does not fault her mother’s limited involvement, she now focuses on her children’s success in school. Sharisa is currently involved with her son in Head Start and volunteers routinely in his classroom. She encourages her seven children to take on learning challenges and then supports them if they are unable to complete tasks on their own. “I don’t let ‘em say, ‘I can’t do this.’ They know they have to try. I tell ‘em to use the dictionary or a book. If that doesn’t work, then I try to help.”

Lori, a higher resource mother, reported continuous struggles with learning and social-emotional issues. However, she did not view these personal issues as the source of her academic failure; rather, she linked her struggles to the lack of compassion and support provided by family members:

I think part of what happened to me was a total lack of involvement with my parents. My dad never believed anything I said anyway. So if I was having a problem at school, it was all my fault. I don’t appreciate the fact that my parents never got involved, never saw the positive, never tried to understand what I was going through at all. And I wanna be able to, if there’s a need for intervention for my children, I need to know that intervention
is necessary before it gets to the point where now we’re being reactionary. Where we could’ve probably headed it off and helped prevent it in the first place. I am very involved with my children and with their school.

Lori later discussed maintaining a presence at the school. She and her husband, Eddie, maintain relationships with school personnel and feel comfortable just ‘popping in’. By spending time in the classroom, and observing her son’s speech and physical therapy, she is able to replicate his instruction at home.

Many mothers and fathers recalled ‘getting by’ in school, which they linked to moderate or nonexistent school expectations from their parents. Amara, a lower resource mother, recalled a very bland school experience – her grades were decent and she did not cause any problems. She also remembered very little support or academic encouragement from her mother. Her mother’s attitude was, “Just to try and do my best with what I was doing. Just, like, it wasn’t very high expectation for me.” Amara pardons her mother for not investing more time and energy into her schooling, since she was a single mother and working several jobs. However, she also now understands the benefits of family involvement and connecting with the school community for her daughter’s eventual success. “I can see myself being at the school a lot. I want her to see me when I go talk to the teachers, so she knows the teachers are watching her and telling me.”

In addition to work and financial contributions, participants often referred to historical context as a dominant factor in the amount of involvement they received as students. “Parents weren’t expected to be involved like we are now” was a common thought expressed by participants, or that the norms and expectations of their parents’ generation did not call for the type of involvement that is endorsed today. While mothers and fathers sometimes excused their
families’ lack of involvement, they still viewed it as a component of their own upbringing that they actively desired to avoid with their own children.

**Father-son relationships.** As fathers recalled how their families were involved in their education, they also differentiated being a ‘parent’ from being a ‘father’. In regard to being involved as a parent, they drew upon their family memories. However, they also described their role as a father, which was related to their relationships with their fathers and memories of levels of involvement. This was especially important for fathers that had sons entering kindergarten.

Only one father reported favorably on his relationship with his father. The rest of the fathers reported non-existent or negative relationships with their fathers. Steve, a higher resource father, spoke in depth on the topic of his relationship with his father and how it informed his role as a father:

> I know more about what’s going on in my kids’ lives than my own father did. You know, that I know their schedules, that I know their likes, their dislikes, what kind of food their eating, what kind of food they don’t eat.

I asked Steve to tell me more about his father and why he was more involved:

> My father…He was an asshole. I mean, he was overbearing, very childish, and the fact that he was an only child - just always had it his way. He throws tantrums. Basically, anything goes wrong he doesn’t like it. So, all in all, just as far as fatherhood goes, he’s not a good example. That’s my relationship with him, fear more than respect, you know. I am taking a different route, especially with my son. I want to be able to support him in whatever he needs, school or whatever, and really show him how to be a man.

Another lower resource father, Darryl, also voiced disappointment with his father, but unlike Steve it was not due to his style of interactions, but rather his complete lack of involvement:
Cause my dad was never around so I don’t know what it feels like to have a father around. So that’s always a very important thing to me is watching my kids grow or, well my child. My mom she’s always been like to me she’s always been my mother my father.

Another lower resource father, Chris, described how important his father was to his development and general school success. He credited both of his parents for setting high expectations for him, but spotlighted the importance of his father in serving as a role model for how he engages with his son:

I mean, it’s because this is how I was raised. It would be the easy way to just leave or not do this – but my dad taught me to be a dad. See, my experiences with my father, it was pretty cool, I mean he was always there. He was always there and he was helpful. I mean him and my uncle, they were the good ones at math, and reading and English, and that grown to me, because my father loved English. So when I grew up English was my favorite subject. I liked to write. I used to write a lot of poetry and he showed me how to draw. And even like I got his name, and I gave my son the same name – so we all alike. I know he is my son and I’m not gonna leave him, I can’t just leave him because he is a part of me and that’s how I feel about any kids that I make, he is apart of me and he is my kid so I’m not just gonna leave. I can’t. I gotta raise him, I gotta grow and develop him. And if my father weren’t there I would probably have a whole different perspective on life.

Chris emphasized the importance of ‘being there’ for his son emotionally and at the school-level. He is already actively involved with his son’s Head Start program and plans on maintaining a high level of involvement once he enters elementary school:
I come to all the little gatherings and school [Head Start] meetings and family nights. Pretty much being there to support with that - that’s what I care about. You know, even setting up for things. Whatever they need, I do.

All of the fathers in the study responded to questions about fatherhood and their relationships with their fathers. During these discussions, fathers described how their previous father-son relationships currently shape their motivations and activities related to involvement with their children - related to preparing them for school and their general development. Most of the fathers were disappointed with the lack of involvement on the part of their fathers and hoped to create and maintain more meaningful and beneficial bonds with their children.

**Summary.** Memories of intergenerational involvement emerged across mother and father interviews and exposed a variety of ways parents remembered the role of their parents in their education. Personal histories created working models of what family involvement should or should not look like. Whether participants expressed motivation to discontinue or continue practices, how parents were parented appeared to make a profound impact on how they currently think about engaging with their own children’s schooling.

In all instances, participants desired to be involved with their children’s learning and education both inside and outside of the school setting. Participants that desired to continue involvement from their past, identified concrete activities to draw upon. Previously experienced engagement and encouragement is now carried with them and informs their dedication to school-related support. This was especially true for father-son relationships. Participants that hoped to discontinue either low levels or undesirable involvement, attempted to identify new ways to
engage in children’s learning and schooling or rely on the experiences of their partner to continue positive patterns of involvement from their partner’s side of the family.

A major advantage for parents who wanted to continue the academic socialization they experienced as children is that they have a model to emulate or add to, and they often report that families are still involved in supporting their parenting and their children with the school process. For participants attempting to modify family involvement histories, they must make more conscious efforts and changes to break the cycle and identify new techniques. Another cycle that parents desired to break was unnecessary transitions, which will be explored in the next theme.

**Theme two: The influence of school transitions.** As mothers and fathers revisited their K-12 years, 21 participants (14 mothers; 7 fathers) recalled changes in school settings as sensitive and pivotal moments in their schooling. Most mothers and fathers reported challenges associated with these transitions; however, a few remembered their transitions as liberating in offering a fresh start or new environment. The recollections of transitions theme split across two subthemes: A New Social Setting and A New Academic Setting. As participants reflected on educational shifts, social perils related to friendships and adjusting to a new school environment were most troubling. However, some academic struggles also surfaced in finding themselves behind in academic skills and content material. Recollections of non-normative transitions help parents recognize that moves are challenging for children, and that not all districts or schools are created equal. This theme was salient for both mothers and fathers.

**A new social setting.** The first subtheme, A New Social Setting, involved memories of non-normative transitions when families relocated across cities or states and participants entered a new school with different peers and social climates. It was a disruption that required
participants to bring closure to friendships at their previous school and subsequently seek out new friendships in a new environment. It also forced mothers to learn the culture and norms of each new school system, and negotiate how they fit into the new setting.

Ashley, a lower resource mother, recalled a variety of transitions across state lines and schools. She originally began school in the south, but when social services threatened to take her from her mother, the grandmother moved her back to Chicago. Later, they moved to the suburbs to care for a sick relative. Ashley was most affected by the transitions in regard to finding friends and belonging to social groups. She was able to adjust to the learning expectations of the new schools, but she regretted always feeling like an outsider in the new setting:

But then my grandma and me ended up moving to the suburbs where I went to junior high school and then high school. And I didn’t like it - neither one. When I got to the school in the suburbs – all those kids grew up together. They knew each other. I was different. I was the odd ball out. And then the teachers and stuff – they didn’t really help you. Because by me being used to my school and when I switched to a totally different school - and with switchin’ you don’t have no friends and you still different.

As a student, Ashley learned to guard herself in school by depending on family and avoiding the need for friendships. Now, she and her two sons have recently moved to the area based on housing availability with their public assistance program. She hopes to keep her two boys in the area for the rest of their schooling, but there is still a level of uncertainty. For that reason, she focuses less on avoiding transitions for her sons, and more on preparing them socially for any future shifts. She further reflected on her experience:
They [students] were like, “You want to be my friend? You have to be like this.” And I was like, I don’t need a friend really – I don’t have to have no friends. It doesn’t bother me whether I have friends or not. That is the thing that I hope my kids be strong with. Not with the need to have friends. They don’t need friends – they got family.

The general message Ashley promoted with her boys, was that friends my change but family stays the same.

Carly, a higher resource mother, remembered the educational impact of her father losing his job at the end of middle school. Due to the economic loss, the family moved from their house in the Chicago suburbs to their summer home in a small community in Wisconsin. It was a tremendous shock for Carly, who transitioned from a large, diverse school setting to a small high school of 400 students. She described the town and school as “a joke” – and remembered the loss of a wide variety of extra-curricular activities, friends, and recreational opportunities. She recalled becoming depressed, hanging out with the ‘wrong crowd’, and eventually dropping out of school. Before the transition, she recalled being an engaged and enthusiastic student who excelled in sports and academics. After the transition, she attempted to regain her previous lifestyle, but was unable to connect academically or socially in the school environment.

Educationally [in Chicago], I was an honor roll student before and I had all these extra-curricular activities. And then with the new school, there was like nothing. I didn’t even end up graduating. I hated it – and I did try to get involved at first, but no one liked me. They acted like I was this dangerous girl from the city – like I was in a gang or something. I dropped out and eventually got my GED. When I look back, I know things would have been different if we’d stayed in Chicago.

When I asked Carly how she believes her move informs how she prepares or thinks about
preparing her children for school, she said:

Well, I’m not putting them through that – I can tell you that much. We had to move in with my husband’s parents last year because he lost his job, but that was just across town. We are now here. We are settled. They won’t be changin’ schools.

Megan, a higher resource mother, did not experience one large transition; instead, she described a “back and forth, back and forth” moving process with her family. The moves happened at different times of the year and throughout her K-12 schooling. When I asked her what that experience was like, she said, “It is what we did.” She then disclosed that the family was thinking about moving to Florida to join her sister and be closer to other extended family. She believed the move would be positive for the children, but expressed some nervousness related to putting her children through a transition similar to her own experience.

It’s what I did, but I don’t want it [the transition] for my kids. If we move, it’s going to be we’re staying there. Like, I wanted my kids to be able to start kindergarten and finish high school in the same school district. So if we move I’m going to feel bad for my older daughter because I know what it’s like to leave friends. You know, to go back and forth. And I only moved from district to district. We’re talking to about going across numerous states! I don’t want my kids to have to feel that you know I want them to be able to make friends and say I’ve been friends since kindergarten. You know I didn’t get to do that so that’s something that I really want for them.

Her husband, Josh, also recalled a challenging school transition during his upbringing:

I can’t wait to see what it’s like when we move our family to Florida, cause I hated it and I was my older daughter’s age. We’ll see how that happens. It’s just one of those things where you have friends where you live, and you don’t want to leave them.
This family was also conducting a great deal of research on the school systems in Florida to find an “A-plus” school and comfortable community for the children. They justified the transition as a benefit to the children and not just an arbitrary move.

_A new academic setting._ Some participants remembered the pains of socially adjusting to a new environment, while other participants recalled the academic shock of entering a different school. The subtheme of _A New Academic Setting_ is a collection of transition-related responses associated with fractured learning – in facing different curricula, higher learning standards, and different styles of instruction. Participants that recalled academic difficulties with switching schools also recognized that school continuity is valuable to one’s learning and success in school.

Lori, a higher resource mother, moved across the country to live with her father after elementary school. She recalled positive memories of learning and school in her primary years, but her world changed when she moved to a different region of the country with higher academic expectations:

Montana has two full grades higher academic level. It was like going from the sixth grade where I was back to fourth grade. So when I went from Texas to Montana, it was like being thrown into the eighth grade. It sucked a lot. And well, I flunked out. I went from C-Bs to Fs. The following year, I think they just skirted me, quite honestly. I don’t remember doing that much better. I never caught up in math. Not ever. Not even up until high school. Classes were more difficult when I moved to Montana because everything was so far out of my range. I never really got it back.

This mother now plans to stay in the area for the benefit of the children. Especially with two children diagnosed with Autism, she realizes the academic, social, and emotional benefits of
maintaining consistency in learning and environments. Even while the family was in the midst of planning a move between housing units, the mother checked with the district to make sure her preschooler could still attend his previously assigned school to continue learning with familiar students and therapists.

Deirdre, a lower resource mother, described a move to a neighboring town as the most defining moment in her educational experience. Her transition was so disruptive that she became a completely different student. The transition was a critical negative turning point for this mother. Before the transition, she described herself as a student who enjoyed school, learning, and extra-curricular activities, but after the transition she became angry, isolated and disinterested in school to the point of dropping out:

They were like learning out of college books, and we didn’t have the same books. They were like a year ahead. Everything changed. I dropped in everything. I was slower in a lot of stuff and asked to be put in a special class, but they said I didn’t qualify. I did give it a try, but then I left. I just wanted to stay with my class that I grew up with, and then I moved here.

This mother also struggled to acquire the necessary credits to graduate on time, so she decided to drop out:

My old school had a different credit system here than there. I was in a 4-block system, and then up here I went 8 classes. There I just had 4 classes a day and they were just longer. So the credits I had were off and they didn’t give me no summer school option. They didn’t offer none of that. So I was like, well I gotta go.

This mother remembered the negative consequences of her transition and regretted not returning to her old school like her brother. This is an awareness she keeps with her in supporting her
children. She realizes that transitions disrupt both social and academic sides of schooling, which can alter a student trajectory.

Sharisa, a lower resource mother, began her interview by naming the schools she attended. After listing an assortment of school names, she finally gave up and said, “It was a lot.” Her school experience was founded on a series of transitions:

And we moved around so much as a kid. I would start at one school and they would teach me one way and then I’d go to another school and they taught me another way and it kept goin’ like that. It made it so hard to learn. That is why I am real consistent with my kids’ schooling now. I don’t want them bouncing around.

Based on the family’s current financial struggles, Sharisa realizes that transitions are sometimes out of her control. However, she attempts to create stability with her children’s learning and school setting. She recalled the educational consequences of school transitions for her first child entering school:

We was homeless for a while, so he [oldest son] did a lot of different schools – my older son moved like three times during that first year, and he eventually got held back in kindergarten. It screwed with him. So, I don’t want the others to have to do that.

Although she expressed gratitude for the program that helped them find housing during the next few years, the moves were problematic for her son’s learning. Her husband, Victor, is now employed and the mother feels confident that her kindergarten-bound son will not face any unnecessary transitions.

Mothers’ and fathers’ stories often gravitated to points of transitions during their schooling for higher and lower resource parents. Participants perceived these changes as detrimental to their social and academic experiences. Entering a new school setting required
participants to meet new friends and learn different social norms and expectations. Most participants regretted the unfortunate loss of friends and stress associated with starting over. Similarly, participants faced new academic demands and curricula. Many participants struggled to meet classroom expectations and adjust to required subject areas. Overall, stories more heavily recognized the stress and insecurities attached to transitions, and many participants voiced a conscious desire to either avoid unnecessary transitions or to better support their own children in these processes. Mothers and fathers wanted educational continuity for their children, and although some transitions were outside of their control, due to housing availability or zoning issues, they described efforts aimed and protecting children during the process.

**Theme three: The social side of school.** Recollections of the Social Side of School is a theme that captures the experiences of 20 participants (12 mothers; 8 fathers) who reported the interference of social circumstances on their school success. These mothers and fathers recalled the power of social factors, beyond teaching and learning, which redirected their educational trajectory or attitude toward school. Originally, the subthemes of early pregnancy, class clown and bullying operated independently; however, they eventually clustered together when the research team realized that these subthemes all led to a current emphasis on supporting children’s social development and social surroundings in school. Participants believed that the social side of schooling affected their performance in school, and they hoped to avoid a similar scenario for their children. Mothers who experienced an early pregnancy in high school, parents that claimed the role of ‘class clown’, and parents that suffered the abuse of bullying recognized that one’s social environment and social choices can create academic obstacles. As parents, they recognize their role in monitoring and positively supported a child’s social side of school. On the other
side, participants also recognized the potential for social activities at the school level to positively guide school experiences and keep students on academic track for graduation.

**Early pregnancy.** The most frequent school disruption for mothers was an early and unplanned pregnancy. This subtheme captured the experience of mothers that became pregnant prior to high school graduation and decided to follow through with the pregnancy. Some mothers transferred into a pregnancy program that operated outside of the traditional high school setting. Other mothers attempted to finish up school, but eventually dropped out to work and earn money for the child. The circumstances associated with the responsibility of caring for a child at an early age often elicited a negative response from teachers or peers. Early pregnancy also contributed to sleep deprivation and financial struggles that shifted their attention from their studies to other aspects of their life that seemed more consequential at the time.

Alexus, a lower resource mother, recalled the educational changes that came with pregnancy at the age of 14:

> After leaving middle school, I got pregnant with my first son, so I didn’t go to high school I went straight to program for teenage moms. I mean, a lot of kids are not gonna be pregnant at school, so I kind of like felt I might as well go. I didn’t want to influence anyone else to do what I did, I didn’t want anybody else to end up like me. But I ended up leaving that program and eventually got my GED.

Many mothers discussed the struggle of balancing school, work, and a child. Some mothers dropped school from the equation, while other mothers had to adjust their future goals for what they deemed as practical. Regina, a higher resource mother, described her situation:

> Now, I winded up leaving [high school] because I winded up getting pregnant. I left for a semester. And I winded up going to a night school. It wasn’t no avenue I wanted. I was
gonna be a doctor. I was the sister that said I’m not gonna have no kids. Which is crazy, it was real crazy. And it was all very time-consuming.

Regina now attempts to create and maintain ‘closeness’ with her children. She is connected to the early childhood center and elementary school, and she believes her children know that she takes their schooling seriously. She also provides emotional support that she recalled lacking in her upbringing. She believes that emotional support can help her children stay focused on what is really important:

I don’t want any of them going home with a baby. I don’t ever want them to get to that point where they are looking for love in the wrong places. Because I want, you know, even if it’s just me showing ‘em, I want to show ‘em, hey look, you ain’t gotta think about none of that, come on over.

Since an early pregnancy kept many mothers from completing school or exploring higher education, they currently struggle with finding consistent employment and higher-paying jobs. Mothers try and stress the importance of completing school and endorse its relationship to financial security and a more comfortable lifestyle for their children, even beginning in the early childhood years. Mothers use their present challenges as lessons for their children on the importance of education and staying focused on learning. For example, Ashley, a lower resource mother, recalled doing well academically until the arrival of her first son in high school:

The only thing that stopped me from not completing high school was that I had my son at the very end of freshman year. Once I had my son in high school - and I kept arguin’ and fightin’ in school and then I got a job and I moved out. Which sometimes I wish I had stayed and completed school now. But at the time it seemed like the right decision for me then. I try to teach them to go to school, go to college, do somethin’ positive. The
only way you can have anything you want in your life is to go to school. If you go to school and do what you are supposed to do – then afterwards you can have all the fun you want to in the world. And that is what I try to train both my kids – go to school, school is important. Go and learn as much as you can.

Ashley confessed her fear of not being able to support her son’s learning and education because of her limited schooling. She presently reads to him and makes sure he has all of his materials for school, but anticipates some struggles down the road. She accepts that she will need to put her pride aside and admit to teachers that she will need their help in order to help her boys. She said that it is better to be honest and admit your limits than to watch your children fail. She said that with girls you fear that they will get pregnant and with boys you fear that they will end up in jail. She is committed to making sure that these outcomes do not become a reality for her family.

Mothers also dealt with the stigma attached to teenage motherhood. Sharisa, a lower resource mother, attempted to finish her studies at her high school, but felt discriminated against by teachers and judged by students.

And I got into class and I took out my notebook and the teacher said to me, “You know, maybe if you didn’t have a baby you would get to class on time. You should put your baby up for adoption.” That is what she said, and it was very unprofessional of her. That is not part of her job description. Well, I went after her and it took 10 guys to hold me back and I got expelled. After that I did home schooling and my home school teachers started to say the same stuff, so I had to have her pulled out of my house too.

Sharisa never completed school and uses herself as an example for her children. “And I am very honest with my kids about my history. And I tell them that they don’t want to end up like Mommy.” She values learning and recognizes the importance of acquiring a degree for future
employment and success. She hopes that her children learn from her struggles and mistakes. She is now very hands-on with her children’s education and has even pulled her older children out of their sex education course. “If they had taught it right with me, I wouldn’t be in this situation.” She does not believe that the curriculum taught in school is clear enough and that schools create a lot of misconceptions about sex and pregnancy. Since she is concerned with the school’s lack of effectiveness, she teaches her children on her own.

With the exception of Regina and Sonya, all of the mothers who reported this subtheme were in the lower resource bracket. Becoming a mother in high school created a number of additional obstacles to school achievement and completing school. These memories were of greatest concern for mothers with girls, who could easily follow a similar scenario in school. Another social scenario that emerged across participants’ memories was craving attention from peers in school.

Class clown. A social area of schooling that jeopardized parents’ academic performance in school was attention seeking behavior. The subtheme of Class Clown was a term a number of participants used to describe themselves as students. This commonly term captured mothers’ and fathers’ playful nature they exhibited in the classroom in lieu of learning. Darryl, a lower resource father, described himself as a clown and remembered wanting to appear cool in front of his friends. One of his top priorities was making his peers laugh, which pushed learning to a much lower priority:

I was always a jokester, like always crackin’ jokes - just being silly in class. I was just like as long as I get a C, I can play basketball, that’s all I cared about. Even my basketball coach, he was one of my teachers, he was like, “You’re always dickin’ around in class, ya gotta stop doing that, this isn’t fun time.”
Based on his class clown reputation, teachers assumed that he did not care about learning and attended school to socialize and mess around. Darryl now emphasizes ‘following the rules’ with his children and encourages his children to respect adult figures in the school building. His older son was recently suspended from middle school for abusing computer privileges. He expressed a great deal of disappointment in his son’s choices, “See, you break a rule and the teacher won’t trust you. You lost her trust when you was messin’ around. When it’s lost, you can’t get it back.”

Similarly, Jasmin, a lower resource mother, described her many years spent as the class clown and putting on a show for other students on a daily basis:

When I was in eighth grade, I couldn’t read, couldn’t do division, ‘cause I was playin’ around all the time. I’m lacking because I don’t care and nobody going to snatch me, you know? So I’m like too far gone. I was a big class clown, just tryin’ to have all that attention focused on me.

Her son’s playful behavior is now her biggest concern in regard to her son beginning school. Jasmin loves her son’s playful attitude and humor, but is convinced it will lead to trouble in kindergarten and beyond. She also described him as the preschool class clown and keeps regular communication with his teachers to monitor his behavior. At one point she shared some comments from the preschool teacher’s perspective, “He just wanted to play, play, play and joke while we were doing lessons. I’m like, oh my god!” Her distress is connected to how much she sees herself in his school behaviors. She judges his playfulness to be fairly typical behavior for a preschool-aged boy. However, she also realizes that there will be less tolerance for his behavior once he enters the elementary school. What she describes as ‘playing around’ kept her from learning basic skills in school, and she vows to make sure her son is educated in school. Jasmin
currently stays connected to his school and creates consequences for inappropriate behavior, and she believes this will be an ongoing process with him:

It’s a time to play and it’s a time to do what the teachers tell you to do. If you can’t do that, then we going to have problem. Cause I already know you know what you doing, that means you doin’ it on purpose. And you say you forget what I said, and that is not respecting me. And you crossing the line, so then I get him. And he knows I’m gonna pop that tail.

Like Jasmin, Sonya, a higher resource mother, also recalled how chatty she was throughout her schooling. She was convinced that all of her teachers would describe her as such, and that she made school more difficult for her younger siblings because of this reputation she held at the school. Although she was an average student when it came to grades, her disregard for class rules and daily comic routine made her somewhat of a challenge for teachers and kept her from reaching her full academic potential.

I aggravated her [a teacher]. She was like, “Ugghhh!” And I talked all the time and kept the class entertained. Pretty much all my teachers felt that way about me – I was always playing. I played a lot.

Sonya is worried that history may repeat itself with her youngest son. She explained that he picks up material easily, and this may lead to trouble in the classroom. If he is not constantly challenged with new material, she believes he will find other things to occupy his attention – like talking to peers and entertaining the classroom. She cited his kindergarten screening as an example. He received a high score on the readiness test, and the screener said that she did not have any concerns for him in regard to kindergarten entrance. Ironically, the screener’s lack of
concerns has created concerns for this mother. She plans on working with teachers to make sure he has work that will keep his attention.

Higher and lower resource participants described themselves as class clowns in school. These mothers and fathers now worry about keeping their children focused and busy in school, to keep them from taking on a similar role. The theme also often overlapped with individuals that reported attention issues, primarily those diagnosed with ADD or ADHD, which will be discussed later. The general consensus was that this type of role in school leads to compromised academic success and a negative reputation with teachers. It is a role they hope to limit or positively direct with their children in kindergarten and beyond.

**Bullying.** While some parents recalled acting as perpetrators in the classroom, as expressed by the class clown subtheme, other parents recalled the role of victim. Mothers and fathers recalled the humiliation and disturbances felt by verbal and physical intimidation and abuse in the school setting. Parents described vivid memories of criticism, exclusion, harassment and aggressive behavior from classmates, and in a few cases, from teachers. Recollections of bullying consistently led to a number of concerns and actions being taken on the part of mothers and fathers. One of the lower resource fathers, Rashad, spent most of his school time alone, because interactions with peers often led to verbal and physical fights. He recalled being taunted and picked on by classmates and believed the staff sided with the other children in these instances - even though he felt as though he was rightly defending himself:

Someone was always just kicking me, and I was just like, “It don’t take nothin’ for me to hurt you.” You know they get to taunting me and I just push them away, I walk away. And the teacher said I did it.
For Rashad, the school setting represented a space where children were often victims of bullying and mistreated by students and staff. He assumes similar problems will manifest for his son and plans to be heavily involved at the school-level to monitor activities. Rashad expressed a basic distrust for the school environment based on his own experience. He likes to show up and observe in the classroom to really see what is going on. On several occasions he has been told that he is not permitted, so he contacted central administration to get an official letter stating that he was allowed on site. He is also working with his youngest son on coping mechanisms for dealing with frustrations and anger:

I try to keep him from getting agitated. Cause sometimes kids will look at him and he’ll get discouraged and get like confrontational. And I’m like, “No, you don’t do that. Keep doing what you’re doing, don’t worry about what’s going on around you, you know just worry about what you’re doing.”

Stephanie, higher resource mother, was less than thrilled to discuss the social side of her schooling. With a law degree, she confidently talked about her academic success in the classroom. However, her tone changed when I said we would shift to talk about her social experiences in school. She said, “Oh great” in a very sarcastic manner. Although this mother did not use the term bullying, perhaps because it was not a ubiquitous term during her schooling, she recalled being a victim of verbal and emotional abuse throughout her schooling:

I was smart and the other kids hated me ‘cause I was too smart. Not that they all hated me but there was a lot of talking crap about me. We had a lot of tormentor types of people in our school that like tormented me all the time like a lot of really bad people.
Like what kind of clothes you’re wearing and what kind of car do you drive there in, like that kind of stuff they were really mean like that. The girls were the worst. Stephanie views the school as an unsafe environment. She is especially concerned that the staff will not be vigilant enough at recess or during free time. Even more so, she is distressed about the new educational cutbacks and the lack of necessary teachers. This mother is nervous to send her son to kindergarten because, “Kindergarten is a bunch of really bad ass kids where as at preschool there a bunch of really nice kids.” She believed the peer climate changed in the formal school setting, much like she experienced, where students are less protected by staff. She would like to send her sons to a smaller and safer environment, but she believes that only comes with sending your child to a private school, which is not within their economic means.

A higher resource mother, Lesley, experienced bullying due to her weight. She claimed that she found inner-strength to get through it, but realizes bullying happens regularly in school. For that reason, she teaches her sons, “To not be prejudiced in any way. I teach them to respect others.” When I asked her what types of ‘differences’ she was referring to, she listed a range of options including physical appearance, race, ethnicity, family background, etc. She socializes her sons to appreciate difference and respect other students. Lesley is also aware that they experience some bullying in the community because of her position at the local community center. For that reason, she enrolls them in activities outside of the neighborhood to get them away from some of the teasing and verbal abuse:

Well, it is hard for them because I am in charge here and you know how kids are, so they get teased and not treated right. So that’s why I seek things out in other neighborhoods. I get them out of here so they can have a break from that.
Similarly, Sharisa, a lower resource mother, recalled incessant mistreatment and intimidation by peers and a few teachers. For a number of years in elementary and middle school she was the victim of these abusive behaviors and felt terrible about herself and place in school. By high school she was exhausted with the mistreatment and turned from victim to perpetrator. She stood up for herself and for others, and recognizes that she often took her actions to an inappropriate level in defending herself.

I was picked on a lot in school. I was made fun of for everything. That changed by high school and then I became the leader of “I’m gonna whoop your ass club” and I decided to stop the bullying ‘cause I was tired of it.

Sharisa and her husband, Rashad, were victims of bullying and acknowledged that bullying behaviors are an ever-growing problem in schools. Since they are not able to be in the setting to stop these activities, she works with her son on responding appropriately. This mother learned the hard way that physically defending herself created additional problems in her schooling, so she is taking an alternative approach with her son.

I tell him, it is not okay for him to hit children. It is not okay for him to touch other peoples’ bodies. If someone hits you on the street, you need to call the police – same thing in the classroom. You can’t touch someone without their permission. This is what I teach him.

According to participants, they held limited capacity to intervene with bullying in the school setting, other than showing a presence at the school. Instead, they concentrated efforts on preparing children for bullying behaviors and developing appropriate responses to such events.
Extra-curricular activities. The most positive topic that mothers and fathers discussed was involvement in extra-curricular activities and the sense of belonging in school-based sports and clubs. Sports and clubs provided spaces for participants to explore personal interests or thrive in a setting outside of the classroom. It was especially important for the self-esteem of participants that struggled with learning or achievement in the classroom. Parents viewed extra-curricular opportunities as an important aspect of children’s social and emotional development that, in turn, will benefit their overall school experience and academic performance. Many parents believed it was the responsibility of the parent to seek out and enroll their children in recreational activities, clubs and sports teams. Finding group and recreational activities is especially important in the early years, because most school-based activities do not begin until middle school or high school. Although both mothers and fathers described this subtheme in interviews, it was father dominated.

Many fathers believed involvement in sports and activities kept them away from the wrong crowd and surrounded by positive influences. Peers and adults associated with these activities provided positive pressure and guidance to do the right thing and stay out of trouble. Extra-curricular activities represented structured time and supervision, and positive peer influences. Fathers also credited the structure and grade requirements for keeping them focused academically. Chris, a lower resource father, gained a great deal of confidence from his success in sports. It generated a great deal of recognition from family and teachers, and motivated him to do well academically. He recognizes that his son may not share his love of sports, but wants to support any talents or interests he presents. “It doesn’t matter what he interested in. I will go with that and help him.”
Marcus, a lower resource father and partnered to Deirdre, respected his older sister’s ongoing efforts to keep him enrolled in sports and activities. “She made sure I was doing activities and tried her best to keep me away from the wrong people.” Even though his daughter is too young for any school-based activities, he is already seeking out opportunities with local community centers and after school programs. He believes it is the job of the parent to make sure children find a place to belong and are surrounded by positive influences:

Keeping them involved with the community centers, and programs to keep them off the streets, programs that prevent them from getting’ into trouble. I mean there are a lot of wrong people to hang with, and I was one of those people, the things that I’ve done...

Marcus reflected on his poor life decisions toward the end of high school, which ultimately led to incarceration. He offered a very simple explanation for his failure in school – “I was with the wrong crowd.” For that reason, he commits to keeping his daughters in programs during the school year and summer:

I put ‘em in summer programs and any type of program that’s gonna help. I tell them, “Stay in sports!” I mean, I started with sports but never finished it and you know sports and activities are all so great for a reference as you get older. The more involved you are the better it helps with your future. The wrong crowd can be tormenting -back then I wish I stayed in sports and activities in school because that’s something I want them to do. Stay in those activities and those activities draw better people. But the violence starting in younger kids is just ridiculous so that’s something I’m concerned about with the school.
Josh, a higher resource father, recalled the positive benefits of participating in clubs and sports. Especially since he struggled academically, he was able to use these activities as a way to escape.

That’s why I encourage my kids to play sports, do any activities that they can. Just cause - I think playing an activity or doing something you really love actually gives you that chance to get away from any struggles in life. And so like if they’re struggling in school or struggling with something, at least they are doing something they enjoy and will help them take their mind off it for a short period. And I hope they have the best experience in school as possible. And I’m going to encourage them to do everything that they can. Whether it be like plays, sports, clubs. If they want to do them I’ll make sure it happens.

Sports, clubs, and activities played an important role in mothers’ and fathers’ experiences in school. Other than one case, where a mother was over-involved to the detriment of her grades, participants recalled a number of benefits from involvement in extra-curricular activities. Most fathers viewed them as a way to stay away from the wrong crowd and off of the streets. Grade requirements attached to sports eligibility kept them on track academically and helped them stay focused on learning and homework. Mothers more frequently expressed the benefits of extra-curricular groups for social belonging and a place to build confidence. Finding a niche within the larger student body helped participants identify and develop talents and feel connected to school. Higher resource participants already had their five year olds enrolled in a number of recreational activities, such as swimming lessons and softball teams. They hoped these early experiences would create a foundation for future years of involvement with school activities.
Lower resource participants tended to discuss this theme in terms of future activities that they would like their children to consider.

**Summary.** Teenage mothers, class clowns and victims of bullying all recognized the power of one’s social choices and surroundings on school performance and success. These mothers and fathers recognized that one’s social side of school frames students’ classroom experience and ability to learn. Even when parents expressed a positive disposition toward learning or the capability to learn, social decisions and relationships kept them from completing school, enjoying school, or working to their full potential. Mothers and fathers that described these subthemes in their interviews recognized the need to support the social side of children’s development as much as academic development. One way in which some parents believed the social side of school could be a positive contribution was through the last subtheme, extra-curricular activities. Finding an activity that matched parents’ talents or interests was a way to make them feel good in the school setting and stay out of trouble. Extra-curricular activities also boosted the self-esteem of participants that struggled with learning in the classroom, which will be discussed in the next theme.

**Theme four: Special education labels and services.** Recollections of special education labels and services is a theme dedicated to 14 participants (8 mothers; 6 fathers) who recalled the challenges associated with special education labels and their sense of belonging in school. Many of the memories were connected to attention issues and some were general learning disabilities that placed them at a disadvantage for school success. For that reason, most of these mothers and fathers described hating school as a result of the challenges they faced in a general education classroom. In fact, ‘disliking school’ was originally a separate code that the research team explored; however, after further analysis, we discovered that disliking school was consistently a
symptom of receiving a special education label and struggling in school rather than a free code. For that reason, we focused on the experience of special education and its reported connection to current thoughts and behaviors.

Participants that reported diagnoses also recalled the stigma attached to being labeled in school or falling outside of the mainstream crowd. Whether the labels were cognitively based or related to one’s social-emotional health, they impacted their schooling experience and their concerns for reentering the formal education system with their children. The subthemes of: Behavioral and psychological Needs and General Learning Needs are presented and described.

**Behavioral and psychological needs.** A number of mothers and fathers reported receiving referrals and diagnoses in the category of social-emotional needs. Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) were the most commonly reported labels, as well as a few cases of depression and bipolar disorder. Most attention-related problems were identified and diagnosed at an early age, while mood disorders manifested later in participants’ education. Characteristics of these diagnoses made learning challenging, and set these participants apart from their peers in school. Parents often complained of teachers’ lack of understanding of these disorders, and therefore, how they were mistreated or under-serviced by personnel at the school. It remains a sensitive topic for parents and shapes how they monitor their children’s development and support them in school. For example, Josh linked most of his experiences in school to his ADD diagnosis. It made learning difficult for him and placed him on unfavorable terms with many teachers because of his inability to stay seated and focused.
I hated school. I actually have ADD, so school was hard. Teachers thought I was a trouble maker. I was diagnosed sometime after preschool. Yeah, they like tell me about all of these outbursts I’d have and how I couldn’t sit still and all of this stuff.

His diagnosis and the misunderstandings associated with it, defined his experience in school. Although his children are not in special education or presenting any early signs of ADD, it is still at the fore of his mind in supporting his children educationally.

That’s my biggest concern with my children, is if they were to have something like ADD or a learning disability. My biggest issue is like, would a teacher really be able to identify that that’s what’s going on? Or, will they just think they are slacking and don’t know anything?

One mother, Lori, described the ripple of diagnoses she received in middle school and high school:

And then they started saying things about me you know because obviously I’m bipolar, I’m ADD, and I, I have borderline personality disorder and that’s my fault that I’m so antisocial! It was all MY problem and couldn’t possible have nothing to do with the environment around me. Because they were all trying to figure me out then, see, and you, you can’t be figured out unless you’ve got a label.

Years later, Lori began researching the exact criteria for the labels she was given in school. She realized that she did not match the criteria for many of the labels and completely rebelled against the school authority. She understands that labels “follow a person forever,” and she now claims to be a strong advocate for her children in the school setting and at IEP meetings. She also recognizes that states and districts assign labels somewhat inconsistently, based on her own
experiences. Later in her interview she said, “It’s Wisconsin, they give everyone a diagnosis.” For that reason, she has been very hands-on with the process of her son receiving referrals, what was stated in his evaluations, and exactly how the diagnosis will benefit him in relationship to services received.

**General learning disabilities.** Another group of mothers and fathers reported cognitively-based learning disabilities that required extra assistance and alternative strategies to learn. Most of these parents recalled spending a portion of the day in a special needs classroom and receiving assistance from different specialists in the building (i.e., speech, reading specialist). Mothers with general learning disabilities were most concerned with supporting their children’s learning in the home and helping with homework in higher grade levels. Holly began her interview with the following:

I kinda always had a learning disability, so school wasn’t good for me. [I needed] extra support and re-explaining things. I was in a special class, like I had a special teacher. I had a special room I go to, like to do homework. It was like a resource room. So school was always hard for me.

Like most participants that disclosed their special education labels, Holly’s learning disability defined her experience in school and kept her from ever feeling at ease in the school setting. Every subject was a challenge and she lacked confidence with every academic endeavor. She is not overly concerned with the learning potential of her son, because his early childhood center claims he is academically ready for kindergarten and developing age-appropriate math and literacy skills. Instead, she worries that she will not be able to provide the homework support they might need down the road. She is already anxious about future mathematics assignments and has partnered with a neighbor to provide assistance with homework after school.
It’s amazing, their homework. I mean third grade, my friend’s son is in third grade, and it is hard! Oh my god that’s gonna suck next year ‘cause they come home with a lot of stuff. I already asked my neighbor to help. She has a son, and she said we can go over there and partner up to do homework.

Lacking faith in her ability to support her son’s learning, Holly is already developing connections and strategies to make sure he will achieve in school.

Sharisa was diagnosed with a learning disability in elementary school. It was a constant battle in school to learn and remains a challenge in adulthood:

So, I had a learning disability, so that was hard too. It was just that words were hard for me and reading. And my mom couldn’t help me because she didn’t get past the fourth grade. I was really on my own. Some people tried to help me, but it was just really hard.

Much like Holly, Sharisa is also concerned about the limited support she is able to provide for her children. She believes her learning disability helps her appreciate how difficult the learning process can be for children, which motivates her to practice patience with her children.

However, she worries about her capacity to assist with homework or answer questions. She discussed providing academic resources for her children, such as dictionaries and books, and encourages them to learn – but feels restricted in actually assisting the learning process.

One of the fathers, Eddie, remembered most of his school days spent most of his time in a special needs resource room. However, towards the end of high school he stopped attending most of his classes, because he was frustrated with his learning challenges. “I didn’t understand, so I didn’t go.” As an adult, Eddie now realizes that he can learn and is intelligent, but has a different learning style than what was supported during his time in school. Now, with his two preschool
aged children, he recognizes that children present different learning abilities and needs, and he is open to discovering what works for them.

Megan recalled temporary special needs services for speech and language. Although it was not a permanent diagnosis, it greatly impacted her experience in school:

They had me in speech help, whatever you want to call it, special program because I lost my hearing for a while. So I worked really hard to mask it, but I had a lot of problems talking correctly. I don’t know if it’s because I had the extra help and there was that stigmatism on me getting pulled out of class to do that you know? So I don’t know. I mean I wasn’t a bad student you know, but I had some learning problems early on.

Even though this mother spent a brief amount of time in special education, the experience was attenuated her confidence in elementary school. For that reason, her goal is to over-prepare her daughter for kindergarten, “I want her to be more than ready. I want her to be advanced. Because I want her to have an easier time than I did.” She also reported that her older daughter is in a special reading group in her third grade class, and she is in communication with her teacher to find out how they can catch her up to other students.

**Summary.** Most mothers and fathers that received special education labels and services in schools disclosed this information at the beginning of their school experience interview – noting the significant impact it had on their learning and success in school. Receiving a social-emotional label also often placed them in the category of troublemaker in school. These mothers and fathers currently look for similar characteristics in their children and hope to identify problems early and make the school community aware of their issues, rather than allow them to be misunderstood. Mothers and fathers with general learning disabilities remember the ongoing frustrations with learning that led to a general distaste for the school setting and lack of
confidence with academics. These memories transcend into their current activities in supporting children’s learning in the home. These parents desire to support their children academically, but doubt their capacity to adequately support all their learning-related demands.

**Summary: Recollections of Schooling.** Mothers and fathers recalled and reflected on their social and academic memories of school. While the memories were vast and meaningful to their lives, four core types of memories led to how they prepare their children for school: memories of family involvement, school transitions, the social environment, and special education. These areas of participants’ memories motivated parents to think and act in a certain way in relationship to their children’s schooling – from kindergarten and beyond. These areas contributed to a general world view of education, which helped shape their approach to socializing children for formal education. Parents believed that memories contributed to how they desired to be involved in children’s schooling and how they planned on monitoring their child’s learning and education (e.g., special education referrals). Next, I will present participants’ perspectives on what it means to be ready for the kindergarten classroom – this is a shift from parents’ world view of education to grounded, concrete skills they believe are essential for survival in kindergarten.

**Constructions of Readiness and Transition Activities**

This section includes parents’ understanding of what it means to be ‘ready’ for kindergarten. By describing what they expected, as well as what the school expected, parents connected their constructions of readiness to transitions activities, or ways in which their notions of readiness were supported. Parents report supporting readiness in a number of ways, but they also acknowledged the enormous benefits provided by early childhood centers, extended family and other contextual factors that will be discussed in the final section of this chapter. These
external individuals and activities inform how they understand children’s readiness for school and provide assistance in developing children’s preparedness to enter kindergarten. Unlike the previous section on recollections of schooling and preparing children for the larger notion of K-12 schooling, this category focused on preparation for the kindergarten classroom. How parents understand readiness informs how they support the development of readiness in the following themes: Disposition, academic knowledge and skills, social and emotional skills, self-care and health, and familiarity with the school setting.

Mothers and fathers consistently overlapped on constructions of readiness in terms of a child’s disposition, academic skills, social and emotional skills, and self-care and health. However, while mothers viewed themselves as supporting all of these areas of readiness development, fathers often reported higher involvement with the development of a positive disposition, social and emotional skills, and health-related activities. Themes and subthemes are presented and described below, with evidence provided in the form of quotes and narrative descriptions. Divisions in parents’ interview responses are explored through the lens of sociodemographic differences and differences between the higher and lower resource families. The first three themes (i.e., disposition, academic skills and social-emotional skills) were the most ubiquitous responses among mothers and fathers. The last two themes (i.e., self-care and health, familiarity with the school setting) were not identified by all participants, but were meaningful for many of mothers and fathers in the study. For that reason, they are organized in that descending order.

Theme One: Disposition – “Readiness means being excited for school”. Throughout interviews, all 24 participants referenced the importance of being excited for school as one of the most important components of being “ready” for school. In fact, a number of parents stated that
their child was ready because he or she was excited about starting school, regardless of any other themes they described. All parents desired for their children to be looking forward to starting kindergarten and open to learning, and most parents believed their child held a positive disposition. Participant explanations of the importance of one’s disposition for school readiness split across two subthemes: Excitement for the school setting and Openness to learning.

**Excitement for the school setting.** Parents evaluated children’s level of readiness based on the excitement they expressed for entering a ‘big kid’ school, which also involved being transported on the much-celebrated yellow bus. Regina, a higher resource mother of twin kindergarten-bound boys, discussed the readiness levels for her sons. With one son expressing excitement, and the other son rejecting the idea, she believed they would experience the transition differently:

I think they are ready – I think they are ready to go. One of them is actually really ready to go cuz he knows he’s gonna get on the bus with his sisters. So he is more ready to go and is excited. Now the other one is a little more of a mama’s boy. I say to him, “You ready to go to school? You wanna get on the bus?” And he’s like, “No!” But, that’s him and I don’t know what’s gonna happen. We will see. But the other one [son] will be fine.

Just like the above quote, many parents believed their children were excited to start school so that they could join older siblings and continue social relationships with peers. For example, Stephanie, a higher resource mother discussed her son’s readiness for school and joining his older brother, “Well, he likes to go to preschool ‘cause he likes hanging out with
other kids. He wants to go to school and he wants to be with his brother who goes there. So he’s ready.”

Many mothers and fathers supported building a positive disposition by associating kindergarten with having fun and making new friends. For example, Sonya, a higher resource mother, reported:

He’s excited about goin’ to kindergarten. I say, “Yeah, you’re gonna meet new friends. Old friends from Head Start will be there, but you’ll see a lot of new friends and teachers.” He’s excited. He’s like, “New friends? New friends?!’”

Additionally, some participants reported visiting the school for an orientation day or setting up an appointment to visit the school. They believed this helped children get excited for a new physical space and all of the opportunities that existed at the school-level, which is discussed in the final theme, familiarity with the school setting. Jasmin, a single, lower resource mother of her first and only child entering kindergarten, reflected on her visit to the school, “After visiting the school, I like that he soaked it in and liked it. He’s like, “Yeah, Mom!” So now he gets what kindergarten is and he’s very excited.”

A number of participants described a calendar countdown with their children in building anticipation for the first day of school. Victor, a lower resource father, described what he believed the school was expecting from his son and how excited his son was to begin kindergarten:

I guess they (the school) just expect him to come with a better outlook on – well, an open mind, mainly. And since he’s been out of Head Start all he’s been saying is, “When do I do to school? When do I go to school.” You know, he’ll sit up in the kitchen and look at
the calendar.

Similarly, Deirdre, a lower resource participant reported counting down the days as part of the process for entering school and building up the excitement:

She’s excited. She’s more excited. She’s like, I gotta do my homework. I’m like, what homework you got? She likes doing. I’m like, what homework you have? I mean, that’s stuff that don’t need to be turned back in. So I’m like, whatever, go grab it and do it.

Cause she tells me, I got three more days till school. I say no baby, you got three more months. No I got three weeks. She thinks… no, I like look, and then I take the calendar and then I show her…

Participants believed that if children were asking about school, it meant they were ready. I asked Hannah a lower resource mother how ready she believed her son was for kindergarten. She responded, “Oh, he was ready yesterday.” When I asked her to tell me why she believed this she explained, “Because every day he asks me, ‘Mom, am I going to school today?’”

A belief that their child was excited for school eased some anxiety for the transition for parents. Rashad noted during his interview, “I’m glad he’s excited – cause he has the rest of his life to hate school.” Such remarks suggest that parents desire children to enter school with a positive attitude, which will set the tone for their experience in kindergarten. Participants also believed that schools expected and desired children to enter kindergarten with a positive disposition, which would, in turn, make their job easier in educating students. Discussions of children’s attitudes toward school often led to their attitude toward learning in general and openness to educational materials and instruction, which is explored next.

**Openness to learning.** A number of parents linked readiness to how much children enjoyed educational activities and learning, and how open they were to gain knowledge and
master new skills. Josh, a higher resource father, commented on his daughter’s disposition, “Well, she loves learning so she will be fine.” He was confident that his daughter had the right attitude toward school and learning to make an easy transition.

A number of mothers and fathers believed the transition would be easier if children were open to trying new activities and learning new skills. By being open and willing to take on new challenges, participants believed kindergarten would come with greater ease. Alexus, a lower resource mother described her daughter’s willingness to learn:

She’s pretty open and everything, so I’m pretty sure like when the school brings something to her attentions she’ll be ready for it. She’ll be ready to go. I'd say she'll do good in everything cause she’s just really, really open and always happy. And they [teachers] will like her a lot for that.

Like this mother, Chris, a lower resource father also described the importance of openness for school readiness. He discussed what he believed the school expected of his son in kindergarten, “I guess they just expect him to come with a better outlook on well an open mind, mainly. To be open to learnin’ new stuff.”

Lisa, a lower resource mother also shared a similar perspective on her daughter’s readiness and desire to please adults in her preschool program:

She is just such a happy child and wants to make everyone happy. I swear she will do anything for her teachers – she wants to please everyone. They tell me that. She is always volunteering to clean up the room, help with stuff, you know. She is just one of those kids, you tell her what to do and she does it.

Even though her daughter needed to attend summer school to further develop her academic
skills, Lisa was confident that she would be fine in kindergarten. She believed her attitude toward learning and teachers would lead her to success.

A number of mothers and fathers described their role in fostering a positive disposition towards books and reading as part of the readiness process. Ashley, a lower resource mother described the family’s nightly reading routine with her son. She believed parents could cultivate a love of books and reading, which is key to success in school:

Like at night time we read books and stuff so that he can learn to like…to love reading. I think a lot of parents don’t take the time to read to kids. But kids love books - they see books and they see pictures, they want you to read it to them. They will bring it to you to read it to them. It is up to you to read it to them. So I try to read to him so that he can know or so he can develop a love for books or a likin’ for books and sometimes…In that way I think schools gonna be easy for him. It will be easier for them when he comes and is more open.

Like Ashley, many participants hoped to create a smoother transition by encouraging an appreciation for and enjoyment of school-like activities and materials. Parents often gauged children’s openness to learning by how they responded to learning materials in the home and experiences in their early childhood centers.

**Summary.** Mother and fathers emphasized the importance of a child’s disposition for school readiness. Children’s excitement for entering the school setting, and general openness to learn were important components of preparing children for school and supporting early success. Some parents praised their child’s natural tendencies to enjoy reading and school, while other parents attempted to shape a positive disposition by associating school and learning with fun. Starting school with a positive attitude was believed to be important for school success and
Theme two: Academic skills – “Readiness is knowing the basics”. Like the last theme, Disposition, all 24 participants reported academic skills (e.g., letters, numbers) as an important component of school preparation. Numeracy and literacy skill development was one of the primary goals identified for preparing children for school. This response was given by every participant, and often referred to as “the basics”. Participants viewed letter, number, color, and shape recognition as requisite knowledge for kindergarten entry. Participants also identified the importance of fine motor skills in knowing how to hold a pencil to write. Many perceived these basic skills as a foundation for future learning. In general, participants from higher sociodemographic backgrounds named a wider range of skills and knowledge in this category and used school-based language, such as “cognitive skills” and “number sequencing”. Further, mothers and fathers with higher degrees in early childhood education and child care training provided the most concrete examples of what knowledge and skills looked like in preschoolers and linked them to activities inside and outside of the home.

Parents were conscious that children would be required to demonstrate a range of knowledge and skills in school, and described how they, or others, supported knowledge and skill development. Parents believed that children would acquire a great deal of knowledge once they entered kindergarten, but also realized schools held some basic pre-entrance requirements. Mothers and fathers commented on the emergence of these prerequisite skills that did not exist when they began school. The rise in expectations from their generation is another explanation as to why parents’ recollections of their schooling were not informing their current constructions of readiness and transition activities, since the landscape of kindergarten-readiness had changed since their early childhood. Instead, parents were constructing new notions of what schools were
expecting of their children based on older siblings’ experiences and information gained from involvement in early childhood centers. Ashley, a lower resource mother, brought up the topic of higher kindergarten standards several times during her interview. With one son already in school, she was aware of the high demands and curriculum changes that her younger son would face in the fall:

> Cause it’s like now – that stuff that they learn in kindergarten now is stuff that we – we didn’t learn in kindergarten – like as far as like they – like in kindergarten and stuff, they try to stress the facts of learnin’ how to read and learnin’ how to make the sounds and stuff. Now, I’m only 26 years old and that stuff we didn’t do in kindergarten. We learned our numbers and our ABCs and our colors. But most kindergarteners they are trying to teach them to read and sound out different things and stuff. What’s the weather like? - and stuff like that. So, it been changed a lot – so if you don’t stay on your kid to be kinda smart or kinda learn things, they will get left behind because things go so quickly now.

Like Ashley, higher and lower resource participants felt pressure to help children acquire these desired skills, so they would begin school academically on level with their peers.

> Mothers and fathers both stressed the importance of basic math and letter knowledge. Fathers provided less description than mothers in identifying types of skills and generally summed them up as reading and writing skills. For example, Darryl, a lower resource father commented that his daughter needed to, “Be ready to learn.” When I asked him what he meant by that, he said, “You know, she needs the readin’ and writin’.” Another lower resource father,
Chris also described readiness in vague terms, and presented school preparation as engaging in activities that are “school-like”:

I help my kids get ready for school by pretty much helping them read, write, um just as far as pretty much school work, as far as pretty much school work, a lot of school work, reading and pretty much situations that involve education, that involve school, that involve learning

However, some participants articulated a wider-range of academically-oriented skills and provided more specific examples of how these skills were supported. Josh, a higher resource father reported:

She knows her stuff already. She can, she knows how to write her name, she can recognize letters, she can recognize sounds, she’s- she’s a quick learner. She knows how to hold a pencil, write. She picks up on stuff quite quickly.

Marcus, a lower resource father also discussed readiness in terms of basic skills:

It’s needing to know basics, you know, like shapes and sizes and numbers. You know, she has a lot like things to do with her like leap frog, play games, board games, card games, that’s helped and her sister teachers her a lot.

Marcus was impressed with how much knowledge she gained through a 4K program and playing with her older sister. He believed she would thrive in kindergarten:

She just seems bright. Her name, she can spell that, certain words she can spell, three letter words she can spell, and numbers. She’s good with her numbers. She can do a little
math and she knows certain number math problems, I’ve been working with her sounding words out, you know. She’ll kinda hesitate, and I’ll show how to sound it out.

Steve, a higher resource father, felt confident that his prior work experience in a daycare center provided him with an understanding of the breadth of skills that were important for kindergarten:

I mean, the basics. Write her name, upper and lower case, recognize the majority of the letters, colors, shapes, large motor skills, fine motor skills. From the time that I was a daycare teacher I kind of understand the like track and where they need to be and, you know, kind of know where they’re at on a scale for a lot, well all the different cognitive areas.

Mothers also reported a range of transition activities aimed at supporting the development of academic knowledge and skills. Regina, a higher resource mother, used a notebook with her boys to mark their progress.

I wanna make sure that they know how to spell their name, write their name, their ABCs, they know their ABCs. So every day I’ve been working with them, and they have their own notebooks. This is what we do on a daily basis.

Participants that had older children in school, used homework time to work with their kindergarten-bound children. Many mothers described modifying some of the assignments to the level of their younger child to help them learn important academic skills. Alexus, a lower resource mother, explained how she used her kindergarten daughter’s reading books with both of her daughters:

You know at the end of the books when they have like the questions in the back about
you know what was going on through the book? Well, like sometimes my youngest one
will answer before my older one would. And then she [older daughter] would get mad
(laughs). It’s like, here we go. I say, just let her answer and then you can answer the
next on. So, I’m kinda going back and forth to let them do it. And they’re pretty good
together as far as the writin’ and trying to figure out the the words.

When I asked Alexus to provide specifics on what types of activities and skills were most
important for her youngest daughter’s preparation for school, she said:

I think everything is important, but just because my other daughter’s (kindergartener)
working on it, that’s more of the reason why I just work on it with her too. So at least
when she get there she like, “Ok I know this.” You know and she can just really not
push herself and be a little frustrated about how the system works for school and stuff. At
least she’ll have some type of idea of what’s goin' on. so and that’s why I kinda keep her
real close to everything that we tryin to do with homework.

A number of participants engaging in home-based learning activities, sent home by the child’s
early childhood center. Homework bags and family-oriented assignments were a way in which
they could support basic skill development outside of the school day.

The school sent him flash cards and he had this dry erase board. He’ll practice his letters
on the dry erase board. He’ll trace his name, and learn that kind of stuff. And then they
send home letters, like the letter of the week is ‘J’. So, we go through magazines and
find anything with j, and make a collage. And from my experiences, with his sisters
beforehand. It’s just like ok, we need to get you at least to here [academically]. There’s a
point – I know there’s a point he needs to be at – at least be at and maybe past it. I just
don’t want him to fall behind.
A number of mothers determined children’s level of readiness, based on the feedback received from the kindergarten screening. Hannah, a lower resource mother, discussed her son’s performance on the entrance test he recently completed:

In this test he just took, he scored a 98% out of 100. He knew his letters, numbers, colors, shapes, his name. He knew our old address, but not the new one, so, he is ready. Hannah and her children relocated to the area the month prior to the interview. The mother felt confident about her son’s readiness for kindergarten based on standards in their previous city, and felt reassured by the kindergarten screener’s report.

Other mothers relied on feedback from early childhood programs for readiness skills. Holly, a higher resource mother said, “He knows all of his basics – his name and his address and his letters. They’ve taught him everything he needs in 4K.” Megan also believed that 4K programs gave children an academic boost in entering kindergarten. Since Megan completed a 4 year degree in early childhood education, she felt well-versed in the cognitive skills children should possess for kindergarten:

They should be able to count to at least 20 or 30 depending on if they’ve had daycare experience or 4-K experience or something like that. She (my daughter) can add a little bit so just a little bit of math. The math skills like sorting and um sequencing, patterning you know just those simple things that they don’t think of as math, but that are grouped into the math.

Megan, a higher resource mother with early childhood training, further recognized the importance of arriving with these skills so that children do not begin their formal education behind their classmates:
For the cognitive things, it’s important for them to already know some things, because if they go in there without knowing anything they’re going to be behind because in today’s society everything is like boom boom boom boom boom boom you need to know all this stuff. And if they don’t, I feel like you’re going to send your kid into school unprepared. I kind of want my kids to be on the top part of their class in kindergarten.

While Megan aimed to prepare her daughter for the top of her kindergarten class, Ashley, a lower resource mother desired for her son to be at the same level as other students – her underlying fear was that her son would arrive in kindergarten behind other students:

I want him to stay on level with all the other kids. I think that’s what any parent wants their kids to be able to be on level with everything. It’s easier to keep him on level now, but it is harder when your kid get older to keep them on level. Because you haven’t been in school in a long time yourself. It help, my son being older and being in school and my neighbor kids being older, they try to always help him. They try to count with him – they try to do ABCs with him and stuff. His dad do, too. So, it’s like they always tryin’ to keep him focused.

Ashley’s partner, Chris, expressed the same sentiment. He was preparing his son to be, “Up to par. To be there and to be on the same level with all the other kids. Pretty much to be with the program and to be keepin’ up.” Similar contrasts of academic expectations emerged across higher and lower resource groups. Higher resource mothers and fathers sought to “over prepare” their children for school. Lower resource mothers and fathers focused their attention on meeting general expectations, so that their children would not be behind.
Lesley, a higher resource mother, explained how she supported the development of math and literacy skills by multi-tasking. Whether they were in the car or doing errands, she would try to make their time together educational. “When we are in the car we will do a little game like – 1 plus 1 equals and 2 plus 2 equals. And then education as well – we will point out different things like buildings and shapes, and we will point out differences in colors.” With two teenage sons and a full-time job, she tried to make use of every moment with her kindergarten-bound son. She also noted, that as an older mother that has gone through this process with her other children, she is more familiar with what is expected of students and has figured out creative ways to support learning over the years.

**Summary**. Developing competency in basic academic skills was a dominant theme across interviews for mothers and fathers. In fact, it was often participants’ first response to the question, ‘What do you think your child should know or be able to do in order to be ready for school?’ Participants varied in how they supported literacy and numeracy development. Some mothers and fathers set aside time for direct teaching through flash cards or written work, some engaged in activities such as board games or computer activities, and some relied on the child’s early childhood program. Participants discussed academic skills in a fairly routine or rehearsed manner, suggesting that this is a well-known expectation for children.

A divide emerged in the way participants discussed the importance of academic skills and transition activities related to supporting those skills. Participants on the higher end of the resource spectrum, especially those with formal training in education, used terms, such as, ‘cognitive development’ and were able to link home-based activities to these cognitive skills. Parents on the lower end of the socioeconomic spectrum used vague terms such as ‘the basics’ and ‘school-like stuff’. All participants agreed that familiarity with numbers and letters was
important, but the depth of knowledge differed by participants’ level of education and household income. Even though a number of supportive activities were occurring across participant households, higher resource families made concrete links between activities and skill development. Some participants discussed these skills in terms of children’s peers – wanting them to be on level with the other students so that they are not behind. Other participants desired sending their children to school with superior skills to have an added edge in the classroom. Parents that already had a child in elementary school felt more confident about what skills were necessary, while parents that had not entered the school system felt the most unsure as to how well their child’s skills would measure up in the school setting. Discussions on the importance of academic knowledge and skills were often paralleled with discussions on the importance of children’s social and emotional skills, which is explored next.

Theme Three: Social and Emotional Skills – “Readiness is following directions and getting along with others”. Beyond basic academic skills, all 24 participants adamantly stressed the need for their children to be socially and emotionally prepared for kindergarten. In this sample, socializing children to interact appropriately with peers, follow directions, respect adults, deal with conflict, share, and transition between activities rose to the top of their list of expectations. Many mothers reported creating opportunities that would strengthen their children’s social capacities and emotional maturity for school. Responses in this theme split across two subthemes: Following rules and Playing nice.

Following rules. Many of the conversations parents reported having with children as they prepared for school involved rules. A number of parents, primarily parents of boys, anticipated a phone call home in the first couple of weeks. I asked Regina, a higher resource mother, what she thought the school was expecting of her kindergarten-bound boys. Her
response was quick and direct, “Not to come in there and tear that school up!” She noted her
twin sons’ behavior progress in Head Start and believed that their general behavior had improved
over the year. However, it was a lingering concern in entering a new environment:

I mean, comin’ in there, they will tear that school up. They twins. They busy. They will
tear some stuff up. I mean, they’ve gotten a whole lot better with some of the things or
things they do. But some days they might be real active and real busy.

Similarly, Jasmin, a lower resource mother expressed concern about her son’s ability to listen
and behave in the kindergarten setting.

I’m just worried about his attitude. I’m just worried he’s going to bring it to
kindergarten. Look out kindergarten! That’s what I’m like right now. He’s a pretty good
listener, but when he get in that mode I think he’ll get in trouble a couple times. I think I
get called - Like at the end of the day, they’ll call me like, “He was not a good listener
today.”

Attending an early childhood program was regarded as important preparation for children in
learning rules. Feedback received from these programs provided families with a general idea of
how children would behave in kindergarten. This subtheme also overlapped with parents’ school
recollections, as parents revisited their memories of rule following or rule breaking.

Parents expected their children to learn and respect the rules of the school and staff. This
also involved respecting their classmates. Chris, a lower resource father, explained, “He needs to
know that he’s gotta follow directions from the teacher first off, and listen and participate and be
active and learn.” Another lower resource father, Darryl, echoed these thoughts, “For me, it’s
always just have respect for your teachers, ya know what I’m sayin’. In all, just have respect, just
listen.”
Hannah, a lower resource mother, recognized the importance of following classroom directions for kindergarten success. However, she also noted some of the struggles related to following rules and directions in his Head Start classroom:

They will want him to follow directions and do the activities. But if he already knows it or isn’t interested, he’ll go onto something else. If he doesn’t want to do it, he won’t do it.

I asked Hannah how she believed this would play-out in the kindergarten classroom. She realized it would lead to trouble and she described some of the strategies Head Start was practicing with him. “We figured out that if you personally ask him to participate, he will. I’m going to have to talk to his teachers so that they know this. They will have to ask him.”

**Playing nice.** Part of following the rules involved positive play interactions with other classmates; however, it was also regarded as a valuable skill for success in school and a positive experience in the classroom. Parents deemed interpersonal skills as a highly important area for success in school in relationship to sharing, playing, communicating and working together on tasks. For example, Megan spent a substantive amount of time addressing the importance of social skills. As a former child care provider, she recognized how important sharing and play were to success in kindergarten:

I want her to be able to go into a group and play without causing drama. Or just the courage enough to walk up and just start playing with them, because some kids are so shy they won’t just go play house with some other kids. Social skills are important because if they don’t know how to socially interact with other kids, how are they gonna be able to work in groups when they go in groups and even in kindergarten they do that stuff. It’s important for her to have a wide range of experiences before she goes into kindergarten just to be able to function properly I guess and not be behind.
Separately, her husband, Josh, named social skills as the most important skill for his daughter’s successful entrance into kindergarten. “Her biggest thing I think is she needs to be able to play with or interact with other children. That’s the biggest thing.” Both parents were proud that her Head Start teachers reported that she was one of the few children that could work with all other students in the class. They felt this was an important foundation for future success in elementary school.

Two families already had IEPs with their kindergarten-bound children. Based on these unique circumstances, they placed extra emphasis on understanding their children’s social and emotional challenges and how to address their developmental needs in this area. As part of their Autism diagnosis these families had already developed social and emotional goals with the school district. Lori, a higher resource mother, reported specific social and emotional skills they were working on and understood as important for school readiness.

We’re still working on social skills, you know reciprocating conversations -conversations with meaning. Most of what he says now is still spontaneous bursts of verbal-ness and movie lines, or he’ll re-enact a part of a movie. He’s starting to learn how to invite friends into what he’s doing. And you know, ask “How are you?” and “It’s good to see you,” and stuff like that. So it’d be nice for him to be a little bit more on point socially. Lori also discussed some social challenges occurring in his Head Start program their coordinative efforts with teachers to address these issues. She explained that her son recognizes and strictly follows classroom rules, and because upset if other students do not follow those rules. She also expressed concern about the social development of other children in his class and their tolerance for her son’s delays. Lori recognized that children are beginning to notice that her son’s social interaction do not match other students’ interactions.
All the other kids are going to be more socially adjusted than he is, and they’re all gonna have a sense of - shouldn’t you already be doing that? And, little kids that are five and six year olds have a big mouth that don’t stop. And he [my son] has never been taught to not accept himself for himself. As far as he is concerned, he’s just like everybody else. And we’ve always had him highly involved in school, outings, field trips, family fun nights and all things like that, so I know the, the peers that he has now, he’s been in the same classroom with them for the last two years and they all accept him and they understand him and they all, you know, pretty much go along with him. He has good relationships you know, with everybody in his classroom.

Lori and her husband, Eddie, anticipate that their son’s developmental differences will set him apart and in turn hinder his social interactions in kindergarten. It is an issue on their minds and will be actively working with teachers to support this area of his education and development. Gaining acceptance from peers was an ongoing process with his early childhood program and will remain a process once he enters elementary school.

Steve, a higher resource father with early childhood training, pointed out that play time is not always harmonious for children and that problems often arise. He believed it was important for children to learn how to negotiate these problems and problem solve. I asked Steve to discuss how he supported the development of those skills:

I mean for example when they’re playing. You know, a lot of times kids um kids can be very much doing their interacting and it’s not always good. A lot of times in fact two or three kids will exclude the one other and things like that. And it’s, it’s one of those things you take that up and be like okay, you got your choice now. Either you can talk to them about it and find a way to make it work so all four of you or five of you can so
something that you’re all going to enjoy, or the two of you who are being excluded, can
go do something you’ll enjoy and not worry about them. You know, so it’s - Yeah
moments like that where you gotta kind of intercede and people getting upset, and you
gotta kind of make it calm.
Steve viewed the development of social and emotional skills as his role in the school preparation
process. His wife, Carly, focused on academic skills and he focused on the social-emotional side
of readiness:

As far as like social development, that’s where I feel like I’m actually a lot more actively
involved. My wife is kind of an introvert, where I’m the social butterfly. I think in that
aspect I mean, as far as the social development of the children, that’s something that I
always try to push them to go make friends, go say hi, go do this, you know.

Like many other participants, Sonya, a higher resource mother, described readiness as the
ability to make friends and communicate with others. She viewed learning and education as a
social process, and continuously highlighted its importance throughout her interview:

He’s pretty much there. He has no problem making friends. Being able to express
yourself and make friends. He need all that to be successful. He’ll see somebody and be
like, “Hi, what’s your name?”

She also discussed the opportunity for mistreatment or unfairness in the classroom setting.
She anticipated moments where her son might unfairly be singled out or accused of something he
might view as unwarranted. She was already socializing him to deal with these situations:

From my experiences [with older children], it is about teaching him that things might not
be fair. Because life is sometimes not fair. Don’t get mad, don’t yell at teachers. If you
don’t agree with something, do it - you are a child. Do it and then come home and we
will talk about it and I will handle it. That is my job as an adult. Your job is to be a child.

She also contrasted her readiness expectations with those of the school. While Sonya was priming her son to enter a classroom of students and promoting positive interactions, she provided her perspective on what the school expected from her son. “They [the school] just want him to follow the rules – that’s it, really.” This example highlights participants’ understanding that their notions of readiness or desired skills do not always align with school expectations. Sonya deems interpersonal skills as more important than following the rules, but realizes that both will be important for his success.

**Summary.** Participants consistently described school readiness as being able to follow the rules and play nice with other children. Listening to teachers and staying out of trouble was one of the main concerns for parents, especially parents of kindergarten-bound boys. Many mothers already anticipated a call home during the first week of school for behavior problems. Participants also emphasized the importance of interpersonal skills and positively interacting with other children. Parents recognized that sharing, friendship behaviors, initiating interactions and problem solving were all desirable skills for kindergarten. Almost all parents recognized that social and emotional readiness was as important as academic readiness, and many fathers highlighted their roles in supporting the social side of children’s preparedness. Parents also reported the role of self-care and health for joining a kindergarten classroom, which is explored next.

**Theme Four: Self-Care and Health – “Readiness is taking care of your body”**. With less frequency than the previous three themes, 14 participants (7 mothers; 7 fathers) stressed the importance of making sure children were physically prepared for school. Mothers and fathers
addressed concerns about weaning their children off of naps and building their physical stamina to make it through the demands of a full school day. Other mothers reported efforts in making sure their children were physically healthy and versed in basic hygiene behaviors. Participants believed they were in charge of providing children with their basic needs in order for them to be ready and able to learn. Unlike other themes that required the attention and support of a number of programs and individuals, parents described the health and hygiene of their children as their immediate responsibility. Responses in this theme split across two subthemes: Health and nutrition and Self-care and hygiene.

**Health and nutrition.** Marcus spent most of his interview discussing his daughter’s health and nutrition. A few parents believed there was a direct connection between children’s eating habits and performance in school. Marcus, a lower resource father, believed encouraging healthy habits was part of the preparation piece for school and general development:

> I really prepare her health-wise, food-wise. I don’t let them eat a lot of junk food, candy. I rather give them a fruit or wheat crackers or something to keep them healthy and grow more rather than rotting their teeth and havin’ pop. I let them get it from time to time but not too often. They say this is important.

Marcus often referred to ‘they’ in his interview. When I asked him who these individuals were, he named a number of his siblings in the area with school-aged children. With three young girls in his care, he often contacts family members for child-related advice. Supporting children’s health was regarded as an important family contribution to children’s early success in school.

Lesley, a higher resource mother, also associated health with school preparation. She commented on the importance of finding his “mind and body” and that neglecting his growing
body would keep him from reaching his potential in class. She also underscored the importance of keeping his body active and staying physically fit. She believed this would also help him feel good about himself, which would benefit other areas of his life.

Some parents forget how important it is to keep our kids healthy. But I’m older now and I get it. It’s easy to get lazy and let kids eat and do what they want – but it will get ya in the end. I cook every night and make sure he get a good meal. And he learns about food at his program too [Head Start]. And I am real big on keepin’ him active. I have three boys, I have to keep them movin’. He does swimming and karate. I don’t know but I think it helps him focus more. And they say the martial arts are good for discipline. I put him in a lot of stuff.

Later in the interview, Lesley commented on learning some of this information from sessions that were put on by a local organization in the community center. She did not grow up in a healthy household, so this was a new lifestyle she was attempting to create for her family. She also viewed it as her responsibility to both create and maintain for her kindergarten-bound son.

Mothers and fathers also identified the role of sleep and being well-rested for school as part of the child’s health-related readiness. One of the biggest battles for participants, specifically lower resource mothers, was the morning struggle to get children out of bed and off to school. Ashley described one of her most important roles as “getting him out the door.” This meant making sure children acquired enough sleep during the night to get out of bed and make it to school. For a number of mothers, this was a struggle in preschool and a victory if they made it happen.
So, if he gets up in the morning and it’s not a hassle getting him up and getting him out to school then that is just good- good for me right there. And that he stop being so spoiled and lettin’ him stay at home. Because he goes to Head Start and some mornings – this morning it was a good morning – he got up and wanted to go. But some mornings he doesn’t want to go and he cries, “Oh, I don’t wanna go – I don’t wanna go – I don’t wanna go- I don’t feel like it.” So that need to change.

When I asked Ashley how she planned on supporting this portion of his readiness or making the morning process easier, she said, “His father needs to make him go to bed earlier. Cause he is easy to work with until he gets grouchy or sleepy. If he gets tired he won’t do anything for ya.”

Keeping children active and eating right was important for a few parents, as well as providing a sufficient amount of sleep. They recognized that children needed a balance to help their bodies grow in healthy manner. Participants that described this subtheme recognized their role in teaching these habits and supplying the food and activities for their children. Similarly, some parents discussed teaching habits related to self-care and personal hygiene.

**Self-care and hygiene.** In addition to healthy eating, participants reported the importance of personal hygiene and physical independence. Unlike children’s early childhood programs, kindergarten classrooms provided fewer adults to provide assist with as many personal needs. Therefore, parents understood that their children needed to be able to care for their own bodies. Self-care included being potty-trained, washing hands, eating lunch on their own, and tying shoes. It also involved personal care and hygiene outside of the school day that was important for this developmental stage. For example, Megan recognized the importance of taking care of one’s body in the kindergarten setting.
Kids need to have some self-help skills, you know, like going to the bathroom, washing your hands, um just being responsible for yourself you know. Which she [my daughter] is fantastic, she knows how to get herself dressed, brush her teeth, do all of that. Hygiene, too. I gotta teach them when they wake up they gotta brush their teeth everybody do their thing and germs on the hands after touching peoples’ hands, clean after touching stuff like knobs, stuff like that I’ve been trying to work with them

Jasmin also emphasized the importance of hygiene and establishing a routine for self-care. This mother introduced a routine in preschool, and after a year, is impressed with her son’s independence in the morning:

We start our day at about 6:30 in the morning. I get him up, I give him cereal, I get his clothes ready for the day, and he finishes his cereal. He goes to the bathroom, and he uses the bathroom and he brushes his teeth then. He washes his face, then wash up. And then he come out and I help him put his clothes on if he need help. Tie his shoes and things of that sort. Then I get myself ready, and we’re out the door on his way to school. And sometimes he has problems with the shoes – and he know he needs to ask for help. I help him, but I don’t do it for him. He needs to learn that.

This mother also recognized that a child’s personal hygiene could influence his relationships with other individuals in the school. Making sure children were appropriately dressed and smelled good, was an important piece of preparation for school. “I make him bathe at night. Every night! I mean, no one want to be helpin’ you or workin’ with you if you be smellin’ all funky.”
A number of mothers and fathers were anxious about using the restroom independently and mastering toilet training before the fall. Stephanie commented, “I wish he would also be potty trained which he’s not which that’s not really controllable so cause they have nap time at school, but I can’t really do anything about that but he has problems with that.” Lori focused a great deal of attention on potty-training. It was one of her top concerns for her son entering kindergarten:

He’s still not potty trained and his teachers just tell us, you know, when it clicks, it clicks and save it for kindergarten but I’m really not comfortable with kindergarten potty-training my child. Um, right now he’s just getting to the point where like if he is urinating, like “Oh, mom, I’m getting wet!” but you know, there’s no “I’m about to get wet” yet.

Her husband, Eddie, presented the same concern in his interview. When I asked Eddie to discuss plans for kindergarten, he desired to continue efforts that were in action at his Head Start program:

Following the same type of pattern that they do over at Head Start. They take him every hour, you know, and sometimes he’ll go, sometimes he won’t. But the thing is, you can take him in there and set him on the pot and he won’t go and then strap his diaper back on him and let him go back about to do whatever he was doing and five minutes later he’ll come back and tell you he’s wet or he’s yucky. So, it’s just frustrating.

Mothers and fathers discussed training their children in health-related skills and routines that they deemed necessary for success in the kindergarten classroom. It was the child’s job to learn these skills and demonstrate them at school. While not the most ubiquitous theme, self-care and health emerged in a number of interviews. However, it is often a lower-level concern for
mothers and fathers, positioning itself after the development of academic, social skills and disposition.

**Theme Five: Familiarity with the school setting – “Readiness is knowing your surroundings”**. Mothers and fathers recognized the importance of preparing children for the school setting. This was not a theme reported by fathers in the study. Fathers reported the benefit of preschool programs for children’s academic and social-emotional development, but they did not view experience with the school setting as important on its own. However, 13 mothers linked hands-on experiences with the physical environment of schools as an important area of readiness. Familiarity with the school setting represented participants’ efforts to make children familiar with a school setting through the participation in an early childhood program and more importantly with the physical space of their future elementary school. This theme split across two subthemes: *Previous school experiences* and *Orientation visits*.

**Previous school experiences.** Many mothers discussed readiness in terms of participation in an early childhood program. When I asked mothers if they thought their child was ready for school, a common first response was, “Yeah, he’s been to school” or “He’s done school. He knows what it’s like.” Participants believed these early experiences provided children a ‘school-like’ experience and introduced them to the structure and activities that are analogous to kindergarten and formal education. Almost all mothers and fathers described the benefit of knowing what it is like to ‘go to school’, although one mother was worried that the transition from preschool to kindergarten might be more challenging because the child will not be allowed the same level of freedom within the classroom.

Participants that had children in a 4K program believed this was a closer link to formal
education and seemingly better preparation for official kindergarten. Marcus described the contributions of her daughter’s 4K program in Minnesota. She thought most cities had similar programs, but was disappointed when she moved her daughter to a new city during the school year that did not yet have a pre-kindergarten program:

She went to a 4k program in Minnesota. It prepped her for kindergarten. And it prepped us too. We all went in blank slate. And they had conferences like regular kids and we got a report card. I could see everything she was learning. Then I thought they had the program up here and I could just throw her in, but they didn’t. I think getting her into that program when she was four made the difference. She knows how to be a kindergartener. And we made sure she was there every day, cause the person in charge talked to us about how much learning she would miss if she just miss one day. That’s important for parents to hear.

Holly was disappointed in her son’s 4k placement because it was not at the actual school. She wanted to start walking him there, like they would do next year, and get him into a routine.

They have it [4K] at the school, but actually at the daycare center they have pre 4K. But, I wanted him to get in at the school which is right down the road away, so I could walk him there and have that practice you know. But they got him at this other center. I mean it’s a couple blocks, but he can’t walk, you know. So the bus picks him up. But I would have preferred this school versus that. My son that’s eight, when he had 4k he had to qualify. Everyone cannot just get in because it’s a good program, so you had to qualify or have certain issues. And, um, he qualified. So that was good because it was a good program. It seems like ‘cause my son’s not at the school in the pre 4K program, he’s having a hard time over there. It’s not the same as being at his real school. My older son
had a better experience at the school. But definitely it’s still helped a lot and it seems like it has helped him with being ready and getting used to being away from me and getting used to school. Now he just needs to get ready for full days.

Lori was originally concerned that her son was only attending Head Start for half of the school day and did not have the stamina or attention for a full day which was required in kindergarten. She worked with his early childhood teachers to place him in a full day classroom to give him this extra practice and subsequently ease his transition to a full day of kindergarten.

I think he’ll do great, he is ready [for kindergarten]. We have had some opportunities in the last year to put him in some all day classes where he was actually there for, you know, a whole eight hours. And he did it – and that has really helped.

Like Lori, some families advocate for opportunities to smooth the transition for children, while other mothers accept the system that is in place for children.

**Orientation visits.** Orientation opportunities help children and parents become familiar with the school building. They often involve a tour of the school, meeting relevant people in the school, and spending some time in a classroom. Parents placed emphasis on getting to know the school and the school’s expectations as they aimed to prepare children for their first day. Parents were able to ask questions, discuss issues, and generally explore how school had changed since their schooldays. This was most important for first time families entering the school.

For some participants, a visit to the school was informal or unannounced and they would take advantage of spending time in the building or on the playground to become comfortable with the school’s physical environment. Alexus discussed her decision to take her daughter out of Head Start because she was so much smaller than other children. She recognized that this put her at a disadvantage, so she took advantages of opportunities to spend time in her older sister’s
kindergarten classroom and school. In preparing her younger daughter for school, she wanted to make sure she was able to navigate the kindergarten classroom and feel comfortable in her surroundings.

But most of the time I’ll just take her up there [elementary school] when I go and pick my daughter up from school. And sometime we go a lil’ early and just walk around the library cuz I didn’t know that the school like had all that extra stuff. Sometime I just walk through the building and walk around till my other one done and she can just run through there and get to know it.

Alexus also commented on the benefits of attending older siblings’ activities and getting to know the school community. “And she goes to his [old brother] concerts and stuff. And she can watch the people and get to know the people. And see what she will do in school.”

Hannah who just recently moved her family to the area from the east coast, described the ongoing process of geographically adjusting to his new surroundings and new system. She reported that a visit to his new school was most helpful in introducing him to the area and giving him a sense of what was to come. “We’ve been up to the school and he met some of the teachers and everything. He got excited. He was in the library and classroom, and they showed him the playground.” Even though he attended Head Start for several years in another city, she believed this was helpful in exposing him to the actual environment where he will be spending his next year.

Participants in one suburb complained about budget issues and cutbacks in the kindergarten orientation that was once offered in the district. Megan reflected on the important role this initial meeting played for her first daughter. It was an important orientation for the parents and the daughter in meeting the teacher and learning how to navigate the room. Megan
felt this change was unfortunate for families – especially families that were entering kindergarten for the first time. The mother described her experience with the first child:

Well, they wanted her [my daughter] to be able to move around the classroom and know where everything is. So, we had a kindergarten conference, but I don’t know if you heard, but that’s going away. So, we won’t have that now. So, that kind of is going to hurt her [daughter] in the beginning of the year because when we went with my older daughter they showed her where everything was in the classroom. And she went in knowing all of that.

In a separate interview, the father also described the positive benefits of this initial conference for both the teachers and his daughter:

They used to have this conference, which is fantastic. We loved it because our daughter was able to go in like on her first day and she knew where everything was. And it was good for us because we were clueless about what was going on. You know, so I think they were looking for them to be able to move around the classroom freely. But I think that’s going to be harder without the conferences now because they’re going to have to spend the first couple days teaching the kids where, you know, the scissors go and the markers go.

Jasmin reported arranging for several visits to her son’s new school. Since this was her first child to enter kindergarten, she found the visits helpful for both of them.

I’ve been there quite a few times, and I’ve taken him with me. So, just to see if he’d be comfortable there, you know, if I have to take him somewhere else. You know, it’s all about making him feel comfortable, or else he’s going to be worried about this or that and
not focus on his work. The first time we got a tour, and they give you a list of activities that they do, academic activities that they do and that sort. And, (child) liked it. I was like, ok. So they have a lot of arts and crafts, a gym room, swimming and a lot of things. That makes me feel better.

Like Jasmin, participants appreciated opportunities to visit the school, become familiar with the building and meet school personnel. Participants viewed formal and informal orientations as a way to reduce anxiety and make students feel comfortable in their surroundings.

**Summary.** Spending time at the child’s future elementary school and previous school-like experiences provided assurance for parents in thinking about their child’s transition to school. They believed that familiarity with the school routine and/or their building would lessen the shock for their children and allow them to feel comfortable and focus on other areas of learning. Ultimately, these prior experiences would lead to an easier school adjustment. However, opportunities to support these subthemes required the resources and commitment of the schools and community, by providing early childhood programming and access to elementary schools. Some mothers that were not content with current practices advocated for extra opportunities that they believed with help the child’s transition.

**Summary: Constructions of readiness.** Mothers and fathers created ideas of what it means to be ready for school, which shaped how they managed their child’s transition to school. All of our participants recognized a child’s disposition toward school, academic skills and social-emotional skills as important readiness areas for kindergarten. Additionally, many mothers and fathers identified self-care and health, as well as familiarity with the school setting as important themes. As participants identified and described these key areas, they also named a number of individuals and activities that support the positive development of these areas, such as siblings,
extended family and early childhood programs. Another critical factor in constructing notions of what it means to be ready for school involved prior experience with the transition to school process. Mothers and fathers with children in formal education voiced a higher level of certainty of what schools were expecting of their children. Further, responses differed by participants’ income and education levels. Participants reporting higher incomes and levels of education provided more descriptive and comprehensive responses and were able to name a variety of activities aimed and supporting what they believed was important for school entry.

**Preparation Activities in Context**

Like the previous section on constructions of readiness, the photo elicitation portion aimed to explore how parents understand school readiness and what they do to support preparing children for school. This question guided the collection and analysis of data; however, photography and follow-up interviews provided greater descriptions and more concrete examples of how participants prepare their children for school. Many of the same themes presented themselves (i.e., academic skills, social and emotional skills, self-care and health and familiarity with the school setting), however the photo process created a much larger ecological picture of the transition activities which led to a different organization of ideas. The initial semi-structured interview with all families began with, “What should your child know or be able to do in order to start school?” For the photo elicitation process I asked participants to document what they do with their child that might help them be ready for school. Based on the auto-driven approach, instructions were brief and families owned the camera for the week. Participants were reminded that there were “no right or wrong answers”, and were encouraged to think broadly on the topic. As stated in the consent form, photographs could include any individuals or locations that verbally agreed to be photographed.
Based on the research team’s discussions, coding, and ongoing analysis meetings, six main findings were identified and are presented below. The order of the findings begins with parent-directed transition activities inside of the home, and moves outward to family and peer support and community activities. The most robust themes were: 1) Readiness involves doing school-like activities, 2) Readiness involves technology, 3) Readiness is part of everyday activities, 4) Readiness involves having the right materials, 5) Readiness is supported by siblings and peers, and 6) Readiness relies on the resources and opportunities provided by the community. Themes and subthemes are presented and described below, with evidence provided in the form of quotes and narrative descriptions.

**Theme 1: Readiness involves doing school-like activities.** This first theme reinforces and broadens the previous theme of academic skills, that parents believe readiness is knowing the basics. All of the eight families took pictures of activities in the home that looked like activities children do at school. Photographs and interviews described the importance of activities supporting math and literacy development, as well as some content areas, such as learning about weather. These photos were predominantly documented in a home setting. Many of the photographs featured children completing homework from preschool programs, or workbooks purchased to reinforce homework assignments. Parents discussed the importance of these images in extending the learning that went on in children’s classrooms to their homes. Extending learning outside the classroom was especially important for parents who were unable to secure a summer program for their child, and who were concerned that children’s academic skills would regress during summer months prior to school entry. Parental efforts in this area centered on completing homework and workbook assignments and enrichment activities.
Homework and workbooks. Many participants photographed children completing homework assignments or workbook activities. Most pictures captured children sitting independently with their paper and pencil at the kitchen table, but a few were more interactive and hands-on. Jasmin, a lower resource mother, grouped a series of pictures of her son completing worksheets at the kitchen table. She selected one picture of her son completing a letter tracing assignment from his preschool and discussed the activity. “See here, he’s doing his homework. Homework keeps him alert. He goes to school and he says, ‘I know that because we did that last night.’”

A few photographs of homework assignments portrayed a more interactive process in learning content material. For example, Megan, a higher resource mother, also described photographs related to homework from her daughter’s Head Start program. The mother and daughter grouped images of her daughter sorting through a backpack of objects, while lying on the living room floor. Megan selected several of these photographs to discuss:

She gets themed backpacks from school every week. That time we had the weather backpack, so we got to learn all about the weather. And you see, they had a windsock so we could take that outside and learn about it. They give directions and a book about weather. This one we are talking about the thermometer and what the temperature is. She really likes those. There are usually like 6 or 7 activities in there.

Like Jasmin and Megan, many of the families commented on the importance of supporting and supervising homework time for children’s preparation for school. In addition, some families purchased workbooks that replicated these activities to provide their children with extra practice.

Lesley, a higher resource mother, discussed an assortment of pictures that recorded her son completing pre-kindergarten workbooks:
I always go to the dollar store and I buy these and they are really cheap. Like here, he has to write the number 2 and then spell out two. Or like print 6 and then write out six. For kindergarten these days you need to know all these numbers and letters. These books give him the opportunity to know and do what he will be doing in kindergarten so he is ready. Like these books are pre-K books. When his [older] brothers are doing work, he has to do them.

She added another picture of her son cutting and pasting to the cluster of pictures. “See here, he cuts out pictures and puts them in sequence. He cuts them out, puts them in order and then glues them down.” Lesley took a variety of photographs capturing school-like moments in their home. She captured close-ups of the actual workbooks to show the diversity of letter and number activities, as well as images of her son completing the exercises.

**Enrichment activities.** Many photographs captured additional activities that contributed to literacy and numeracy development. However, instead of worksheet-based activities, these pictures displayed game-like activities for the child’s enjoyment. Megan grouped a series of pictures displaying large laminated boards with letters and numbers. These homemade boards were created as a matching game for her daughter. In these photographs, the daughter was matching upper and lower case letters, as well as assortments of dots to corresponding number cards. Megan and her daughter described and reflected on the images of these activities:

Megan: These are some easy things I learned at the day care I used to work at. I mean, they are really inexpensive to make. This one we are counting by 10s up to 100, so that she recognizes 10, 20, 30…

Daughter: (Grabs one picture) This one’s pretty easy.
Megan: Number recognition 1-10 and 11-20 and she does pretty well with that one. She loves doing these and she does them like 3-4 times a week. I figured 20 is a good start. And then the letters, too. Most of this she already knows, but we keep it going so that she doesn’t forget it for kindergarten. We made the matching upper case to lower case because that was one of the goals she made with her teachers this year, so we did that. We used to have to sit with her to do them, but now she can do them on her own. We also use shaving cream on the table and they can practice writing letters with their fingers.

Megan recognized that her training in early childhood education helped her incorporate creative activities in the home that boosted learning. She appreciated that her daughter enjoyed the activities, which made her job easier.

Alexus, a lower resource mother, also discussed incorporating creative approaches to learning. During the interview, she picked up a picture of her daughter in front of a gameboard. I asked her to tell me about what was going on in the picture and why it was important:

Here we are paying Bingo, but it is a different kind. Her older sister had a way of playing ABC bingo that she brought home for us to play. So we sat down and played bingo for a while. And we all play. Her older brother loves Bingo. So she practices her letters.

She also discussed other school-like resources that promoted learning. LeapFrog was an example of an educational game that assisted her daughter in practicing school skills, such as beginning letters and numbers.

Letter magnets were also a common photograph recorded by families. Families described the assortment of letters on their refrigerator as a fun activity for children to practice
creating words and spelling their names. Lesley grouped together a number of photos of her son sliding around colorful letters and forming words. I asked her to discuss these pictures:

This is cookin’ time and if there isn’t something he can be doing with me he does his letters. I have him spell out his name and see here with c he was doing cat and then dog. I want him to recognize letters and start with small words. I will have him tell me the letter, sound it out and spell a word. Then he has to tell me what it means. And then he will say, “What about hat?” And I will say, “Well, what does it start with?” And he has to sound it out and find H.

Similarly, Marcus, a lower resource father and Deirdre’s boyfriend, pointed out the magnet letters in the kitchen and brought attention to their learning contributions. He said, “You can’t really see it, but those are the letter magnets there. They use those in the kitchen. She practices working with her letters and I know that is important for school.” I asked the family how they use the letters. Deirdre said, “You know, they practice their names and some words. Oh god, I have no idea what they have written there.”

Summary. Families photographed a variety of moments when children engaged in academic activities. Participants often described these images as school-like because they were supporting the completion of homework assignments from the child’s early childhood center or supplementing assignments with additional school-like worksheets. As expressed in parents’ constructions of readiness, families believed that literacy and numeracy knowledge was important for school entrance and supported these skills by mirroring efforts by the school. Homework and Worksheets represented a traditional approach for families, and they rarely explained in detail what was occurring in the photographs, since they believed it was easily understood. Participants more purposefully explained the link for nontraditional approaches
represented in *Enrichment Activities*. Matching boards, playing educational games, and working with letter magnets were documented moments that parents believed promoted important school knowledge and skills.

**Theme two: Readiness involves technology.** A somewhat surprising finding was the emergence of technology, specifically computer use, in the photographs and discussions. Five of the families took pictures of children engaging with technology and seven of the families discussed the role of technology during interviews. Interestingly, this was not an activity frequently named in participants’ initial interviews, but was a dominant theme in the photo elicitation follow-up. Images of children exploring educational websites, navigating the internet, playing games, and demonstrating how to turn on and off different pieces of technology emerged as highly valued readiness skill for families. This theme presented itself in two ways – participants described how children gained knowledge and skills through computer games and activities, and simultaneously emphasized the importance of knowing how to use technology for success in school.

**Computers support skill development.** Somewhat like the enrichment activities described in the last theme, parents photographed and identified computer games and resources as important contributors to academic and social development. Children could independently explore sites and engage with the technology in ways that reinforced previously learned skills, and also challenged them in new areas. Alexus described a picture of her daughter sitting at a miniature laptop:

> And this is like her little computer or laptop and it has stuff on it for her to do. It has like a letters game and then there is a sports game. And we can buy more – sometimes we get them at Walmart. And it has like activities for them to do and learn. Some of the games
are too hard for her and she gets frustrated, but some are on her level. But it is good to have the challenge too.

This mother emphasized the role of the computer in providing educational enrichment for her daughter. It presented new academic content, while reinforcing some letter and number recognition she already knew. Megan gave me an interactive tour of the family iPad to view the different educational games it offered. She demonstrated a letter tracing game, flashcards, and a letter-object matching game. She also instructed her daughter to show me the PBS website that was photographed in one of the pictures to display the diversity of activities available to her daughter.

For Lori, a higher resource mother, the family laptop was a helpful tool for teaching their child with autism about social skills:

I have a program on my computer that is designed for children with autism. And it shows a classroom of students and how kids are supposed to behave and I will have him watch it with me. And he will say, “I wanna be the student, mom. I wanna be the student.” And I take him to different websites on the computer to see different social skills.

Lori was concerned with his gap in programming between Head Start and the first day of kindergarten, and she believed these computer programs helped her son continue his social development for school.

**Computer knowledge is a skill.** Other mothers also emphasized the role of the computer and technology for school preparation; however, they underscored the importance of developing knowledge of how to work technology and developing comfort with computers. Parents stressed the importance of computer and technology skills for school success and as a general expectation in today’s society. Lesley grouped pictures of her youngest son, as well as her older sons,
interacting with the computer. She described some of the benefits of educational computer games, but emphasized computer knowledge as a more important skill for kindergarten and school.

Like my older son is doing research on the computer and he [youngest] is sitting there with him, watching what he is doing and learning how to use the computer. He know how to turn the computer on, go to stuff, download stuff. Although I’m a little iffy about all this downloading. We have set up a box for him so that we can pick things that he is allowed to do. He is not afraid of computers. Like in kindergarten they start to do this with kids and introduce them to computers, but he is already there.

Later in her interview, she revisited these pictures to further explain the role of technology in her household. She described her oldest son’s love of music and how beneficial his activities are for her youngest son. Her oldest son works with programs to create music on the computer, and her youngest has both observed and participated in creating and performing with the technology. She also commented, “And they’ve been doing some youtube stuff. [name] sings a little bit and they upload it on youtube – under my discretion of course – so he is learning to use parts of the computer that most kids don’t even know about. This makes me feel good.”

After Megan described the enrichment games available to her daughter on their ipad and computer, she shifted her discussion to the importance of computer knowledge. She explained that she also took pictures of her daughter at the computer to show that he daughter was learning to use technology and navigate the internet:
She knows how to navigate the internet. Her sister taught her. She goes to the E icon and then goes to favorites and can pick her sites to play games. That way, she can go on the computer whenever she wants to.

I asked Megan to tell me why she believed this activity would help her prepare for school. She replied:

Nowadays because of computers, you kind of have to know how or you are lost. I mean, she is going to start with them in kindergarten – it is important to know how to use the mouse correctly and know what buttons do what and at least navigate a little bit. They can use my phone and the Ipad – she knows where to go to use her games – they know the cameras, they know how to use everything. I think it is important for them to know computers and to use it correctly and to know their limits.

Regina did not photograph technology use in her home, but did reference computers in her interview. She discussed her sons’ involvement in the nearby community center, and the benefits of its computer lab.

They go to the computer lab after school and they use that every day. I couldn’t take the camera there, but they go there during the week until 5:30. They get practice on the computers – that is good for them for school. I don’t know what they play, but I know they learnin’ the computers.

Access to computers and becoming comfortable with technology was viewed as beneficial to children’s readiness for school. Beyond supporting necessary skills for school, it was a skill in itself that was linked to a child’s successful kindergarten entrance.

**Summary.** Families that participated in the photo elicitation process believed that a child’s readiness for school involved technology. Specifically, the role of computers was named
by a number of families in maintaining children’s knowledge and skills for school, as well as
developing children’s familiarity with computers for school. This was an area of readiness that
was not originally described by participants, but later recognized as a desirable tool for
children’s school preparation.

**Theme three: Readiness is part of everyday activities.** Many of the photographs taken
by parents focused on everyday activities that were transformed into learning opportunities for
their children. All of the eight families took pictures of naturally occurring activities their
children participate in, and described their importance in interviews. Given the busy schedules
that many of these families reported, parents took advantage of daily routines and errands to
support academic, social, and physical development with their children. Although they did not
describe these activities as school-like or mirroring the school environment, they did identify
these activities as contributing to transition children to school. Families described these
everyday activities in two ways – families made learning part of their daily routine and families
created a routine to support children’s learning and development. Most families described
engaging in and creating both subthemes.

**Learning as part of the routine.** Photographs and interviews displayed everyday
activities and errands as opportunities to learn. Many images documented children’s
involvement with cooking and grocery store trips. These families were able to find teaching
moments in their mundane routines. Participants discussed the creative ways in which they
made these tasks educational and found learning moments in their everyday lives. Families
recognized that photographic images could be deceiving, because they did not immediately look
like learning-related activities; however, families clarified how learning transpired in the
photographs.
Jasmin held up a picture of her son leaving the house for an outing. She described how this picture represented a learning moment:

He goes on all my errands with me and we make stuff educational. We point out buildings and do a lot of stuff at the grocery store. Like, here’s an apple – it starts with an A. For some reason, that helps him connect ideas more than just reading it out of a book. Much more so than out of a book.

Jasmin described her daily routine with her son. After picking him up at day care, they would walk home and visit the mailbox. At first, the mailbox routine was a non-educational moment, but she eventually learned how to capitalize on the chore. Her son’s love of junk mail sparked an idea:

He take the junk mail and he act like it his mail. And he say to me, “I didn’t get no mail today?” And then he starts acting like it is addressed to him and his mail. And he takes the stuff that has like the pictures of fruit inside and he take it out and cut it up and start gluing it to paper and it be like all over the house. At first I was like, “That is not your mail, what does that say?” And he learned and then he started writing his name on it. And he says, “See, it’s mine.” That’s what happens. We go to the mailbox and he do him and I do me. So then I started writing letters and like sendin’ them to him. I just put them in the mailbox and then when he come back he can open them up. He like, “Mom, I got mail.”

I asked Jasmin to expand on how she believed this everyday activity would help her son in school. She discussed his progress with writing and ability to identify letters, especially those in his name. She believed additional practice, especially in an entertaining way, would benefit these academic skills for school.
Cooking was an important routine for families to integrate learning opportunities. During this daily ritual, children could help measure out ingredients and become familiar with the names of different food items. Jasmin discussed photographs of her son with a brownie mix, and connected them to learning:

The cooking definitely help him with things he needs to know. Because he has to figure out the measurements and the ingredients he has to put in and the proper way he has to prepare himself for the meal. He has to wash his hands up to his elbow. And the measurements help him in knowing he needs a cup of this and a cup of that and 1/3 of…it always helps. The pictures on top of the box help, because he know he needs eggs and he need oil and water and he get that.

For Sonya, a higher resource mother, it was actually pretend play, while his mother cooked, in practicing some of these skills:

You can’t really tell in the picture, but here he is pretending to cook while I am in the kitchen. He cuts up pieces of paper to be like food and pretends to follow a recipe like me. I like the creativity, and he is learning too. Following directions and knowing food.

Such examples illustrate the variable ways in which families embed learning opportunities in their daily chores and activities.

**Creating routines to promote learning.** Families also photographed and described their intentions to create routines that support children’s readiness. Routines that promoted personal hygiene and sufficient sleep patterns were displayed in a number of photographs and described in interviews. For example, the majority of Jasmin’s photographs displayed images of her son preparing the shower, brushing his teeth, washing his face, flossing and preparing for school in the morning:
After he uses the bathroom he flosses and here he’s puttin’ toothpaste on his brush. It is an everyday thing just him brushin’ his teeth. It’s just been learning it all the way. Now, getting him to actually get it on his toothbrush took a while without it bein’ everywhere because usually he have it on the sink and I’m like wipe that up. He gets himself ready pretty good for his age. And that will help you stay focused during the day cause then you don’t have to worry about – do I stink?

Jasmin also pointed out a picture of herself sitting in a chair in her pajamas and laughed. I asked her why this picture belonged in the group. She said that her son took the camera from her and snapped a photo of her one morning while he was getting ready for preschool. He explained to his mother that she was also part of his morning routine and should be included. She said, “I try an’ give him space, but I do supervise.” She also added a photograph of her son sleeping in bed. She said that she normally enforces a bedtime for him to get enough sleep for school, but that one night he just put himself to bed. She said, “That night and he went to bed by himself, and I was like ‘Wow, look at my baby knocked out!’”

Regina, a higher resource mother, also described the importance of sleep in her household. She assumed responsibility for creating and maintaining a sleep schedule that would keep her sons on a routine:

I can’t take a picture of it, but I also put them on a schedule. I put them right back on schedule even during summer. They in bed 8:30 no later than 9, even in the summer I want them on a routine. Once their day is done with running around and eatin’, they fall out. If I don’t get them in bed by then, it is hard to get them up in the morning. They need more than 8 hours. If not, they are groggy and grouchy and still sleepy. And we can’t be havin’ that for school.
Sonya also named sleep as a critical piece of school readiness. Like the previous example, keeping her son on a consistent schedule was not captured in photographs, but highlighted in her interview:

Sleep is one of the biggest things for school. He is rested in the morning and he is ready to go and he is not dragging. He has to be in bed by 9 at night. I’m lucky with him, because it isn’t a struggle with him. And then he can get up on his own. That is the only way we are goin’ to make this happen.

**Summary.** For the participants represented in this theme, capitalizing on everyday activities is an essential piece to preparing children for school. Families recognized that their photographs of errands to the grocery store, cooking, or mailbox might be misunderstood in the photographs, and clarified how these moments were learning-related. They also explained how they created routines in their household that contributed to children’s readiness for school. These are activities that are ongoing and consistent in their home and help children develop important skills for the school setting.

**Theme four: Readiness involves the right materials.** Many of the photographs taken by participants focused on practical aspects of getting ready for school. Four of the families took pictures of school materials for kindergarten and seven of the families discussed it during interviews. Images showed children playing with school supplies, preparing a backpack, or picking out clothes. While children were the central figure in these photographs and explanations, parents identified themselves as responsible for providing these items and helping children prepare their materials for the school day. They also believed it helped create excitement for children in preparing for their first day of school. For example, Alexus selected a photograph of her daughter sitting with a purple backpack:
So, here we have her bookbag and I’m like, “Here’s your bag, this is what you are going to take to school and show me your stuff, this is what you need to take with you next year and you are going to take it every day. You can’t forget your homework or your pencils, crayons or anything and your coloring books.”

Her daughter grabbed the picture from her mom to see the image. Alexus said to her daughter, “Tell her what you’re taking.” She replied, “My backpack!” Alexus then said, “What else?”

Her daughter answered:

My homework and my coloring books. And my crayons for my coloring books. And my umbrella for when it rains. So I won’t get wet. Wanna see my umbrella? I got Tinkerbell on it.

The daughter brought me her umbrella to show me Tinkerbell and how the umbrella popped open. I asked her if there was anything else she would be taking to school in her backpack. She said, “And I’m gonna take my pencil to write my homework.”

Another mother, Jasmin, discussed the importance of clothes and shoes for preparing for school. She remembered a time when he would race out of the house without his shoes and not caring about how he was dressed for the day. She reflected on the progress they have made – that preparing for your school day involves preparing for the day in general.

And there he is tyin’ his shoes. He’s been doing it for the past year. He can do the two bunny ears - criss cross them and put them in the hole. And he is pretty independent – he can do it alone now. I let him pick out his clothes for the day. And I don’t care. As long as it is clean and right for the weather – it fine. That is a big thing for me – to be sociable you need to be clean and no one will want to help you cause you smell. Havin’ the right
clothes and shoes is a thing he needs to know and we been workin’ on. That he can’t just go outside, he needs to prepare for the weather.

Lori and Eddie grouped several pictures together of their son playing with school supplies and placing items in a clear, plastic pencil bag. The parents reviewed the pictures and commented on their importance:

Lori: This is, he’s getting his pencil bag ready for school. There he’s got his pencils and his markers. That’s him getting ready for school.

Eddie: Yep, there you can see him with his scissors. Yeah, he learned how to use scissors at Head Start and he came home and was cutting everything up.

Lori: His Head Start program donated some of that for us. We got a list from the school for the supplies he needs. He knows those are his and that he will be taking them to school with him.

**Summary.** Obtaining and organizing school materials was an important aspect of preparing children for the school setting. It was a very practical aspect of the transition to school, in that parents were provided a list of materials they were responsible for providing. However, the process of purchasing and organizing materials prompted families to discuss the transition with children and familiarize them with their school supplies.

**Theme five: Readiness is supported by family and peers.** Many of the photographs included siblings, extended family, and peers. All of the eight families took pictures of family members and neighborhood peers who support their child’s readiness. Explanations of these photographs described these individuals’ their integral involvement in the process of preparing children for school. Older siblings were identified as important teachers for their children in learning both social and academic skills that they believed were essential to success in
kindergarten. Siblings and peers that were close in age to the child, were viewed as helpful in promoting the development of important social skills (e.g., sharing, friendship, communication, conflict management). Megan identified the other siblings that appeared in the photographs and described their role in helping her daughter prepare for school:

Her older sister is in a lot of these pictures because she teaches her a lot of stuff. She reads with her and taught her how to use the computer. She helps her with a lot of the homework she brings home too.

During the interview with Deirdre and Marcus, the whole family was present to share and describe the photographs and their roles in helping the kindergarten-bound daughter prepare for school. This family provided an excellent example of how three sisters interacted and built upon each others’ learning. The kindergarten-bound child was learning from her older sister who was already in school, and was also rehearsing her own basic skills and knowledge by teaching her three year old sister letters and numbers. During the interview, the mother, Deirdre, selected a picture of her two older daughters coloring on a worksheet.

Deirdre: Here they are learning the colors and trying to stay within the lines while they was coloring.

6 year old: I was tryin’ to teach her how to read, too!

Marcus: And her sister taught her how to write all of her numbers.

5 year old: Yeah, and my letters. Yeah! ABCDEFG… And I teach her, too (pointing to youngest sister) cause she say like “ABCB”…and I say, that’s not right, it’s ABCDEFGHIJK…”

(All three sisters sing in unison)

6 year old: And I’ve been teaching her how to count to 100.
Regina praised her nine year old daughter’s efforts to prime her boys for the demands of kindergarten. On her own initiative, the daughter creates assignments and activities for the kindergarten-bound twin boys:

She will sit down and work with them – she is my ace – she does so well on all her standardized tests. She makes them sit down and makes up homework and she says, “Y’all have homework, sit down.” So she will give them paper and have them write letters and numbers and write their name and does different stuff with them. Like she will write letters on a paper, but not in a line, she will put like an A on the top, a B on the bottom, a C over here instead of in order. And she will tell them to put them in order and trace them.

I asked Regina how well the boys responded to their older sibling as a teacher. She laughed and said:

These boys do not have a choice. I told you, she is my girly tomboy and you don’t have a choice or you don’t get no snack. She is a big help with them.

In addition to siblings, extended family also appeared in a few of the photographs. Regina pointed out her aunt and uncle and explained that they help out with the boys and get them excited for school. She extended the connection by saying, “But I also wanted to show them because they pretty much raised me and they taught me how to be with my boys and help them learn. That’s big.” For this mother, images of extended family recognized their direct service to preparing her children for school, but also their indirect role in modeling parenting behaviors that, in turn, help her sons.

Sonya also identified her sister in several of the pictures and explained that since she lived with the family, she played a central role in helping her son with the transition to school:
This is his aunt reading with him. She was reading something about a bear, I can’t remember the name of the story. I’m in school during the day, so he spends most of his time with her - and she lives here. She has a son around his age, so they do everything together. She takes them on her outings and takes them to museums. She probably helps him the most for school.

**Summary.** This theme recognized the individuals that help children transition to school, rather than the activities or objects that promote readiness. Families photographed and described sibling contributions to rehearsing important skills and teaching the use of technology. Similarly, extended family appeared in photographs and families documented their roles in serving as an extra parent to support academic skills and build excitement for school. Extended family was also recognized in modeling what was viewed as effective parenting strategies for their children readiness for school.

**Theme six: Readiness relies on the resources of the community.** Many of the photographs taken by parents focused on attending community activities or taking advantage of resources in the area. Six of the families took pictures of such locations and all eight of the families discussed community resources during their interviews. Since these families relied on financial assistance from the state, their ability to participate in out-of-home activities required that these enrichment opportunities be free or affordable. Many images documented visits to public library activities, zoos, parks, museums and community events. A number of families also discussed the role of structured recreational activities or summer programs on the transition process, even if they could not photograph such activities.

**Educational spaces.** Images of the public library, zoo, and parks appeared across photographs. The public library was an important location for a number of families in thinking
about preparing their children for school. This location’s educational focus and resources, as well as a space to interact with other children, made it an important community resource. Megan discussed visiting the public library a minimum of three times each week with her daughter, and pointed out the photographs of her daughter playing with dominos and building:

There is a whole kids section on the first floor. We go there a lot. They play Mickey Mouse dominos and she plays that every time we go. On Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays they do their story time. We go early, play games, do story time and then play and there are tons of kids there to play with. And they learn about letters there and they sing a song about names and a song about what they are wearing.

I asked Megan how these activities benefitted her daughter. She said, “This is the most important for the socialization and learning to take turns. Because at home she just fights with her brothers and sisters, but there she will take turns.”

Lori and Eddie also captured a number of moments at their local library. The public library provided a space to engage in literature and learning, but also a clean, open space to conduct sessions with the physical and occupational therapists:

Lori: That’s where we were with Joseph at the library and he is picking out books and his DVDs.

Eddie: And here he has his book and he is about to check it out.

Son: Dad, that’s my picture!
Lori: We can use the closed captions on the movie so that he can read the words. Plus, with all the people in our house, it is the only way he can pay attention. We try to go once a week.

Lori: And the birth to three gal - and he is playing with the letter board.

Eddie: And I know kindergarten expects him to count so high and he needs to know that. Since he takes to academics so well, we try to teach him as much as possible so he is ahead.

For Lori and Eddie, the public library provided a safe and clean environment for their son to explore and learn. Since their house offered limited space and organization for most activities and therapy sessions, libraries were important for their son’s preparation for school.

Jasmin grouped a number of photographs taken at a local park. She pointed out the different activities he displayed in the photographs, such as the monkey bars, running around, and using his scooter on the blacktop. She also discussed the role of other children at the park as part of his social and emotional development for school:

Like he learns a lot from being with kids at the park. The other day there was this bully at the park and he had to deal with her. And he was like, “Mom, I’m gonna slap her in like 2.5 seconds. I’m gonna slap her.” I said, “Son, just walk away. She is a girl. Just walk away. Just come and tell me what’s going on and I will handle it.” These are important lessons. You can’t be hittin’ kids at school. You can’t be doin’ that.
Alexus also took several pictures of her daughter at a park. However, unlike the previous mother, she emphasized the park’s role in helping her daughter become comfortable with the school setting and offering a safe place for physical exercise:

We go up to the school and play at the playground and we got to the park. It was pretty much just running through the grass. They started running until they saw the playground. Did the monkey bars and everything. Cause the park back here, I don’t trust it because we share it with some of the rough housing over there. I don’t like to take the girls there. So, I’m glad we can use the one at the school. It is safe. And she gets to know where she will be next year. There are usually just a few people who have small children that go up there, so we are good. And letting her go up there and get used to that atmosphere is gonna help too. And they are safe to run around and get exercise.

Like local parks, the zoo was also a destination photographed and discussed in interviews. It provided a hands-on experience for children to learn about animals and the natural world. Regina laughed as she reviewed her photographs from the zoo and described how her twin boys interacted with the animals:

Here we are at the zoo. We are on the train right there. They were running around and they wanted to see the animals and were interactin’. Here are the lions. You know, stuff like the zoo is most important to their learning. Like if you are with the goats, you are actually with them – with the goats. So the boys had four goats trapped in the corner – they have no fear. They were hugging goats.

When I asked Regina to tell me more about how these images were connected to her sons’ school preparation, she said:
It is a learnin’ experience and they are learning about all these animals and they face to face with them. And they ask a million and one questions, of course. And when they in school and they see a picture of a goat, they are going to know, yeah I saw a goat at the zoo and they are going to know. And it goes on and on from there, and this is what I want them to learn when they are little to help them.

Regina believed real world interactions would benefit her son’s in kindergarten and beyond.

Similarly, Deirdre and Marcus took a series of pictures of family outings in the community. The mother selected one picture of the family bowling together. I asked her to tell me about the photograph and how the activity helped prepare her daughter for school:

Deirdre: This is when we went bowling. She is bowling and learning everyday concepts and learning numbers and tracking numbers. Of course they beat mommy.

5 year old: And I got a strike! But, I had help.

Deirdre: So with them it was like, “How many did you get down?” and they would have to count. They also had to pick out shoes and know their size and all that.

Deirdre and Marcus also emphasized the amount of social development that occurred during their family outings. Any activity involving the three girls involved learning to take turns, following directions and problem solving with each other. Deirdre picked up another picture of the girls feeding ducks at a pond to support her comments:

Deirdre: And then we went to feed the ducks – we were at the park.

5 year old: I fed them bread! The ducks.

Deirdre: The ducks are friendlier at the zoo, but we had fun. They learn animals and listening skills, Do not go…

5 year old: …in the water!
Deirdre: Just the more social and interactive skills and then knowing the animals and spending time with nature. Learning all the social skills is the most important for me and being together and learning how to interact. That’s why these activities are so important when we go out and spend time together.

Marcus: And there is a lot of “what is that?” and explaining what it is. We do a lot of family outings and get them out.

5 year old: Yeah, we always go to the park and we run around and play tag.

Deirdre said that although many of their family outings provided opportunities for different types of learning, but socialization was the most important part. Learning to follow rules and appropriately interact with sisters and cousins would benefit them the most in school.

**Structured programming.** Some families recognized the role of structured or longer-term programs on their child’s preparation for school. Photographs and descriptions of recreational classes, such as swimming and karate, as well as summer programming surfaced across interviews and photographs. Lesley grouped several pictures of her son participating in organized programming. The pictures recognized the contributions of ongoing recreational activities in which she enrolled her son:

He goes to take swimming lessons at the Y and he is able to take a friend. He goes every Tuesday for a group lesson and he goes up a group every 6 weeks. And karate class to build skill building and thinking and self-control. He has been swimming since he was 3 years old. I want to keep him active. It helps him in a lot of ways for school. I am a heavy set woman and I want him to stay active and his older brothers are in sports and he wants to be involved too. I wanted to give him something he could own and this swimming class is his. This makes him feel confident that he can achieve that he can do
stuff. That is what I try to instill in my boys. And I keep him busy so he won’t have time for the streets.

Sonya concluded her interview by discussing her son’s involvement in a summer enrichment program. She acknowledged that she couldn’t take a picture of her son at the program, but that it was an important aspect of her son’s preparation for school that she wished to share:

I don’t have any pictures, but he does go to the center here from 12 to 2. They teach him letters and numbers and they go on field trips. It is for part of the summer and he likes that. I tried to get him into the summer school [school district program], because this program only lasts for a certain number of weeks, so I was trying to get him in. So that he could stay up for kindergarten and keep his skills, but he did too well on the test and he couldn’t go. So, then I had to find him something else. It was like the one time I wanted him to fail at a test, so he could go to their summer program – but he did really good. So, then I had to find something on my own.

Sonya regretted that her son did not qualify for the free summer school option, provided by the district, for children that needed additional support based on their kindergarten screening. She commented that there were not many summer options in her area, and full day programs were out of her financial capacity. She was pleased with her son’s program and believed the center helped him maintain his knowledge and skills for kindergarten. She said, “The center lets me drop in at any time and I know they are working on reading skills and their counting, just getting him ready for school.”

Lori and Eddie also discussed some of the challenges in securing summer programming for their son.
He was funded through the county to go to a summer program. But, it was only enough money for a few months and I didn’t want to pull him from Head Start to do something for a short time. So we figured out how to keep him in Head Start and use the money in-house and keep him with his teacher a little longer. And Madison’s school system doesn’t do anything during the summer. So, like when Head Start ended and he is now regressing with what he knows.

Regina was able to enroll her twin boys in the school district’s summer program. She believed this experience was an excellent primer for kindergarten. The experience prepared the boys for the academic content of kindergarten, as well as building the stamina for a full day of school:

So, there isn’t a picture, but the biggest thing was the summer school. It was a full day, just like they have in kindergarten. I put them on the bus 7:15 and they didn’t get back until 5 o’clock. It was good for them. The teachers said they were good and they did an excellent job. They give me a call and tell me that they are helpful and listening and that’s good.

**Summary.** Families captured numerous images of the public library, park, and zoo, and reflected on the importance of summer programming and enrichment opportunities for their child. These settings and opportunities helped families connect academic knowledge to the real world, facilitate social and emotional lessons, and provide space for physical exercise. They identified these spaces as safe, educational, and instrumental in supporting the transition process to school. Several families expressed concern that many local resources and opportunities were dwindling due to budget cuts and stress on the economy. They believed the reduction in services would challenge their child’s preparation for school.
Summary: Photo elicitation. During the course of a week, eight families photographed activities that they believed contributed to children’s school preparation. Photographs included an array of individuals and activities both inside and outside of the home. Follow-up interviews provided a description of photographs and meaning related to priming children for the school setting. Participants presented and discussed images that clustered in six main areas: school-like activities, technology, everyday activities, school materials, family and peers, and community opportunities and resources. Participants discussed reinforcing school-based learning through worksheets and enrichment activities. Technology was also a critical piece of readiness for these families – not merely learning from computers, but knowing how to use computers is also a valuable skill in itself. Participants also highlighted daily activities and errands that contain learning opportunities, as well as a variety of family and friends that support the process. Finally, participants emphasized the role of the community in providing affordable or free programs and settings that help their children learn and prepare for kindergarten. These themes support the notion that the transition to school is a family, school and community process that requires intrafamilial and extrafamilial investments and supports.
Chapter Six

Discussion

For all children, the transition to formal schooling is a noteworthy milestone with far-reaching consequences. Kagan (1999) and Pianta and Cox (2002) call it “a big deal” and a “landmark event” for children, their families, and school educators. Further highlighting its significance, Pianta & Kraft-Sayre (1999) suggest that transition to school “sets the tone and direction of a child’s school career” (p. 47). The transition to school for low-income families is especially important, considering that these children are at greater risk for lower levels of academic and social readiness for school (Lee & Burkam, 2001; Booth & Crouter, 2008). The purpose of my study was to better understand the transition process through the eyes of low-income parents who are the primary managers of children’s preparation for school (Machida et al., 2002). By exploring the contributions of parents’ memories of school and their current constructions of school readiness, I am able to create a more comprehensive picture of parents’ educational perspectives and practical expectations for their kindergarten-bound children.

In order to effectively cover the breadth of new knowledge generated by this study, the next sections of this chapter will discuss each set of findings (i.e., recollections of school, constructions of readiness, preparation in context), by connecting participant responses to prior research and highlighting unique contributions of my study. I will then synthesize the findings, and explicate how my findings widen the field’s understanding of how low-income parents approach socializing their children for school. An ecological perspective helps to theoretically explain participants’ responses and the variety of factors that participants believe contribute to this process. Finally, the limitations of the study and future directions for research and practice in early childhood will be discussed.
Recollections of Schooling and an Educational World View

The most surprising general finding from this study was the division between preparing children for *school* versus preparing children for *kindergarten*. Originally, I anticipated that parents’ memories of school would intersect with their constructions of readiness to create a comprehensive vision of what it meant to be ready for the kindergarten classroom. However, as mothers and fathers detailed their experiences in school, they did not connect them with kindergarten-readiness activities. Instead, many participants stated that kindergarten has changed drastically from their school days, and their personal experiences are far removed from what their children will experience or are expected to know today. For example, Ashley, a lower resource mother, found it difficult to draw upon her own experiences in preparing her son for kindergarten, since schools and classrooms are placing new demands on children at such a young age. Ashley was not alone, several mothers made a clear distinction between their transition into school and their children’s transition into school. Participants, specifically mothers, did not believe their memories or experiences provided an accurate model to guide their behaviors or notions of what children need to be able to know or do in order to begin school. Instead, parents’ memories created a world view of schools and preparing children for the long-term challenges and success in K-12 schooling.

I will begin this section by discussing the general findings from parent’s recollections of schooling and how participant interviews connect with or challenge some of the limited but relevant literature in the area of memories of school. I will then contrast the current findings with a previous study I conducted on this topic with a sociodemographically diverse sample of mothers, by discussing thematic commonalities and differences between the two samples. Based on these two studies, I will propose a modification to a popular model of academic socialization.
(Taylor et al., 2004) that will more accurately capture the role of parents’ own school experiences within the process of preparing children for school. Finally, I will describe the importance of the chronosystem as part of the theoretical framework for this study and endorse its often under-stated role in the bioecological model of development.

**School recollections as part of the transition process.** Research suggests that as parents begin to prepare their children for school, there is often a reactivation of school memories (Raty, 2007; Mapp, 2003; Barnett & Taylor, 2009) which can both support or challenge a healthy transition. For my participants, memories in the areas of intergenerational influences, transitions, social environment and circumstances, as well as special education, served as the most meaningful in guiding their self-reported thoughts and actions with their children. For example, participants were motivated to become involved, or stay involved, in their children’s schooling based on their own family histories of involvement; participants that experienced non-normative transitions in schools, hoped to avoid unnecessary moves with their children, or at least to better support the process; participants that recalled special education as a defining feature of their school experiences were already assessing characteristics their children were presenting in relationship to potential diagnoses or school-related problems; participants that reported social barriers to learning were committed to supporting children’s social and emotional development, as well as supervise their social surroundings to promote greater success in school. After describing their K-12 years in school, mothers and fathers recognized the permeable relationship between their histories and current world view of their child’s schooling.

Findings from participant interviews offer insight into the complex process of school readiness in regard to how parents’ personal school experiences may direct decision-making around children’s learning and education. All mothers and fathers in this study reported
perceived connections between their school experiences and how they prepare their children for school. This implies that school recollections claim a role in parents’ long-term thoughts on schooling. Since the sample for this study was comprised of low-income families, most participants reported lower levels of education and success in school, and their stories evoked a full gamut of emotions. The memories that participants chose to share were shaped through their own interpretation; however, they represented academic and social experiences they perceived to be the most formative from their school days. Even when mothers categorize their overall school experience as positive, they still identified a variety of both favorable and unfavorable memories that fed into their thoughts and practices with their children. Exploring these memories and areas of concern provided a deeper understanding of families (Edwards, 1999) and why parents behave as they do.

**Intergenerational influences of family involvement.** Whether or not parents recalled high or low levels of family involvement during their schooling, they desired to be involved with their children’s education. Participants who recalled high family involvement used those forms of involvement as models for how they desired to support their children. Like Megan, acknowledging the educational benefits of her parents’ involvement at the school level, assisting with homework and attending extra-curricular activities – she now aims to replicate these practices with her children. Conversely, participants that recalled low levels of involvement, or a complete lack of involvement, desired to create a more positive and hand-on environment for their children’s school and learning. However, participants who desired to discontinue family involvement from their past were forced to create new ideas of what that involvement would look like, since they could not draw upon their own experiences. Higher resource participants were more likely to report efforts to continue involvement they experienced as students, while
lower resource participants were more likely to report disappointment with their families’ lack of involvement. This theme echoes and extends similar investigations on parental involvement in children’s schooling (e.g., Mapp, 2003).

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

Barnett and Taylor’s (2009) empirical study found similar intergenerational mother-child transfers quite striking in their work, such that mothers who recalled the school involvement of their parents more positively reported engaging in academic transition activities with their own children, even after controlling for income. My findings support the notion of intergenerational continuity with high levels of involvement; however, participants who reported low levels of involvement desired the opposite type of relationship and are actively attempting to challenge these intergenerational patterns. This type of intergenerational trend has been documented in children of divorced parents, and the transmission of higher risk of offspring divorce (Amato, 1996), suggesting that children of divorce might not have traditional models of marriage to guide future relationships. Likewise, the families in my study might be at greater risk since they do
not have positive memories to draw upon, and might need the greatest amount of assistance in meeting their school involvement goals.

**Social memories of school.** It is interesting to note the heavy emphasis participants placed on social memories from school. Other than the academic memories related to special education, and specific prompts about their academic experiences, mothers and fathers focused on social memories. Similar findings were reported in a study of school memories in a sample of college students (Walls, Sperling, & Webber, 2001). When students were prompted to recall memories from K-12 schooling, only 13% were academic. The authors suggest that academic memories may be so repetitive and bland for students, that social memories are prioritized or hold more emotional weight which brings them to the forefront of memories.

In my study, events related to early pregnancy and bullying defined mothers’ and fathers’ experiences in school. For example, Alexus and Regina reflected on their early and unexpected pregnancies and how it rewrote all of their educational goals and placed them in an alternative learning setting. For Ashley and Sharisa, teenage motherhood led to conflicts with teachers and peers in the school setting, which kept them from finishing high school. Such social events and memories dominated their interview responses due to the perceived significance they had on their lifestyle as a student and ability to succeed in school. Similarly, memories of bullying placed a negative tone on mothers’ and fathers’ experiences in the school setting. Ongoing social battles and emotional abuse suffered in school interfered with their academics and still elicits a visceral reaction in participants when they revisit these memories. These social memories encourage parents to monitor and protect the social side of children’s schooling, as they watch their children enter formal education.
While social memories dominated interviews, they were not always linked to negative events or outcomes. Instead, some participants identified the positive role of extra-curricular involvement, especially for fathers. Nasir and Hand (2008) reported that high school sports teams provide students, specifically marginalized teens, the opportunity to take an integral role on the team, express themselves, and feel competent in the school setting. Likewise, many of the fathers in my study recalled how important these opportunities were to building confidence and sense of belonging in school. As presented in my findings, Josh recognized sports and recreation teams as a way to escape his struggles with ADD and learning in the classroom. He now views extra-curricular activities as important as academics for his daughter’s school experience.

Similarly, Marcus identified school groups and sports as a life preserver for many students and staying out of trouble. The relation of student engagement in school to academic achievement is a widely studied area in educational psychology and is linked to positive outcomes for children in school (Dweck, 1999; Eccles, Wigfield, & Schiefele, 1998; Stipek, 2002). Clearly, the social side of school experiences is an important area to recognize for past and current generations in understanding student experiences and achievement. Especially since parents’ past experiences with the social side of school appear to motivate their behaviors with their children.

Academic memories of school. For participants who highlighted the importance of academic memories, their recollections were primarily related to learning, psychological, or behavioral disabilities that called for specialized educational services. Lori was one example of a participant who received several diagnoses in school, some of which she did not entirely agree. She now practices great caution and involvement with her children and any referrals they receive from school personnel. Mothers and fathers recognized how defining a special education label was on their school identity and experience in the school setting. Even when parents
believed that they benefitted from specialized programs and extra attention, it was an ongoing challenge that continues to threaten their self-efficacy with supporting their children’s learning.

Several studies in the area of special education asked participants to reflect on their experiences in special education (e.g., Conner & Ferri, 2007; Shah, 2007; Gibson, 2006; Pitt & Curtin, 2004). Although these studies do not connect the experiences of one generation to the next, they do document the profound impact of special education placements and services on students’ school experiences. A general interpretation of the results of these studies could lead one to conclude that, for many young people, mainstream environments have not facilitated effective learning and socialization processes. On the contrary, the scenarios described by these students have contributed to situations of segregation and discrimination which have marked their school experience. According to the nine personal narratives analyzed in one study (Diez, 2010), special needs students perceived more barriers than benefits in their school experience. These young men and women were critical when talking about their memories of mainstream classrooms. Likewise, my participants reported negative memories of feeling misunderstood by the school community, which transcends into current concerns about how their children will be treated in school. Referring a child for early screenings or services, may initiate a very unique process for parents who experienced special education in their childhood, and activate negative memories from their past.

**Overall importance of memories.** Mothers and fathers recalled a variety of experiences and retold stories of their K-12 years in school. Experiences were not all positive or negative, and even participants that began interviews by saying, “I hated school” still highlighted positive and beneficial aspects of school, such as sports teams or school-based clubs. The underlying thread that tied all of these interviews together were barriers and challenges that kept many
participants from successfully completing school and their current challenges associated with lack of success in school. Even when participants no longer identify with the person they were during those school days, the memories are still alive and in operation when they think about their child entering formal schooling and what types of similar experiences may await them. The reported memories contribute to a world view of education and how they should engage in the process of supporting their child in school. Mothers and fathers did not specifically link these memories with practical skills or knowledge that children needed to survived in school, but rather their general role in facilitating a successful transition into school and throughout their many years in formal education.

Contrasting findings with a previous study. This study extended previous work I conducted on the topic of recollections of schooling with a more socioeconomically diverse sample (Miller et al., 2011); therefore, it is important to consider how the findings differed across these two studies. In my previous study with 47 mothers of preschool aged children, participants were also asked to explore their social and academic memories of school and how those memories currently informed preparing their children for school. Findings from mothers’ responses were not identical to the findings in my current study. Participants reported that intergenerational influences of family involvement, school transitions, the type of school they attended (e.g., public/private, rural/urban, etc.), and the diversity of the student body were the strongest memories guiding their current behaviors (Miller et al., 2011). My findings from the present study with low-income mother and fathers presents a semi-replication of themes. By comparing these findings with my current sample, it is interesting to note that intergenerational influences and transitions remained constant between the two groups. It appears that across sociodemographic lines, these two areas could be consistently influential. However, findings
differed when it came to the perceived influences of social challenges and special education that were not as repeatedly named in my first study. Table 4 juxtaposes the findings of these two studies.

Table 4

*Comparison of School Recollection Findings*

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<th>Study 1: Diverse sample</th>
<th>Study 2: Low-income sample</th>
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<td>Intergeneration influences of family involvement</td>
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<td>Transitions</td>
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<tr>
<td>Type of school attended</td>
<td>The social side of schooling</td>
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<td>Diversity of the student population</td>
<td>Special education labels and services</td>
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One explanation, for these thematic differences, is that the participants in the current study reported much lower levels of education, which parents often associated with learning disabilities and social challenges that kept them from graduating from high school or obtaining higher degrees. As a result, the social side of schooling and challenges participants faced, were regularly described in their educational histories. Unlike the highly educated and income-earning mothers in my first study, interview discussions in the current project tended to focus on obstacles faced in school. Since many mothers in the first study excelled in school and held positive models of schooling, they did not dwell on avoiding negative outcomes or experiences for their children. Instead, they focused on different aspects of their schooling – not just barriers or obstacles. In a way, this difference highlights a luxury that higher sociodemographic parents
posses, the general confidence that their child will not struggle with basic academic or social demands in school. Therefore, parents can concentrate on other areas, such as, enhancing the child’s experience by selecting the best school-child match and exposing children to a diverse student population that will prepare them for the real world.

**Paternal recollections of school.** An innovative aspect of this study is the inclusion of fathers, who were not represented in my previous study. The eight fathers who participated in interviews generally disliked school, and relied heavily on extra-curricular activities to keep them motivated and focused much more than mothers. Although this is a very small number to draw conclusions from, it highlights the importance of the social side of school for fathers and their desire to access similar activities for their children. Since previous research suggests that fathers are less likely to participate in traditional school-level activities (Fagan, 2009), social and recreational activities might be more attractive to fathers that wish to connect with their children’s schooling.

Mothers and fathers repeatedly discussed the perceived intergenerational influences of how they were parented in school. However, fathers also focused on their relationships with their fathers as a distinct part of their family involvement memories, with father involvement that ranged from non-existent to heavily involved. Most fathers were disappointed with the relationship they recalled with their fathers during their days in school, and hoped to create a different dynamic with their own children. This was especially important for fathers with sons. Fathers that were preparing sons for school also expressed the need to prepare them for the “real world” and teach them how to be men. Mothers did not report similar approaches with their daughters, suggesting that the father-son process of preparing children for school might look somewhat different for families.
Summary. My previous and current studies demonstrate that parents’ memories guide their reported behaviors related to a general world view of education and schooling. Parental reports did not support the idea that memories lead to kindergarten-related transition activities and home-based learning proposed in Taylor et al.’s (2004) popular academic socialization model which is often used to study and understand the transition to school. My work may help to modify or refine this popular model, which will be discussed next.

Rethinking a popular model of academic socialization. Taylor and colleagues (2004) contend that parents’ own experiences in school are important considerations in understanding children’s academic socialization. This model is a widely used and recognized model by the field, and is cited in a wide number of studies on children’s early learning and readiness for school (e.g., Barnett & Taylor, 2009; Barbarin et al., 2010; Rowley, Helaire, & Banerjee, 2010; Johnson, Martin, Brooks-Gunn, & Petrill). My findings support Taylor et al.’s (2004) conceptualization of academic socialization, in that “who parents are” helps explain “what parents do.” However, their model connects school memories with transition-related practices for school entry, which was not the case for my participants. Based on my findings, school experiences might be better understood as a contributing factor to parents’ broad educational views and approaches to the general socialization process, with longer-term consequences on children’s ongoing adjustment and longer-term success in school. For example, parents’ memories of transitions were reported as a significant area of concern for parents in thinking about their children’s schooling. Based on experiences with non-normative transitions in school, parents reported a desire to create educational stability for children. Based on the research team’s interpretation of the data, this did not translate to reports of current transition-related activity with children, but it was on the forefront of parents’ minds for the future. Taylor et al.’s
(2004) model was based on the ecological ideas of Bronfenbrenner, and therefore, I hypothesize that the significance of parents’ own school experience may be more properly placed with their macro-level influences (i.e., socioeconomic and cultural context) that inform the full process of academically socializing children for school.

My proposed modification could also explain why Barnett and Taylor (2009) did not find many significant relationships in their study of parents’ recollections of schooling and transition activities for school. Based on Taylor et al. (2004) model, their study hypothesized that memories would be significantly related to transition activities. The study measured the influence of positive and negative memories of schooling and their relationship to academic-oriented activities (e.g., saying the alphabet with the children, reading with the child) and social activities (e.g., discussing details of the first day, the school routine, meeting a new teacher). Their hypothesis was not supported by their findings, other than in the category of family involvement, which also surfaced with my participants. The lack of significant findings in their study offers additional support that parents’ school memories may contribute to more general views of education, rather than translate to kindergarten readiness activities.

**Applying models from a neighboring field.** In psychology, several models incorporate the influence of parental histories on current parenting practices (e.g., Belsky, 1984; Serbin, 2004). Less application of individual histories is present in the field of education, but it continues to grow (e.g., Martin, 2002; Raty, 2007). Belsky (1984) incorporated parents’ developmental histories in his model of parenting, suggesting that experiences parents had while growing up contribute to their current psychological well-being and parental functioning. His model draws on literature that relates child abuse to reported mistreatment in parents’ own childhood and the subsequent mistreatment of their children (Belsky, 1978, 1980). In sum, his
ideas suggest that supportive developmental experiences encourages optimal child development outcomes, while negative developmental experiences lead to compromised outcomes. The field of education is beginning to incorporate similar ideas, by associating parents’ educational histories with children’s achievement (e.g., Barnett & Taylor, 2009). Borrowing these ideas will create a more comprehensive picture of the role of families in children’s learning and success in school.

Serbin (2004) draws on Belsky’s (1984) work and proposes links between parental histories and outcomes for the next generation, based on the intergenerational transfer of psychosocial risk, including the continuity of parents placing their offspring at increased risk for social, behavioral, and health problems. Citing studies that have identified that parents and children may experience similar physical, social and cultural environments, such as economically deprived neighborhoods in which overlapping generations of families live (Bradley & Corwyn, 2002; Brooks-Gunn et al., 1993; Ingoldsby & Shaw, 2002), Serbin (2004) endorses the need for more studies to incorporate the influence of parents’ childhood experiences and the parenting they received in order to understand the transfer of risk from one generation to the next.

Parents in my study reflected on how their experiences in school contribute to socializing their children for school. Like research in the field of psychology, I am concerned with understanding the processes of socialization: how one generation transfers patterns of behavior to the next. Recent intergenerational studies have often focused on the prediction of parenting behavior and other environmental conditions within the life course of one generation, with a view to identifying the processes that place the offspring of the original subjects at risk for social, behavioral, and health problems across childhood and adulthood (Serbin & Karp, 2004).
Most of these studies focus on the outcomes between generation 1 and generation 2 and are helpful in identifying important predictors for intergenerational risk and transfer of risk. However, this approach is unable to incorporate the process and experiences – and how those lingering memories may guide parental concerns and approaches to children’s schooling. My study begins to fill some of those gaps related to understanding the process and parental perspectives on these intergenerational trends.

Memories and the chronosystem. Thinking about the transition to school through an ecological lens allows educators and researchers to incorporate the chronosystem and consider sociohistorical time as an important factor within this process for children and families. In fact, models that incorporate parental histories cite Bronfenbrenner as a guiding influence (e.g., Taylor et al., 2004; Belsky, 1984). The links participants made between their memories of school and their thoughts and activities related to their children’s schooling provides greater evidence that this remote system may be at play in the parent-child-school relationship. Mothers’ and fathers’ memories may guide interactions at the microsystem level with their children, as well as the mesosystem level and their relationships with the school setting and recreational activities and centers. In the following section, I will discuss the findings of parents’ reported activities at the micro- and mesosystem levels in relationship to how parents understand the process of preparing children for kindergarten and individuals and activities that support the process.

How parents “ready” children for school

As conceptualized by the National Education Goals Panel, parents play an important role in preparing children for school (Shore, 1998). However, how parents construct meaning of readiness and understand their role in this process is still unclear (Diamond, Reagan & Bandyk,
All of the participants reported what they believed children should know or be able to do in order to start kindergarten. Mothers and fathers placed variable emphasis on the different areas and supported these dominant themes in different ways. Consistent themes across participants identified children’s disposition toward school, academic knowledge and skills, social and emotional skills, self-care and health behaviors, and familiarity with the school setting as the most important areas of being ready for kindergarten. Fathers tended to report their involvement in vague terms, and emphasized “being there” for their children. Mothers tended to provide more concrete examples of they support the development of key readiness areas, especially higher resource mothers and participants with early childhood training. Unlike the last section on preparing children for “school” through a broader, world view lens, this section focuses on parents’ pragmatic views of the skills and knowledge children need to survive kindergarten.

**Children’s disposition toward school.** Many of the themes described by participants align with literature on school readiness and the transition to school. For example, the importance of children’s dispositions about school is documented in studies on adult and children views on starting school (e.g., Dockett & Perry, 2001; 2003). Parents in my study linked children’s readiness with excitement for kindergarten. Even when children scored low on the screening and the school district placed children in a summer preparation program, parents did not view this as ‘lack of readiness’ – they still believed being excited for school was really the biggest part of a successful entrance and this just helped children stay on track for kindergarten. They did not view this type of early intervention as discounting the efforts and activities they contributed to preparing their children for school.
Parents described children’s excitement in counting down the days on a calendar, talking about riding the “big bus”, making new friends, and joining older siblings at the elementary school. For example, Regina believed that one of her twin boys was “more ready” than the other, because he was excited for school. Lower resource parents placed the greatest emphasis on disposition and entering school with a positive outlook. They believed this excitement and openness to learning would ease the transition for children, and in some cases make them more likeable for teachers. In some cases, this theme also coincided with parental recollections of school and disliking the school setting as students. Based on their challenges associated with possessing a negative attitude toward school, they hoped a positive disposition would create a different educational pathway for their children and lead to more positive outcomes.

Supporting the ‘basics’ – The ABCs and 123s. My Participants also recognized that, beyond possessing a positive disposition toward school, children needed some basic academic knowledge and skills to begin kindergarten. In my study, every respondent mentioned that either factual information, like knowing the alphabet, colors and numbers, or skills like reading or counting were essential to readiness. My participants discussed academic skills in a fairly routine or rehearsed manner, suggesting that this is a well-known expectation for children. In fact, participants would often parsimoniously say, “They need to know the basics,” without any additional elaborations – expecting that I was familiar with this term and knew what they were communicating. I would then employ follow-up probes to uncover what they meant by “the basics”, which they then clarified as meaning letters, numbers, colors, shapes, etc. Given the emphasis on academic performance and achievement in the media, as well as in the increasing number of high stakes statewide testing programs in the elementary grades, it is not surprising that parents are concerned about their child’s academic abilities (Pianta, 2007). Research
supports that even when parents have a holistic view of kindergarten readiness, they place the most emphasis on the child’s academic abilities when making decisions (Diamond et al., 2000).

All but two of my participants’ children were enrolled in some form of early childhood education program at the time of the study. However, all reported involvement at some point in the child’s first five years. Based on children’s involvement in programs with an academic agenda, it is likely that the center-based curricula may shape their understanding of kindergarten expectations. Since many early childhood programs focus on the development of academic skills as a way to prepare children for the next level of schooling (Gill et al., 2006), parents may recognize these skills as essential to kindergarten readiness. In fact, as exhibited in a number of the interviews, mothers and fathers often identified the child’s preschool or Head Start program as a key contributor to the child’s academic preparedness.

Families in the lower resource bracket often recognized early childhood centers as the primary setting for developing these skills, while the higher resource bracket viewed centers as an important source that was complemented with a number of their own parent-directed activities and contributions. For example, Lesley acknowledged that Head Start was able to reinforce what she was already doing with her son, rather than identify it as the central source for knowledge and skill development. Further divisions emerged between resource groups, with the higher group striving to prepare their child academically for the top of the class, versus the lower group striving to prepare their child to be on level with his or her peers. This is an interesting contrast in parental expectations, which may contribute to early gaps in academic student performance.

**Social and emotional skills.** As often as academic skills, mothers and fathers identified the importance of children’s social and emotional development for successful entrance into kindergarten. Parents believed readiness was related to becoming responsible for one’s self and
listening to directions, as well as appropriately interacting with other students. McAllister et al. (2005) also found strengthening children’s social capacities and emotional health for kindergarten a primary concern for low-income parents. Throughout interviews, parents often referenced the rules of school, which contained implicit understandings that children would be required to recognize and respond to the rules of school. Sonya boldly stated in her interview, that following rules was the only skill that schools really desired of students, even though she aimed to support his holistic development and preparedness for school. Parents of boys were generally concerned with this area and their children “behaving” in school. Many were expecting a phone call from the teacher within the first week, and frequently reporting that elementary schools would not be as forgiving as their preschools in regard to behavior issues.

Social and emotional readiness for school is an expectation expressed by the NEGP as well as numerous studies on children’s readiness for school (e.g., Duncan, Claessens, & Engel, 2005; Webster-Stratton & Reid, 2004). Readiness for the social norms and rules is also a concern for teachers, with 46% of kindergarten teachers reporting that over half of their classes struggled with following rules (Rimm-Kaufmann et al., 2000). Children’s abilities to listen to directions, as well as work independently and collaboratively increases what Pianta and LaParo (2003) refer to as “teachability.” Social readiness is a theme that comes up in work on children’s perspectives on the transition to school as well – children express an awareness that they need to know the school rules, and the consequences of breaking those rules, in order to stay out of trouble (Dockett & Perry, 2007). Similarly, parents in my study expressed the same awareness, that children’s functioning in school and gradual adjustment relied heavily on their ability to follow the social norms of the classroom.
As part of supporting children’s academic and social and emotional readiness for school, many mothers and fathers also identified the importance of readiness in the areas of self-care and health. Many participants believed that self-care abilities provided children with the necessary independence to become part of the kindergarten classroom. Many of the conversations in this area focused on mastering potty-training before entering kindergarten and learning to wash one’s hands. Eddie and Lori discussed their ongoing struggles with potty-training their son, and viewed it as one of their main concerns for him. Stephanie also identified potty-training as her number one struggle, she felt she had done everything she could and that it would be in the hands of the school next year. Parents also believed that proper nutrition and sleep helped students arrive ready to learn. For example, Marcus viewed his daughter’s health habits as one of the most important factors for school readiness and believed it would benefit her performance in school. Participant views on self-care and health readiness match results in similar studies, as well as policy goals. Health is a readiness area promoted in the NEGP (Shore, 1998) and incorporated in many early learning centers (Pascoe, Shaikh, Forbis & Etzel, 2007). Kindergarten teachers often indicate that children needed to have some self-care skills in order to start school. Such skills included children being able to toilet independently, dress themselves, fasten shoes, and recognize their own belongings (Dockett & Perry, 2002; West, Hausken, & Collins, 1993).

**Orientations and transition programs.** A smaller group of participants discussed the importance of being familiar with the physical space of a school environment. Participants recognized being ready for school in terms of experience with a school-like setting (i.e., Head Start or 4K) or by visiting their future school. Mostly mothers identified the role of recognizing one’s surroundings and familiarity with the actual school environment. They believed this eased
the transition for their child and reduced the anxiety of entering a new setting. Participants described orientation visits as one piece of this theme, when time and personnel were dedicated to helping children and parents become familiar with the school setting. In most cases this involved a tour of the school, meeting relevant people in the school and spending time in a classroom. For example, Jasmin explained how her visit to the school with her son eased her concerns when the principal spoke to her son like a person (not a child) and they were able to explore the school building to figure out how he would find his classroom. A few participants (e.g., Megan/Josh and Carly/Steve) were upset with their school’s abandonment of a pre-conference orientation visit with the child’s kindergarten teacher. They viewed this face-to-face time with the teacher as invaluable to the child’s comfort level in the classroom and adjustment to classroom expectations.

Transition programs exist in a variety of forms and may include an orientation visit or an actual program for an indeterminate length, depending on the child’s or parents’ needs. Children, parents, and teachers often emphasize the value of programs to help everyone prepare and adjust to the transition (Dockett & Perry, 2007). Gill et al. (2006) found that a well-thought-out plan of transition that synchronizes school-transition-related efforts and time frames between pre-K and kindergarten programs can be useful because it helps to pool resources, offer a wider range of activities suited to the needs of diverse groups of families, and be more efficient. However, developing such coordinated plans requires collaborative work. It may be difficult for educators, especially pre-K teachers, to leave children in their care to attend networking events or meetings aimed at developing communications or common plans. It is important to note that participants rely on school personnel or programs to organize such activities or opportunities. Although a number of participants viewed this as an important domain of readiness, it was out of
their control in many ways. It is also an example of parents needing outside assistance to support what they deem as necessary for preparing their children for school. Access to school-like settings and orientation visits, is one example of several contextual supports that can ease their transition to the school setting.

**Contextual factors and the transition process.** Based on the guiding theoretical framework for the study, it is important to highlight the contextual influences that helped shape participants constructions of readiness and how they supported the development of those readiness areas (Bronfenbrenner 1995; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). All of the participants in the study received support in some way that assisted their management of the transition process. Many relied on the informal support of family and friends, such as Marcus’ consistent recognition of his large extended family and using them as a resource for school information or parenting advice. The valuable contributions that a variety of individuals make to the child and family transition to school are documented in a number of studies (Docket & Perry, 2011; McAllister et al., 2005).

**Father involvement.** Within an ecological framework, father-child interactions serve as proximal processes in the child’s immediate family system (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). Mother reports on father involvement, as well as fathers’ descriptions of how they are involved, offered important examples of how fathers support the transition to school. My interviews revealed similar findings to other work on father involvement during the early years (e.g., Fagan, 1999; Fagan & Palm, 2004; Summers et al, 1999). Fathers were less specific than mothers on the knowledge and skills needed for kindergarten entrance, and instead stressed supporting whatever their children might need to be successful. Mothers and fathers emphasized the importance of fathers’ role in preparing children for school – such as, “Being there,” “Giving
them whatever they need,” and “Preparing them for the real world” were common responses. These sentiments echo the findings of a study on Early Head Start fathers, which described some of the contemporary roles fathers described, such as caregiving and providing love (Summers et al., 2006).

Unlike the mounting research that suggests limited school involvement on the part of fathers (Fagan & Palm, 2004), fathers in this study, as well as their partners, described regular involvement with children’s programs and schools. For example, Josh took off work to attend his daughter’s Head Start ceremony and reported attending events on a regular basis. Steve discussed regular communication with teachers and attending preschool events. Similarly, Eddie reported such frequent communication with his son’s teachers that he felt as though they were becoming annoyed with his constant presence. It must be noted that fathers enrolled in this study are highly-involved fathers and are partnered with mothers that also encourage and support their involvement. Research suggests that men are much less likely than mothers to be found at school-related functions (Fagan & Palm, 2004), and while the fathers in my study might be the exception, it is important to learn from these important figures as to why they are so involved and how schools and programs can continue to support their involvement.

It is also important to consider father involvement outside of the school setting and its impact on children’s development. Recent studies have demonstrated that fathers’ supportive parenting behaviors independently contribute to the cognitive and socioemotional development of young children, over and above mothers’ supportive parenting behaviors (NICHD Early Child Care Research Network [ECCRN], 2004; Tamis-LeMonda, Shannon, Cabrera, & Lamb, 2004). Fathers assume a variety of family roles and in doing so make direct and indirect contributions to their children’s preparation for school (Booth & Crouter, 1998; Marsiglio, Amato, Day, & Lamb,
2000; Pleck & Masciadrelli, 2004). Despite the growing acceptance of the assumption that involved fathers provide important contributions to their children’s development, paternal impacts on young children’s achievement and outcomes has been understudied in low-income and minority families (Lamb & Tamis-Lemonda, 2004).

The relationship between the father and the mother is an important influence on the father’s ability to remain involved on a regular basis (Downer & Mendez, 2005) and emerged in my study as well. Residing with the family and maintaining a positive or neutral relationship with the mother, allowed fathers to remain involved on a regular basis and invest in efforts to prepare children for school. In line with my participants’ responses, positive, collaborative co-parenting relationships between fathers and mothers, is associated with increased paternal involvement (Coley & Chase-Lansdale, 1999; Tanfer & Mott, 1997). In fact, residential status and co-parenting issues determined the likelihood of fathers being involved in this study. I was unable to gain access to fathers that were non-residential, due to incarceration or negative relationships with the mothers.

**Older children and experience.** Although there was a great deal of overlap in responses and in the themes that emerged across interviews, there were differences in what parents “believed” was expected versus what they “knew” was expected. This was related to the experience acquired from already having a child in formal education. For parents who are transitioning their first child to school, it may be their first contact with the elementary school since their own school days (Meredith, Perry, Borg, & Dockett, 1999). The environment is likely to be very different from what they experienced as children, and consequently, there may be some changes in expectations or preparation activities for later children. Only three participants in the study were transitioning their first child to school, while all others had at least
one child in formal education. Participants that had already experienced the process reported less anxiety and felt much more knowledgeable with the current child. One father even reported, “We were clueless the first time,” suggesting a certain level of blindness or naivety to the situation and expectations. Parents reported an advantage with having prior experience with schools and knowing what to expect. However, they still acknowledged that each child was a bit different, which also guided the process.

Research suggests that at the time of the first child entering school, parents establish a connection with the school and teachers. By the time later children start school, this connection is well established and may lead to a sense of partnership between the school and home environment. Therefore, later children benefit from this already established relationship (Arthur, Beecher, Dockett, Farmer, & Death, 1996; Bickley, 1995; Dockett, 1995). However, this was not necessarily true for my participants. This type of scholarship assumes that these established relationships are positive and that all of the children attend the same school. Based on some friction parents were already reporting with older children’ teachers and frequent housing mobility that led to school transfers, parents did not report this advantage. However, they did identify the benefit of exposing the younger children to older siblings’ school setting and becoming familiar, themselves, with the school environment and larger education system as helpful. Such benefits match the literature in suggesting that families feel better prepared for the adjustment to the school as an institution and its expectations with older siblings (Arthur et al., 1996; Meredith et al., 1999).

**Early childhood centers and home-school connections.** All but two of the families’ kindergarten-bound children were in some form of early childhood center. However, all of the parents recognized that early childhood programs greatly assisted the process of preparing
children for school, especially through the development of important academic and social skills. Eddie kept repeating throughout his interview, “I can’t say enough about his Head Start program. They have done so much.” Similar accolades were expressed across mother and father interviews. Decades of research support these parental reports that these early center-based experiences contribute to children’s academic and social gains as they begin school education (Camilli et al., 2010; Barnett, 1995; Burchinal et al., 1997; Abbott-Shim, Lambert & McCarty, 2003). Much like the mainstream discourse on school readiness, “early childhood education” and “readiness” are practically synonymous and serve as a primary source for preparing children for school (Brooks-Gunn, 2003; Kagan & Kaurez, 2007).

Parents also reported positive relationships with children’s early childhood programs and teachers – programs that were designed for lower-income families and seemed to welcome families. Participants enjoyed the ongoing communication they had achieved with children’s centers and the openness of the programs to allow them to “show up” at any point. Likewise, research demonstrates that these relationships have important consequences for children, by enhancing children’s motivation to learn (Christenson, 2000), as well as the development of key emergent skills that are necessary for academic success (Pianta, Rimm-Kaufman, & Cox, 1999). Families did not express concern that this would change upon entrance to elementary school. Two mothers talked about issues related to being judged by teachers with their older children, but did not discuss this in relationship to their kindergarten-bound child.

**Summary.** Participants reported many of the important individuals and stakeholders involved in the process of readying their children for school, like fathers, siblings and early childhood centers. Such individuals and settings helped shape their constructions of what it meant to be ready for kindergarten, as well as supported many of the reported domains.
However, interviews were often decontextualized from the natural environments where these activities take place. Next, I will discuss the photo elicitation process, which involved a smaller number of participants that were able to capture images in context and report on the images.

**School Preparation in Context**

The eight families that participated in the photo elicitation process were able to capture images and provide a follow-up discussion of activities and individuals that support the transition to school. The photographs added contextual richness to the study by showing the interactions, objects and people who engage in the transition. In relationship to initial interviews with participants, the follow-up interviews reinforced a number of themes related to the skills and knowledge families’ viewed as essential to readiness for school (e.g. basic academic skills, social and emotional skills). However, the interviews extended prior discussions and provide concrete examples of preparation activities that take place over the course of a week. Participants presented and discussed images that clustered in six main areas: school-like activities, technology, everyday activities, school materials, family and peers, and community opportunities and resources. The photographs and interviews also provided additional areas of readiness (i.e. school materials and technology) that were not frequently named in initial interviews. Providing families with a week to photograph moments, reflect, and discuss the transition to school provided a much broader picture of this process for families, which was portrayed as a family, school, and community process (Pianta et al., 1999).

**School-like activities and materials.** A number of photographs captured moments of children engaging in school-like activities. Participants discussed the importance of reinforcing school-based learning through homework, worksheets and enrichment activities for children’s readiness for school. Families reserved time and space to complete worksheets that helped
children practice basic academic skills. Families also replicated those types of school assignments by purchasing analogous workbooks from discount stores in the area. A few mothers also photographed and discussed the role of take-home bags from Head Start, which asked children and families to complete activities related to specific topics (i.e., weather). A large number of Head Start programs have integrated take home bags, which have shown to improve children’s readiness (Bierman et al., 2008). Photo elicitation participants also viewed these bags and take-home activities as beneficial to children’s preparation for school and provided them some direction on how to engage in their children’s learning.

Helping with children’s homework is a widely discussed activity in the area of home-school partnerships. Epstein’s (1995) work on partnerships speaks to the importance of learning at home for children’s success, and identifies assisting with children’s homework as one example of her six essential components of effective partnerships. Through this perspective, helping with homework is a way to increase the overlapping spheres of home and school, which ultimately supports children’s learning and development. While helping with homework may contribute to stronger home-school connections, parents in my study viewed it as a way to reinforce what children were learning in school, rather than striving to strengthen their relationship with the school. When parents described the images of their child completing homework assignments, the meaning they assigned to these images was primarily related to knowledge and skill building for the child. However, by engaging in educational activities with children at home (such as supporting homework and modeling reading behavior), parents may unconsciously communicate clear expectations for achievement, while integrating school curriculum goals within the home (Christenson & Sheridan, 2001).
Prior research suggests that home-based parental involvement may be as important as school-based involvement (Fantuzzo & McWayne, 2002). However, the question remains whether certain forms of home-based involvement and learning are more beneficial. Cooper et al. (2010) found that home-learning activities related to reading and science, mediated associations between family poverty and kindergarten achievement. It is suggested that these forms of involvement are more closely in line with the academic demands that children face in the classroom than other home-learning activities. Participants in my study did not prioritize certain workbooks or homework assignments over other enrichment activities in relationship to preparing their children for school. However, they did emphasize that because many of these worksheets and assignments “looked like” what their children would be doing in kindergarten, they believed they were beneficial.

As demonstrated by participants in my study, low-income parents do provide positive learning experiences and respond to the developmental needs of their young children, which may remain unnoticed or underappreciated (e.g., Machida et al., 2002). The investment that families in this study, as well as other studies, are making in children’s learning challenges the mainstream belief that low-income families are not interested in supporting their children’s education (Compton-Lilly, 2003; Jeynes, 2003; Doucet, 2008), and encourages greater research in exploring the variety of learning experiences that may occur in children’s homes.

For photo elicitation parents, readiness was not just about skill or knowledge based checklists, but also about checklists of school supplies. Participants photographed and discussed the practical necessities of school supplies. Part of the process of preparing their child for school was to introduce them to and familiarize them with the objects they would be carrying to and from school. However, the significance for families was not about merely purchasing a bag and
filling it with crayons, pencils and notebooks, there was also a social element to it. Parents would discuss the utility of these items and aimed to increase the child’s positive disposition toward school. The newly purchased items were fun for the child and created a platform to discuss how they would be using them at school and even led into the social aspects of schooling and meeting new friends and sharing with other classmates. McAllister et al.’s (2005) case study approach to understanding how families prepare children for school, also found materials to be important to their families’ readiness activities. For example, preparing a new backpack or acquiring new shoes or school uniforms were activities families recognized as necessary for school entry.

The importance of technology. Technology was also a critical piece of readiness for these families – not merely learning from computers, but knowing how to use computers was viewed as a valuable skill in itself. As technology advances and digital literacy proliferates and becomes accessible, it appears that families and young children are taking these up (Anderson et al., 2010). In fact, in this study, families associated technology not only with kindergarten success, but also post-graduation, real world success. Photo elicitation participants were interested in providing opportunities and support for general exploration of technology and mastery of basic skills and concepts. This in fact, may be true of most participants in the study, since the same participants did not stress the importance of technology in their initial interviews.

Koh (2004) argues that individuals are living in ‘new times’ when advances in technology render obsolete many of our previous conceptions of what it means to educate our children. Participants provided rationales for computer literacy and the vocational relevance of computer skills, or about the inherent value of learning with computers. For example, Lesley took pictures of her son learning how to make digital music with a special program and
uploading homemade videos on youtube. Other families expressed their desire that children be comfortable with the functions of computers, so that they were prepared to use them in the school setting. Ultimately, parents recognized the need to develop basic technology skills that enable children to operate computers and other digital tools effectively. Participants recognized societal and school demands for these basic skills, and were therefore attempting to provide a foundation for children before entering kindergarten. Arguments for computer literacy date back at least to the 1980s (Buckingham, 2006). However, research focuses on the importance of digital literacy from the school perspective, and little is known about whether parents prioritize digital literacy at a young age.

Even though parents reported the use of digital technology at varying levels, almost all of the families recognized computers and other digital devices as important to children’s school preparation. Participants described images of playing enrichment games on PBS’s website or reading books on an ipad. These are all literacy practices, however, the literature is still unclear as to whether or not these practices are valued or built upon in the classroom (Carrington & Luke, 2001). Of course, it must be recognized that not all families have equal access to computers and other digital tools (Rodriguez, 2004). Although many families are taking up different forms of digital literacies, scholars and practitioners also need to be aware that the digital divide still exists (James, 2008). Although all of the families in this study represented lower-income homes, there were varying degrees of how much technology existed in the homes. Further, most of the participants photographed and discussed children using technology independently or with a sibling. Although parents believed children were gaining valuable knowledge and skills for kindergarten, it is unclear how much children are actually gaining from their independent explorations, without the adult interaction.
Naturally occurring, everyday activities. Participants also highlighted daily activities and errands that contain learning opportunities, as well as a variety of family and friends that support the process. Images and discussions related to everyday activities involved trips to the grocery store or mailbox, as well as assisting with cooking. While not apparent at first, learning moments were embedded in these activities and described during the follow-up interviews. Families reported busy lifestyles, and were able to take advantage of their daily rhythms to support learning. Mainstream discourse often assumes that lower-income families are not actively engaging in preparing children for school if they do not support traditional learning activities, such as reading books and practicing basic math concepts (Roy, Tubbs and Burton, 2004). However, families may create non-traditional learning opportunities for children, much like participants in the study.

The characteristics of child participation in everyday family activities are important, and represent important learning moments that schools can learn from or extend. According to Bronfenbrenner (1992), activities that make up the fabric of everyday life can have development-enhancing or development-impeding, depending on the characteristics and features of the activities. Everyday activities that invite and encourage child participation would be expected to produce positive developmental consequences. Everyday family and community life provides young children with many different kinds of learning opportunities and experiences (Dunst, Hamby, Trivette, Raab, & Bruder, 2000; Goncu, 1999). Natural learning opportunities are afforded as part of daily living, child and family routines, family rituals, family and community celebrations and traditions, and other everyday activities that are either planned or happen serendipitously, and which across time and in their aggregate constitute the life experiences of a developing child (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1992). These include, but are not limited to, meal
times, bath times, caring for pets, dressing and undressing, taking walks, playing in a puddle of water, picnics, planting flowers, bedtime stories, car or bus rides, bookstore story hours, amusement rides, play groups, and grocery shopping. Families in participating in the photo elicitation portion of the study captured similar images and described the importance of these natural learning opportunities as beneficial to children’s school preparation.

A number of studies explore and identify family-driven activities that positively influence children’s school success (Cooper et al., 2010; Fantuzzo & McWayne, 2002; Keels, 2009; McWayne et al., 2004). However, variables included in these studies look at traditional objects linked to learning (e.g., children’s books, number of children’s records, family computer). These types of investigations are important in linking certain activities with child outcomes, they limit our understanding of alternative activities that may be taking place in many of these low-income homes that school can build on. Photo elicitation images and discussions helped widen the lens on behaviors and activities that are shaping children’s early beginnings, especially nontraditional activities, and increase our understanding of why parents provide certain experiences.

**Contributions of siblings.** Images and discussions connected to the photo elicitation process provided evidence of a wide network of individuals that assists the process of preparing children for school. In many cases, families described the assistance of older siblings. There are many reasons to expect that children gain something by growing up with siblings and exposure to a many developmental levels within the household; however, there is surprisingly little evidence of this advantage. Indeed, the vast majority of research assessing the consequences of siblings reports negative effects. Children with many siblings do not perform as well in school as children with few siblings. By focusing almost exclusively on educational outcomes, however, previous studies have neglected ways in which children might benefit from siblings. One
possibility, for example, is that siblings promote children’s social and interpersonal skills (Downey & Condron, 2004). An alternative position, and a position supported by my results, is that siblings are not just competitors for parental resources, but that children actually gain interpersonal skills from the presence of brothers and sisters. The argument here is that through repeated interactions with siblings, children are forced to develop interpersonal skills that can then be generalized to peer relationships (MacKinnon, Starnes, Volling, & Johnson, 1997; McCoy, Brody, & Stoneman, 1994).

Sibling contributions emerged across participants’ photographs and discussions. Older siblings helped kindergarten-bound children with homework assignments, other enrichment activities, and taught younger siblings how to navigate the internet. Both parents and children acknowledged the transmission of knowledge from older to younger siblings in follow-up interviews. Gregory (2001) and her colleagues have demonstrated the important roles that siblings play in supporting literacy learning. Compton-Lilly (2003) also identified the role of immediate and extended family in her study on reading and the urban lives of children. Her students named a wide range of individuals in their lives that helped them learn to read (e.g., aunts, uncles, grandparents, older siblings). She found that parents relied on the assistance of older children to help with younger children because they are currently in school and understands how skills and knowledge are taught. Rather than some of the parents that felt very disconnected from current curricula and teaching techniques because they had been out of school for such a long time. My participants expressed the same concern and their reliance on older siblings, further strengthening the evidence that a wide-range of stakeholders contribute to children’s learning and development of key skills for success in school.
Continuing work with families and communities, especially ethnographic work, clearly shows the situated nature of learning within home and community contexts (Anderson, Anderson, Friedrich, & Kim, 2010). Although earlier research tended to focus on the parent as playing the central role in young children’s learning and development, more contemporary work shows that other significant people in children’s lives also sometimes play important roles in supporting learning. Furthermore, while much of the literature still implies that family means the traditionally described nuclear family, it is obvious that families need to be construed quite broadly.

**The importance of community resources and opportunities.** Beyond the home and family, participants emphasized the role of the community in providing affordable or free programs and settings that help their children learn and prepare for kindergarten. Acknowledging the role of the community, the NEGP incorporated family and community supports for children’s readiness in the panel’s early childhood report and goals (Shore, 1998). The three objectives outlined in this section of the report call for access to high-quality preschool programs, parental training and support, and health-related services. The report does not specifically recognize the other community resources or programs that participants in the photo elicitation process documented. Interestingly, participants did applaud the many benefits of early childhood programs, but also described the importance of other community-based activities and spaces for children’s preparation for school.

Like the NEGP’s report, most studies focus on the accessibility of high quality early childhood education and document the cognitive and social benefits of attending such programs (Camilli et al., 2010; Barnett, 1995; Burchinal et al., 1997; Abbott-Shim, Lambert & McCarty, 2003). Similarly, families in my study discussed the importance of such programs. While they
were not always allowed to take photographs in these settings, they did discuss the role of programs and summer programs in aiding the transition to school and optimizing children’s readiness.

Along with enrolling children in early childhood centers, parents also manage out-of-home time by organizing and supervising children’s educational and social opportunities in the community. Clark (1990) states that achievement is best understood in the environmental contexts of children’s everyday lives, but rarely do studies consider how parents manage or fail to manage their children’s education outside the household (Furstenberg, et al., 1999). Most research studies related to children’s involvement in community activities and programs focuses on school age children. However, such studies document the positive consequences associated with involvement in community activities on student achievement, especially for children living in low-income homes (e.g., Tienda & Kao, 1994; Morrison-Gutman et al., 2000).

Limited information is available on the contributions of other community resources or services on the transition process. Families took photographs of publicly funded resources like libraries, parks, zoos and museums and emphasized their importance in providing safe environments to explore the natural world, socialize with other children and practice basic skills. Families relied heavily on these locations and acknowledged the importance of children learning not just from a book, but from the real world. Less research focuses on involvement in community activities before school entry, but was a main finding in this study on parental perspectives. Participants in my study recognized the positive benefits of community resources and programs on their children’s readiness for school. Based on my data, I am unable to report on the cognitive or social readiness of students, but I am able to underscore the value that parents place on these community offerings and their reported reliance on these affordable services.
Participants recognized early childhood programs and other public spaces as instrumental in supporting the transition process. Based on parental reports, these community resources helped students develop key academic skills for kindergarten as well as provide necessary opportunities for socialization with peers. For example, one participant relied on the public library’s story hour for her daughter to practice social skills with non-sibling children. Other families relied on the local zoo and museums to provide children with hands-on, real world experiences that would make learning more meaningful and provide them with a foundation for future learning in school.

Lareau’s (2003) ethnographic work on the role of the family has drawn attention to social class differences in the organized activities that parents arrange for their children. Lareau found that higher SES parents schedule their children for a variety of arts, sports, and other activities, whereas lower SES parents allow for more unstructured and natural development. I identified similar patterns in my sample of participants. Other than enrollment in full-time early childhood programs, most community activities were unstructured. Images and discussions of activities circled around non-committal activities, such as the zoo and park. However, this may also be a symptom of limited structured programs for preschool aged children. For example, during other interviews in the study, participants discussed future oriented plans to enroll their children in sports and after school programs.

Previous research reports that parents have identified a lack of high-quality, accessible child care, as undermining their efforts to ready their children for school (McAllister et al., 2005). Participants in my study reported access to childhood programs during the school year, but were more concerned about the summer months. For children that did not qualify for the school district’s summer programming based on the kindergarten screening, struggled to find
affordable or appropriate enrichment opportunities. They feared that their children were regressing during the summer months and losing important academic and social skills for kindergarten. Several families expressed concern that many local resources and opportunities were dwindling due to budget cuts and stress on the economy. They believed the reduction in services would negatively affect their child’s preparation for school.

**Summary.** This section delved into the contextualized family process of preparing children for school, by focusing on activities inside and outside of the home that parents believe help children become ready for kindergarten. It provided examples of more concrete activities and the identification of key individuals that help prepare children for kindergarten. In a way, it served as a visual diary for families to document, think and reflect on a week of activities the support their child’s learning. Next, I will synthesize these sections to propose what this study means more holistically to the field of early childhood and the transition to school.

**Synthesis of Findings**

Based on previous research and a popular model of academic socialization, I explored parents’ constructions of readiness and their school recollections in relationship to how they report preparing children for kindergarten. By framing the project and questions as preparing children for school, I was referring to starting kindergarten and used the words *school* and *kindergarten* interchangeably. However, as I conducted interviews and reviewed transcripts, it became clear that while I used these words interchangeably, parents did not. Rather, they were talking about two processes that operated simultaneously: preparing children for kindergarten and preparing children for school. For parents, the process of transitioning children to school was rooted in short-term visions of preparing children for success in the kindergarten classroom, as well as preparing children for success in the larger system of K-12 schooling. Parents’
educational histories contributed to a world view of education that guides their engagement and decision-making during the transition process. Together, constructions of readiness and recollections of schooling guide parents’ beliefs about socializing their child for school.

Based on mothers’ and fathers’ explanations, parents reported that they believed their recollections of schooling guided early and ongoing activities intended to promote school achievement as part of a larger-scale effort to prepare children for school (kindergarten and beyond). Since memories spanned a number of educational years and stages, our interpretation of the data suggests that memories may guide current and anticipated activities to support the child’s holistic K-12 schooling. Simultaneously, parents’ constructions of readiness informed a smaller-scale effort aimed at promoting achievement in the kindergarten classroom and children’s first stage in the formal school community. Mothers and fathers constructions of readiness and transition activities more narrowly focused on requisite skills for kindergarten entrance. Since parents described the transition to school as a short-term and long-term process, with short-term and long-term consequences, the findings are organized and presented in that manner.

Parental recollections of schooling were comprised of themes related to intergenerational influences, school transitions, the school setting, the social side of schooling, and special education. Themes related to mothers’ and fathers’ experiences in school were quite consistent and are presented collectively, with the exception of one theme that was father-dominated and will be identified as such. Parental constructions of readiness and transition activities were comprised of themes related to children’s dispositions, academic skills, social-emotional skills, self-care and health, following rules, and familiarity with the school environment.
Limitations

My findings should be interpreted with the acknowledgment of study limitations. My analysis relied on interviews as the primary source of data, and therefore is limited to parental reports of current thoughts and behaviors as well interpretations of their own experiences. It also relied on participants’ willingness to share their personal stories and current socialization practices. I worked on building rapport with mothers and fathers from the initial phone screening and throughout the home visits, however some participants provided less in-depth responses, even when a number of prompts were provided.

While there was some racial and economic variation in my sample, participants were White or African American and reported household income under 200% of the federal poverty threshold – making them eligible for the state’s child care subsidy. This sample limitation suggests that identified themes might not fit everyone’s story, or that additional themes may present themselves in a higher-sociodemographic sample. Based on the proposed theoretical concepts, sampling did not include immigrant families. All participants in my study attended school in the United States, and I am unsure as to how these findings translate to different groups. Therefore, it is necessary to extend this work to a wider array of racially and ethnically diverse groups. The growing population of immigrant students in schools (Capps et al., 2005) calls for the incorporation of such populations in this type of work. It will also provide important insight into how educational histories experienced outside of the United States contribute to the process of preparing a child for school in a different country and educational system.

Mothers recruited fathers for the study, which required a neutral or positive line of communication between the two parents. Mothers that did not volunteer father information or contact the father for the study, reported that they did not have a relationship with the father or
that the father was unable to participate due to incarceration or living in another state. This suggests that the eight fathers involved in the study were actively involved in the lives of their kindergarten-bound child. Mothers that granted access to the child’s father expressed their desire to support a collaborative partnership and often acknowledged their efforts to “stay on the same page” with the father, which matches the maternal gatekeeping literature (Allen & Hawkins, 1999; Fagen & Burnett, 2003). The level of involvement and communication with those children varied upon the relationship with the child’s mother and geographic proximity. This suggests that father reports of involvement were specific to the child of interest for the study, and may not translate to all of the father’s biological children. Several of the fathers reported having biological children in other households; however, fathers were not as actively involved with their nonresidential children. Based on this recruitment design, information gained from this study cannot be transferred to a general population of fathers, and may be unique to the circumstances and characteristics of the eight fathers in this study.

During interviews, several mothers and fathers commented on their lower-income status as something with which they do not identify. They described their middle or working-class background, and although they met criteria for family subsidies and public assistance, they did not embrace those labels or status. Looking back, I would have delved more deeply into participants’ socioeconomic histories, and would have moved beyond current socioeconomic circumstances. Unfortunately, I did not gather enough information from all participants to fully explore this phenomenon, which might contribute very important information to understanding family differences during this transition. The newness or persistence of low-income status may affect how parents approach or engage in the process of transitioning children to school. This
supports previous research suggesting that a family’s class background influences their current socialization practices (Hill, 1997), and is a limit of this study.

Based on IRB approval, photographs served only as prompts during photo elicitation interviews, and did not serve as data for analysis. I was not able to share the visual images beyond the research team, which limits their contributions to the study. Since the photographs captured contextual components of preparing children for school, the photographs contain important information that may not have been identified by participants or the research team. Descriptions and interpretations of the photo elicitation process would benefit from pairing images with the text to provide the audience with more complete data.

Finally, sampling was conducted in a county (and within a state) where the landscape of early childhood education is rapidly changing with the implementation of universal pre-kindergarten. With an increasing number of families enrolling their children in publicly funded 4 year old kindergarten (Madison Metropolitan School District, 2012), formal education is entering families’ lives at an earlier age and may impact parental perspectives on the transition process (Pianta, 2007). This may or may not challenge my findings, but conclusions should be interpreted with that in mind. In light of these limitations, I find great value in emic data that take into account individuals’ lived experiences. I was able to elicit human connection with experiences that are part of all of our lives, to varying degrees. These findings offer important implications for research and practice that will be discussed next.

**Implications for Research**

A number of future directions for scholarly work surfaced during the qualitative process of this study. As my small team of students reviewed and analyzed the project’s data, we began asking questions that were unanswerable with the interview transcripts. However, they marked
important areas to explore in the future, such as tracking the transition to school in the sample, considering children’s perspectives and increasing the use of photo elicitation in research.

**Following families into kindergarten.** Many discussions with the research team and colleagues revolved around – “So, what do you think happened?” – highlighting the lingering curiosity of how these families actually experienced the transition into kindergarten. After months of analyzing and reanalyzing data to understand the process leading up to this important milestone, it is important gather follow-up data on how families actually experienced the event, how children are adjusting to kindergarten and to allow parents to reflect on the process. Currently, I am conducting follow-up interviews with family to track this experience and gather information on how children are succeeding or struggling in the kindergarten classroom.

Following families into the structural transition of formal education may also allow for the application of Bourdieu’s concept of cultural capital in exploring the contrast between the home and school and issues of power. This contrast may become more pronounced once parents are faced with a new educational institution that does not actively cater to their cultural needs or diversity, which they may have experienced in their Head Start or preschool program (Ramey et al., 2000). During the data collection process, parents were preparing their children for school based on what they deemed was legitimate and important knowledge for school. Once the transition takes place, parents may reflect on or re-evaluate what kind of skills, knowledge and dispositions are valued by the school setting, which may support or hinder their child’s adjustment to school, as well as their own.

**Considering children’s perspectives.** While the transition to school is conceptualized as a family process, children’s perspectives would help advance this type of work. Dockett & Perry (2007) incorporate children’s perspectives and expectations of kindergarten. Since
evidence suggests that how children perceive their parents’ involvement may impact outcomes for children, (Bowen et al., 2012), it is important to consider how children experience this transition – and view their parents’ role in facilitating the process. Especially since they are the individuals that physically enter a new school system and are required to both adjust to the new sitting and demonstrate the desired kindergarten readiness skills. The capacity and desire of children to participate in research surfaced during the photo elicitation process and provided some important insight into the skills and knowledge they posses, as well as who and what they view as important for success in kindergarten.

Using visual methods in future studies. Increasingly, qualitative researchers have embraced visual methods, including photography, as a means to generate knowledge and convey understanding (Gibbs, Friese, & Mangabeira, 2002; Pink, Kurti, & Afonso, 2004). Visual methods are gaining attention as a way to better understand families and strengthen home-school relationships (McAllister et al., 2005). For the purposes of my study, I employed photo elicitation to identify a variety of family activities related to preparing children for school. Participants were able to visually capture the context of this transition, and identify people and places the surround them as they enter formal education.

As suggested in implications for research, the photo elicitation process demonstrated holds potential for additional studies in early childhood. However, it also demonstrated potential to serve as an intervention tool for families and schools. Families photographed activities and individuals that they regarded as integral to the process of readying their child for school. It also required families to reflect on the images and their relationship to children’s successful entrance into kindergarten. This process holds promise to increase families’ awareness of activities that
may benefit their child and to educate the school setting on meaningful family activities that may be invisible or underappreciated during this transition process.

On a broader scale, the methodology may enhance internal reflection, self-awareness, and the exchange of individuals’ perceptions in order to initiate personal and community change that can be documented in research (Wang, 1999). Action-oriented forms of photography use, such as Photovoice, have proven to be effective tools for low-income populations in child health research and policy (Wang & Burris, 1997; Killion & Wang, 2000), and could make powerful contributions to the field of education and early childhood development. It has also been used effectively to inform policy makers and to create tangible legislative change.

**Implications for Practice**

**The transition to school and low-income families.** Because schools have historically pushed academic preparedness, parents feel the need to advance the same agenda (Gill et al., 2006). However, participants in my study also named a number of additional readiness areas that they view as important and desire to support beyond academic skills. There is a need for a paradigm shift away from a purely academic agenda to include all domains of development of school readiness (Booth & Crouter, 2008). This broader focus, as advanced through national goals, should be supported through concrete practices and initiatives by policy makers. Advocating for a holistic view of development but rewarding only literacy and math based outcomes is unlikely to change current thinking about school readiness and the transition to school (Lee & Burkam, 2001). Further, the focus will not change unless adequate outreach efforts are mounted to reach families and broader communities; unless schools and parents are convinced that a successful transition to school does not hinge only on traditional academic
skills; and unless schools are convinced that their funding is not in jeopardy if they do not show gains in narrowly defined, academically-oriented domains.

Based on participant responses, the contributions of family and peers are important to consider in supporting children’s readiness for school, and the resource of these individuals should be included in developing intervention strategies. In fact, school personnel are beginning to identify the great strength of these family networks for children’s success in school, but more work should be done with schools and educators (Wright, Diener, & Kay, 2000). Similarly, families also frequently referenced the importance of community resources and opportunities, and their reliance on the access and affordability of these services. This finding has important implications for community organizations and local policymakers, in identifying public locations and programs as instrumental in supporting readiness opportunities for low-income families. Therefore, supporting a healthy transition to school requires attention to broader community and policy issues and programs that may enhance or stunt this process for families.

**Working with low-income families.** The current definitions of readiness emerge from and cater to primarily white middle-class families (Gill et al, 2006). Children from lower-income families who do not meet these criteria are deemed to be lacking in skills. However, children living in low-income homes make up 44% of the population in the United States and this number continues to grow (National Center for Children in Poverty, 2012), making it a top priority for school personnel and service providers. The early childhood field needs to think about the experiences of children from lower-income families from a strength-based perspective, as a way to explore the skills and talents that children develop at home, and how schools can build on those strengths. Further, practitioners should remain aware of higher and lower resource
differences among low-income families that may shape their experiences and approaches to preparing children for school, which emerged in this study.

All participants recognized the importance of the role of family in the process and were investing in children’s readiness for school based on their understanding of this developmental milestone. Involving parents and the broader community in a dialogue is valuable in gaining families’ perspectives, especially because not all children go through a formal pre-K experiences or have access to high-quality early childhood centers (Gill et al, 2006). However, unless the positioning of schools and teachers can shift, the focus of such exchanges is likely to be limited to involving parents in the promotion of the school’s agenda (Keyes, 2002). In addition, as the roles of home and school became more distinct in the last century, families have been socialized to view schools as seats of knowledge about what is in the best interest of children. Desiring parents to be partners and be involved in the transition to school is a sound idea, but striking a true partnership is a time-consuming and involved process that requires sustained engagement with families and changes in school policies and practices that are respectful of the realities of today’s families, histories, and practices.

**Training educators to consider educational histories.** My results, as well as previous research, suggest that experiences parents recall from their many years of first-hand exposure to school settings, may impact the way they view school and academic outcomes. Based on my findings, thinking about children’s academic socialization in terms of intergenerational influences provides a way to consider parents developmental histories and their current behaviors. For my participants, readiness was related to practical knowledge and skills necessary for success in kindergarten; however, it was also related to participants’ larger world view of
starting school. Education histories contribute to parents’ outlook on school and children’s education, which in turn, may shape their relationships with teachers and other school personnel.

Fostering a strong relationship and connection with families aids the development of important skills and contributes to a smooth transition for all children and their families (Ramey et al, 2000). It calls for teachers and schools to solicit and listen to parent stories. As teachers bring their past to the work they do in schools (Graue, 2005; Gomez, Rodriquez, & Agosto, 2008), parents also bring their past to their learning-related involvement. These personal histories are excellent tools to creating meaningful bonds with families. Schools have traditionally thought about family outreach as unilateral (school to home), instead of a mutual process (Christensen, 2003; Bernhard, Lefebre, Kilbride, Chud, & Lange, 1998; Lareau, & Horvat, 1999). However, in creating meaningful bonds with families, it must be considered a joint process and both sides must take an equal investment in the child’s development. Although we tend to concentrate on the immediate skills needed for the kindergarten classroom, it would be helpful to acknowledge other areas (such as parental histories) that are important and contribute to the parent-child process.

Some points of interest that were especially relevant to mothers and fathers included issues related to intergenerational influences, transitions, the social side of schooling and special education. Exploring these memories and areas of concern can provide a deeper understanding of families and children (Edwards, 1999). It can unveil why children behave as they do, children’s way of learning and communicating, some of the problems parents have encountered, and how these experiences may impact children’s views about schools and learning. We should encourage and teach the skills for practitioners to use these emotional stories and personal histories in order to better understand the home environment of children. Parents can share
anecdotes and observations form their own individual consciousness to give teachers access to complicated social, emotional, and educational issues that can help teachers reduce the mystery around their students’ early beginnings. Dually, as teachers help parents revisit their school memories, parents may become aware of the motivation behind their thoughts and action.

Parental recollections on schooling guide cognitions, learning-related behaviors, and decisions parents make about their children’s education. Listening to parents needs to begin early and be sustained throughout a child’s education in order to promote optimal levels of success. We also need to suspend assumptions about parents’ backgrounds and involvement in learning, and open ourselves up to the variety of learning experiences, as well as learning that occurs within the family and community contexts. Through this perspective, we can create more relevant and necessary supports and interventions for our families and children, in order to benefit all children and families.

Visual methods as an intervention. Students, families, and researchers may use photography to communicate ideas and confront issues both inside and outside of the classroom. The transition to school is just one of many social issues that may be addressed through visual imagery, “It can give strong insight into wider cultural perceptions, categories, and metaphors, and provide us with views of how things are or should be” (Harrison, 2002, p. 857). Based on the philosophy that the transition to school is a family, school and community process (Pianta, et al., 1999), visual imagery creates a medium to share perspective, ideas and challenges between and across these key stakeholders. Acknowledging that school preparation is a joint responsibility, rather than something dictated by a particular group, recognizes the importance of relationships and providing time and resources to support relationship-building. Using photography to share information from the home to school and school to home, allows schools
and communities to identify existing strengths and extend these strengths, rather than focus on
deficits.

One example of how this process may be used as intervention tool is related to visual
work directed by Dr. Eberhart-Wright in child and family programs serving high risk families. Dr. Eberhart-Wright developed a technique called “Focus and Reflect”, aimed at highlighting positive home interactions and building on family strengths (A. Eberhart-Wright, personal communication, February 24, 2012). As part of this process, a coach visits family homes and gains permission to video tape parent-child interactions. During visits, only positive comments are made about family activities and the coach identifies “beautiful moments” between the parent and child. Beautiful moments represent positive interactions that benefit the child and the parent-child relationship. Edited clips of beautiful moments are then presented at family group gatherings to serve as teaching opportunities for other families and to describe the benefits of such interactions. This type of technique engages families and early childhood staff to recognize positive interactions and build on them. Photography could accomplish these same goals and holds potential for highlighting the strengths of families, increasing the self-efficacy of parents, and spreading effective practices to other families.

Conclusion

This study was able to answer important unexplored questions related to parental histories, understandings of readiness, and how low-income mothers and fathers engage in the transition to school process. Information gained from this study provides a foundation for future research in this area as well as highlighting important implications for early childhood practitioners. According to the participants in my study, many parental ideas about being ready for school match policy ideas stated in the NEGP, as well as many of the readiness areas valued and
endorsed by schools (Shore 1998). However, the activities and efforts directed at supporting those areas are often embedded in everyday activities or supported by a variety of individuals that schools and communities may tend to under-recognize. Further, parents draw upon their own memories of school in creating a world view of education and how they socialize their children for the school setting and engage in children’s learning.

My findings suggest that the transition to school process is more complex for families than often discussed and described, because families are challenged with preparing children for the kindergarten classroom and the larger context of formal schooling. For that reason, both constructions of readiness and educational histories operate in tandem during the transition process. By focusing on what families are already doing and exploring their perspectives on the readiness process, these findings may promote more meaningful and practical directions for facilitating a smoother transition for families. Ultimately, this exploratory work can inform our understanding of the family transition to the school setting, and enhance efforts in supporting both parents and children during this period. It acknowledges parental histories and current practices in relationship to preparing children for school. With this knowledge we can greatly improve the process for families and schools.


activities: Two minority ethnic children learning in out-of-school contexts in the UK.


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doi:10.1016/S0304-422X(03)00034-2


Appendix A: Recruitment Form

Is your child entering kindergarten?

The Transition to Kindergarten Project is recruiting mothers of preschool age children to participate in a project about the family role in preparing children for school.

Participation involves 1 visit to your home lasting approximately 2 hours. Visits will be scheduled at your convenience.

Earn a $20 gift card for participation in this project.

If you have any questions or would like to participate – contact Kyle Miller at (515) 720-7379 or by email (kemiller4@wisc.edu).

If you would like to be called, please provide the following information:

Print Name: _________________________________

Phone Number: ______________________ or Email: ______________________

Best times to call: _________________________
Appendix B: Recruitment Phone Script

“Hi, my name is __________. I’m calling from the University of Wisconsin. May I speak with (adult listed on contact card)?”

If the contact person is reached, continue to the Study Rationale.

If the contact person is not available, say: “Could you tell her that I called and will try to call again? In the meantime, if she would like to call me back my name is __________ and I can be reached at 608-262-9770. Thank you.” Discontinue the call.

Study Eligibility:

“I am calling because you recently returned an interest card about our study here at the University of Wisconsin. We are currently recruiting mothers of preschool age children who will begin kindergarten in the fall. Does this fit the age of your child?” (If yes, continue with phone protocol. If no, proceed to Ending Call). “We are also looking for participants that are eligible for the state’s child care subsidy. Does this fit you?” (If yes, continue to study description. If no, proceed to Ending Call).

Ending Call:

“I’m sorry. It looks like your family doesn’t meet our requirements for involvement in this project. Thank you for your interest and your time. Can we keep your name on file for future projects? If you have any questions about the project, you may call the lead researcher, Dr. Janean Dilworth-Bart at 608-262-9770. Thank you.”

Study Description:

“The study is called The Transition to School Project, and it is about parents’ perspectives on how they prepare their children for school. We are looking at how you manage this transition, as well as how your own experiences in school may influence this process.

This study involves one visit, which is expected to take approximately 2 hours. It may take place at your home or any location you would like, and will be scheduled at your convenience. If you decide to participate in this project, you will be asked to participate in two interviews and complete one form about your family. We are also encouraging fathers to take part in this project. If the father of your child would like to take part, he will participate in one interview and complete one form about his involvement.

You will receive a $20 gift card for your participation. And we can provide child care during this visit. Also, your participation is completely voluntary and you can stop at any time.

Do you have any questions about our project?” (Address all questions)

Are you interested in participating in The Transition to School Project?”
If no, say:

“Okay. Thank you for your time.” (Discontinue the phone call)

If yes, say:

“Great. Would you like to schedule the visit at this time or would you like me to call you at another time?”

If they would like to schedule at that time, find out potential days and times that work.

If they would like to schedule later, find out a good time to call them back.

“Thank you for your interest in The Transition to School Project. I look forward to working with you.”

Discontinue the phone call.
UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON
Research Participant Information and Consent Form for Mothers

Title of the Study: Parental perspectives on the transition to school

Principal Investigator: Janean Dilworth-Bart, PhD
University Affiliation: UW-Madison, Human Development and Family Studies
Phone: (608) 262-9770
Email: jedilworth@wisc.edu
Address: 312 Middleton Building
1305 Linden Drive
Madison, WI 53706

Student Researcher: Kyle Miller, EdM
Phone: 608-262-9770
Email: kemiller4@wisc.edu

Description of the Research:
You are invited to participate in a research study about parental perspectives on preparing their children for school and how they manage the transition to kindergarten. The purpose of this research study is to look at how parents’ own experiences in school contribute to current activities, as well as who is part of this process for children and families. You have been asked to participate because your child fits our target age range, and you qualify for the state’s child care subsidy.

This study will include mothers and fathers from the Dane County area. Father participation is not required, but highly encouraged. This research will take place in your home or at a location of your choice. You will be interviewed as part of this project, and your interview will be audio recorded. Audio recordings will be used by the study’s investigators and research assistants. The recordings will be kept for 10 years before they are destroyed.
**What will my participation involve?**

If you decide to take part in this study, you will be asked to complete a survey about your family and participate in two interviews. You will also be asked to invite your child’s father to participate in the study. However, his participation is not required. The session will be scheduled at your convenience and will last approximately 2 hours.

**Are there any risks to me?**

Because we will be visiting your home or meeting in a neutral location, there is risk that other people may find out that you are participating in this study. We are also required by law to report suspected child abuse or neglect to the Dane County Department of Human Services.

**Are there any benefits to me?**

There will be no direct benefits to you for participating in this study.

**Will I be compensated for my participation?**

You will receive a $20 gift card for participating in this study. If you do withdraw prior to the end of the study, you will still receive the $20 gift card. We will provide child care for children during the scheduled session.

**How will my confidentiality be protected?**

While there will probably be publications as a result of this study, your name will not be used. Only group characteristics will be published. If you participate in this study, we would like to be able to quote you directly without using your name. If you agree to allow us to quote you in publications, please initial the statement at the bottom of this form.

The transcripts of your interviews and survey about your family will be assigned a number in place of your name. Your number and identifying information will be kept in separate locations. Audio recordings of your interviews will be used for research purposes only. They will be heard and viewed by researchers and students working on this project. We will keep the recordings for 10 years.

**Whom should I contact if I have questions?**

You may ask any questions about the research at any time. If you have questions about the research after you leave today you should contact the Principal Investigator Janean Dilworth-Bart at 608-262-9770. You may also call the student researcher, Kyle Miller at 608-262-9770.

If you are not satisfied with response of research team, have more questions, or want to talk with someone about your rights as a research participant, you should contact the Education Research and Social & Behavioral Science IRB Office at 608-263-2320.

Your participation is completely voluntary. If you decide not to participate or to withdraw from the study it will have no effect on any services or treatment you are currently receiving.
Your signature indicates that you have read this consent form, had an opportunity to ask any questions about your participation in this research and voluntarily consent to participate. You will receive a copy of this form for your records.

Name of Participant (please print):______________________________

__________________________________________________________

Signature Date

I give my permission to be quoted directly in publications without using my name.
UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON
Research Participant Information and Consent Form for Fathers

Title of the Study: Parental perspectives on the transition to school

Principal Investigator: Janean Dilworth-Bart, PhD
University Affiliation: UW-Madison, Human Development and Family Studies
Phone: (608) 262-9770
Email: jedilworth@wisc.edu
Address: 312 Middleton Building
1305 Linden Drive
Madison, WI  53706

Student Researcher: Kyle Miller, EdM
Phone: 608-262-9770
Email: kemiller4@wisc.edu

Description of the Research:

You are invited to participate in a research study about parental perspectives on preparing their children for school and how they manage the transition to kindergarten. The purpose of this research study is to look at how parents’ own experiences in school contribute to current activities, as well as who is part of this process for children and families. You have been asked to participate because your child fits our target age range, and you qualify for the state’s child care subsidy.

This study will include mothers and fathers from the Dane County area. Father participation is not required, but highly encouraged. This research will take place in your home or at a location of your choice. You will be interviewed as part of this project, and your interview will be audio recorded. Audio recordings will be used by the study’s investigators and research assistants. The recordings will be kept for 10 years before they are destroyed.
**What will my participation involve?**

If you decide to take part in this study, you will be asked to complete a form about yourself and participate in one interview during one session. You may choose to be interviewed during the visit we schedule with your child’s mother, or may choose a separate time and location. Your participation in this project is expected to last approximately 45 minutes. We will schedule at your convenience.

**Are there any risks to me?**

Because we will be visiting your home or meeting in a neutral location, there is risk that other people may find out that you are participating in this study. We are also required by law to report suspected child abuse or neglect to the Dane County Department of Human Services.

**Are there any benefits to me?**

There will be no direct benefits to you for participating in this study.

**Will I be compensated for my participation?**

You will receive a $20 gift card for participating in this study. If you do withdraw prior to the end of the study, you will still receive the $20 gift card. We will provide child care for children during the scheduled session.

**How will my confidentiality be protected?**

While there will probably be publications as a result of this study, your name will not be used. Only group characteristics will be published. If you participate in this study, we would like to be able to quote you directly without using your name. If you agree to allow us to quote you in publications, please initial the statement at the bottom of this form.

The transcript of your interview and form about yourself will be assigned a number in place of your name. Your number and identifying information will be kept in separate locations. Audio recordings of your interviews and transcripts will be used for research purposes only. They will be heard and viewed by researchers and students working on this project. We will keep the recordings for 10 years.

**Whom should I contact if I have questions?**

You may ask any questions about the research at any time. If you have questions about the research after you leave today you should contact the Principal Investigator Janean Dilworth-Bart at 608-262-9770. You may also call the student researcher, Kyle Miller at 608-262-9770.

If you are not satisfied with response of research team, have more questions, or want to talk with someone about your rights as a research participant, you should contact the Education Research and Social & Behavioral Science IRB Office at 608-263-2320.
Your participation is completely voluntary. If you decide not to participate or to withdraw from the study it will have no effect on any services or treatment you are currently receiving.

Your signature indicates that you have read this consent form, had an opportunity to ask any questions about your participation in this research and voluntarily consent to participate. You will receive a copy of this form for your records.

Name of Participant (please print):______________________________

__________________________________________________________  ___________
Signature                                                                 Date

I give my permission to be quoted directly in publications without using my name.
Title of the Study: Parental Perspectives on the Transition to School
Principal Investigator: Janean Dilworth-Bart, PhD
University Affiliation: UW-Madison, Human Development and Family Studies
Phone: (608) 262-9770
Email: jedilworth@wisc.edu
Address: 312 Middleton Building
1305 Linden Drive
Madison, WI 53706
Student Researcher: Kyle Miller, EdM
Phone: 608-262-9770
Email: kemiller4@wisc.edu

Description of the Research:
You are invited to participate in a research study about how parents prepare their children for school. You have been asked to participate because your child will be entering kindergarten in the fall and you are eligible for the state's child care subsidy. You have also been asked because you participated in our larger study on the transition to school.

The purpose of this research is to better understand the variety of things parents and families do to prepare their children for school. You will be taking photographs of your family and will be interviewed as part of this project. This research will take place in your home.

WHAT WILL MY PARTICIPATION INVOLVE?
If you decide to participate in this research, you will be provided with a digital camera for one week to take pictures of activities you engage in with your child. Once the photographs are developed, you will participate in an interview about the photographs. You can delete any
pictures you do not wish to share with the project, and should also consider deleting any photos of anyone who might not want their images shared with the research team as part of the interview. Your interview will be audio recorded.

Your participation will last one week and will include a follow-up interview, which will last approximately 1 hour.

**ARE THERE ANY RISKS TO ME?**

Because we will be visiting your home, there is risk that other people may find out that you are participating in this study. We are also required by law to report suspected child abuse or neglect to the Dane County Department of Human Services.

**ARE THERE ANY BENEFITS TO ME?**

We don't expect any direct benefits to you from participation in this study.

**WILL I BE COMPENSATED FOR MY PARTICIPATION?**

You will receive copies of your photographs for participating in this study. If you decide to withdraw prior to the end of the study, you will still receive copies of any photographs you have taken. Child care will be provided during the follow-up interview session.

**HOW WILL MY CONFIDENTIALITY BE PROTECTED?**

While there will probably be publications as a result of this study, your name and photographic images will not be used in any publications.

The transcript of your interview will be assigned a number in place of your name and we will not keep any copies of your photos. Your number and identifying information will be kept in separate locations. Transcripts will be used for research purposes only. They will be heard and viewed by researchers and students working on this project. We will keep the recordings for 10 years.

If you participate in this study, we would like to be able to quote you directly without using your name. If you agree to allow us to quote you in publications, please initial the statement at the bottom of this form.

**WHOM SHOULD I CONTACT IF I HAVE QUESTIONS?**

You may ask any questions about the research at any time. If you have questions about the research after you leave today you should contact the Principal Investigator Janean Dilworth-Bart at 608-262-9770. You may also call the student researcher, Kyle Miller at 608-262-9770.
If you are not satisfied with the response of the research team, have more questions, or want to talk with someone about your rights as a research participant, you should contact the Education Research and Social & Behavioral Science IRB Office at 608-263-2320.

Your participation is completely voluntary. If you decide not to participate or to withdraw from the study it will have no effect on any services or treatment you are currently receiving.

Your signature indicates that you have read this consent form, had an opportunity to ask any questions about your participation in this research and voluntarily consent to participate. You will receive a copy of this form for your records.

Name of Participant (please print): _______________________________

__________________________________________  ______________

Signature  Date

I give my permission to be quoted directly in publications without using my name.
Appendix D: Instruments

Sociodemographic Form for Mothers

Participant Number ___________

Date ________________

Please answer the following questions about yourself:

My birthday is: __________________ 19 ____________

Race/Ethnicity (check all that apply)

□ African American/Black
□ White (Non-Hispanic)
□ Asian/Pacific Islander
□ Hispanic/Latina
□ Native American
□ Other (please specify): ____________________

Marital Status:

□ Single, never married
□ Married
□ Living with a partner
□ Separated/Divorced
□ Widowed

Highest Education Level Completed:

□ Less than high school
□ Some high school
□ High school graduation/GED
□ Trade school/vocational school
□ Some college
□ BS/BA degree
□ Masters degree
□ MD/PhD/JD degree
□ Other (please specify): __________________________

How many children do you have? _________ How many live in your home? ___________

How old are your children?

Child #1 ________________ (age)  Child #2 ________________  Child #3 ________________
Child #4 ________________  Child #5 ________________  Child #6 ________________
Do you work outside of the home? Yes _____ No _____

If yes, what do you do? ___________________ Hours/week ___________________

What is your yearly household income? __________________

Does your household receive any public assistance? Yes_____ No_____

How many times have you moved in the past year? _____________

Please answer the following questions about your preschool aged child:

My child is a: boy _______ girl _______

Child’s date of birth: ______________________________

Race/Ethnicity of Child (check all that apply):

- □ African American/Black
- □ White (Non-Hispanic)
- □ Asian/Pacific Islander
- □ Hispanic/Latina
- □ Native American
- □ Other (please specify): ___________________

Does your child attend a preschool, early childhood center, day care, or family care setting? Yes ____ No_____

Type: ___________________________

How many hours per week does your child spend at this location? __________________

How long has your child been attending this location? ___________________

Does your child participate in any community activities? Yes _____ No_____

If yes, please check all boxes that apply and report how often:

- □ Church _______________________
- □ Sports/Recreation ___________________
- □ Library _______________________
- □ Museums (e.g., children’s museum) ___________________
- □ Arts-related classes or activities ___________________
- □ Other (please specify): ___________________
Sociodemographic Form for Father

Participant Number _____________

Date _______________

Please complete the following questions. Check as many boxes as apply:

Date of Birth (Father): ____________________________________

Race/Ethnicity (check all that apply)

□ African American/Black
□ White (Non-Hispanic)
□ Asian/Pacific Islander
□ Hispanic/Latina
□ Native American
□ Other (please specify): _____________________

Marital Status:

□ Single, never married
□ Married
□ Living with a partner
□ Separated/Divorced
□ Widowed

Highest Education Level Completed:

□ Less than high school
□ Some high school
□ High school graduation/GED
□ Trade school/vocational school
□ Some college
□ BS/BA degree
□ Masters degree
□ MD/PhD/JD degree
□ Other (please specify): _____________________

What is your relationship to the child in the study? (check all that apply)

□ Biological father
□ Non-biological father
□ Legal guardian
□ Other (please specify): _____________________
What is your living arrangement with the child in the study?

□ Live with child full time
□ Live with child part time
□ Live separately
□ Other (please specify): ________________________________

Do you work outside of the home? Yes _____ No _____

If yes, what do you do? ____________________________  Hours/week ____________________________
Transition to School Interview (Part 1)

Participant Number: __________________

Date: _______________

Introduction: For this interview, I am going to be asking you questions about your child’s activities and thoughts on what he/she needs to know or do for kindergarten.

1. (Child’s name) will be starting school in the fall. What would you like your child to know or be able to do before starting school? (Probe for: specific skills – preacademic, social, emotional, etc.)
   a. Why do you feel these skills are important for school?
   b. Where is your child learning these things? (Probe for: What are you doing? What is your family doing? What is your preschool doing?, How is the community contributing?, etc.)

2. What do you think schools want your child to be able to know or do in order to start school? (Probe for: Where do these ideas come from? – checklists, friends, preschool, older sibling, etc.)

3. How ready do you think your child is for starting school? (Explore how they use the term ‘ready’ – what skills and behaviors do they associate with the term? Is the term linked to their expectations, the schools, or both?)
   a. In what ways do you think your child will do well?
   b. Are there any areas of concern? (Probe for: where do these concerns come from? – experiences in preschool, observed behaviors/interactions, etc.)
School Experience Interview (Part 2)

Participant Number ________________

Date ________________

**Introduction:** Okay, now we are going to shift gears a little bit. For this part of the interview, I am going to ask you to recall memories from your own schooling. Questions will explore both academic and social memories of schooling, as well as memories about your family’s involvement. Your responses do not need to be confined to any certain period, and you can discuss any/all memories from K-12. If you do not feel comfortable answering any of these questions, please just let me know and we will move on to the next one.

1. Can you start by telling me a little bit about the schools you attended when you were growing up?

   Probe for: Where were your schools located (urban, suburban, rural)?

   What type of school did you go to? (public, private, religious, etc.)

   What was the student population like?

   (If transitions between schools are discussed) What was it like to change schools or settings?

2. Can you tell me about what kind of student you were? How would you describe yourself as a student?

3. In general, what was your academic experience like in school?

   Probe for: What kind of relationships did you have with your teachers?

   How well did you do in school (i.e., grades, progression, learning in general)?

   Do you remember areas in which you struggled? Excelled? Can you tell me a little bit more about that?

4. In general, what was your social experience like in school?

   Probe for: Were you involved in any additional activities?

   What do you remember about your peers and/or friends?

5. What do you remember about your parents and your schooling?
Probe for: In what ways were they involved in the schooling process?

What kind of relationship did they have with your school(s) or teachers?

6. Do you know anything about (child’s name)’s father’s experiences in school? Did he have a similar experience or different experience than you described?

7. Based on what you have told me about your own schooling, do you recognize any ways in which your own experiences influence how you are (or think about) preparing your child for school?

   If yes, how so? Can you give me examples?...

   If not, are you influenced in other ways (e.g., people, media, groups/organizations)?
Father Involvement Interview

Participant Number: _____________

Date: ________________

I am going to start by asking you some questions about your life as a father and involvement with your child. If there are any questions you do not feel comfortable answering, just let me know and I can move to the next one.

1. How has becoming a father impacted your life?

2. What does being an involved father mean to you? (probe for: specific activities, financial/time contributions, responsibilities, attendance at certain activities, etc.)

3. In what ways do you view yourself as involved?

4. What kinds of help or support do you get in order to be involved with your child? (probe for: relationship with mother/division of roles, influence of job, support from family members, etc.)

(child’s name) will be starting kindergarten in the next year (or appropriate time reference), I am going to ask you some questions related to (child’s name) beginning school.

5. What do you think your child needs to know, or be able to do, in order to start school?

   What kinds of expectations do you think the school has for your child?

6. Are there ways in which you have helped support these skills or would like to support these skills in the future?

   Can you give me some examples? (e.g., learning-related, preschool involvement, instrumental, etc.)

7. Can you tell me a little bit about your own experiences in school? What were you like as a student? (probe for: academic and social memories/identities, general attitude about experience)

   Can you tell me a little bit about your experiences with your own father (or mother)? What do you remember about your parents’ involvement with your education?

   Do any of your own experiences or memories influence how you think about preparing your child for school?

8. Is there anything else you would like to share with me about (child’s name) and your involvement or (child’s name) being ready for school?
## Appendix E: Definitions and Examples of Themes

### Themes Related to Parental Recollections of Schooling

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Intergenerational</td>
<td>Participant recalls the level of involvement of his or her own family, related to learning, education or schooling.</td>
<td>“My parents were super involved and I plan on doing the same with my kids.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>transitions</td>
<td>Participant reports that a transition (e.g., changing districts, changing schools, graduating to new level) influenced his or her development or school experience.</td>
<td>“I moved around a lot as a kid, which made learning really hard. I want my son to stay in one place and not bounce around.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The social side of school</td>
<td>Participant reports that the social atmosphere or social relationships positively or negatively influenced his or her school experience.</td>
<td>“I was picked on a lot, especially by the girls. I’m already worried about her and the bullying. We’ve started talking about it.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special education</td>
<td>Participant reports that he or she was placed in special education, received a special needs label or was provided an alternative learning program or classroom.</td>
<td>“I had ADD and my teachers thought I was a trouble maker. I don’t want my daughter to be misunderstood. I will make sure of that.”</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

### Themes Related to Parental Constructions of Readiness

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Example</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Disposition</td>
<td>Participant comments on the child’s attitude or excitement toward school or learning.</td>
<td>“He’s excited for kindergarten – so he’s ready.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic skills or knowledge</td>
<td>Participant comments on academic skills that he or she deems important or is currently supporting in preparing the child for kindergarten.</td>
<td>“She needs to know her letters, numbers, shapes...all the basics.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social and emotional skills</td>
<td>Participant mentions the child’s personality traits or interactions with peers as important to the child’s development or readiness for school.</td>
<td>“He needs to be ready to listen to the teacher and follow her rules.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-care and health</td>
<td>Participant comments on her child’s independent self-care (e.g., using the bathroom, washing hands), healthy behaviors, and/or ability to maintain a routine.</td>
<td>“She knows how to use the bathroom and wash her hands.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Familiarity with the school setting</td>
<td>Participant discusses the child’s knowledge of or direct experience with the school environment as an advantage.</td>
<td>“He’s been doing the school thing at preschool, so he knows how it [school] works.”</td>
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</table>

**Themes Related to Preparation in Context**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Example</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Readiness is doing school-like activities</td>
<td>Families document activities that replicate assignments and activities that children do in the school setting.</td>
<td>“We buy him these books that are just like the ones he does in school.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Readiness involves technology</td>
<td>Families document the role of technology in reinforcing important skills or learning</td>
<td>“She knows how to use the computer on her own. She can turn it on and off and knows...”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
how to operate technology. how to use the mouse."

**Readiness is part of everyday activities**

Families document learning that occurs during their natural routine inside or outside of the home.

“Here we are at the grocery store and he learns all about the food and can practice his shapes and colors.”

**Readiness involves the right materials**

Families document purchasing or organizing school supplies with their child.

“He is putting his markers away. He knows this is what he will take with him on the first day of school.”

**Readiness is supported by family and peers**

Families document family members or kin-like individuals that support the child’s activities.

“She is with her sister. Her sister helps her with practicing her letters and numbers and coloring.”

**Readiness relies on the resources of the community**

Families document educational spaces or locations in the community that the child visits.

“We are at the library. We always go for the story hour and then check out books for the week.”