# Mothers' Representations of the Role of Parents and Preschools in Promoting Children's Development

**Jessica Taisey Petrie & Susan D. Holloway**
University of California, Berkeley

## Abstract

This qualitative study investigated mothers' views about their role in their children's education and their expectations of their child's preschool. A particular focus of the study was to contrast the views of mothers with differing degrees of parenting self-efficacy and to contrast the perceptions of working-class and middle-class mothers. In-depth interviews were conducted with eight working-class and eight middle-class mothers of preschool-age children. Most mothers were engaged in home learning activities that promoted academic skills. More working-class mothers than middle-class mothers reported they would not pressure their child to learn academic skills at home. Overall, the mothers viewed preschool primarily as a place for their child to gain social skills, and they put less emphasis on the academic aspects of preschool. While most of the mothers expressed their sense of challenge in providing effective discipline, only the mothers with lower efficacy expected the preschool to provide structure and discipline for their child. Working-class mothers reported more often interacting with the teachers informally in the classroom and in the context of community events organized by the preschool than middle-class mothers. Working-class mothers with low efficacy used the preschool staff as a source of support and advice in their parenting, as well as a source of social interaction, whereas the middle-class mothers relied on other sources of support. Overall, these findings suggest new ways of conceptualizing parent involvement in particular socioeconomic niches.

## Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative project was to better understand how working-class and middle-class mothers of preschool-age children define their role in their children's education relative to the role of the school. This work contributes to the study of parent involvement in three ways. First, it explores women's own perspectives concerning the ways they can support their children's early schooling, and it elicits their expectations about the role of the school. Second, it examines how parenting self-efficacy shapes mothers' views about the behaviors they should engage in with respect to their children's education as well as their expectations of the schools. Third, it illuminates the meanings and interplay of these role-related concepts among working-class and middle-class mothers.

Historically, research exploring the effects of parenting on school achievement has linked family status variables (e.g., income, education, ethnicity, and marital status) to children's achievement without exploring the intervening processes. Until recently, few studies attempted to show how family status was connected to the type of involvement that parents feel they should have in their children's education or the educational resources that children receive (Dornbusch & Glasgow, 1996; Lareau, 1989; Stevenson & Baker, 1987). Researchers are now aware that, taken in isolation, status variables cannot fully explain parents' decisions to become involved in their child's education (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995, 1997). These authors suggest that parents hold specific beliefs and judgments that lead them to make implicit and explicit choices regarding the type of involvement they have in their children's education. These authors also argue that focusing on understanding what enhances and diminishes the influence of parents on child learning outcomes will provide more effective guidance to those who wish to support parents.

In this study, "parent involvement" is defined broadly to include education-related behaviors that mothers engage in at home as well as at the preschool, including providing enrichment activities at home, attending conferences, volunteering at school, and serving on parent-teacher advisory boards (Epstein, 1996; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997). According to Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler's (1997) model of the parent involvement process, parents' decision to become involved is influenced by the way in which they construct the role of parent, their sense of efficacy in the role of parent, and invitations from the child and school to become involved. The present study draws upon two constructs from Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler's model: the beliefs parents have about their role in supporting their child's education and their perceptions of efficacy in doing so.

As defined by Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1995), parental role construction refers to the range of activities that parents deem to be important and appropriate for their actions with and on behalf of their children. Parental role construction is affected by expectations held by parents and those

around them (e.g., family members, friends, and school personnel). For most parents, the role of parent is perceived to include certain actions that support the education process. Parents' actual involvement in their child's schooling occurs when they "activate" their beliefs about education-related activities believed to be an appropriate aspect of the parenting role.

Previous research has shown that parents' role construction in relation to education varies by social class and ethnicity. Some research suggests that working-class parents are more likely than upper-middle-class parents to view the teacher as the appropriate person to handle matters pertaining to education (Lareau, 1989). Less-educated parents may model their own education-related behaviors on the teachers whom they had known as children. For example, Goldenberg, Reese, and Gallimore (1992) found that low-income Mexican American parents who were given storybooks and worksheets to use with their children at home adapted the task in a formal manner consistent with their own schooling. Parents who used the didactic methods they felt comfortable with were found to promote their children's achievement more effectively than those who attempted to use the materials in the informal manner envisioned by the investigators.

While patterns linked to socioeconomic status (SES) have been found in a number of studies, some work also underscores the variation that occurs across parents within a particular social class group. For example, in Holloway et al.'s ethnographic study of low-income ethnically diverse mothers, the women held uniform expectations of the preschool but varied as far as their perceptions of their own role in preparing their children for school (Holloway, Fuller, Rambaud, & Eggers-Piérola, 1997). Some mothers saw fostering academic skills as their responsibility and felt confident in their ability to do so, while others viewed academic activities as the sole responsibility of the school and seemed to lack confidence in their ability to teach their children. The authors argue that various models pertaining to parenting and education circulate within a community and that individual parents actively select a model to construct their role.

Overall, while class and ethnicity may shape parental role construction with regard to education, additional work is needed to shed light on the beliefs and actions of low-income parents and those from ethnic minority groups. Early work on parent involvement tended to conceptualize the construct primarily in terms of parent actions at the school site, and this research typically investigated a rather narrow range of behaviors more common among white middle-class parents. Consistent with many of these early studies, Weiss et al. (2003) found that low-income mothers who were working or attending school full time were less involved in their children's elementary education than other mothers in the traditional ways defined in the previous parent involvement literature. However, the authors also found evidence that the working mothers developed alternative involvement strategies suited to their own circumstances, such as having children come to work after school and holding teacher conferences by telephone or at their place of work. In order to obtain the most accurate picture of parent involvement, the present study examined a diverse array of behaviors that fall under the general category of parent involvement, including those that are less formal and that may be parent initiated rather than school initiated.

Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1997) include parenting efficacy in their model because research has shown that a sense of efficacy for helping children succeed in school appears to be linked to involvement decisions. The construct of self-efficacy refers to "beliefs in one's capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainments" (Bandura, 1997, p. 3). Individuals with high self-efficacy in a particular area exert effort in that area, persevere in the face of difficulty, and respond resiliently to adversity; additionally, they are less prone to self-defeating thought patterns and experience less stress and depression than those with lower self-efficacy. Numerous studies have examined self-efficacy judgments in relation to parenting skills; this work suggests that individuals high in parenting self-efficacy are more optimistic, authoritative, and consistent in their interactions with their children than are those with lower parenting-self efficacy (Ardelt & Eccles, 2001; Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara, & Pastorelli, 1996; Williams et al., 1987).

Parenting self-efficacy has been tied directly to parent involvement in children's education. Studies have shown that parenting self-efficacy beliefs influence whether mothers engage in home learning activities. Parents who view themselves as efficacious and having a "teaching role" tend to become more involved in cognitive activities with their children at home than those who do not see teaching

as part of their role as a parent (Grolnick, Benjet, Kurowski, & Apostoleris, 1997; Machida, Taylor, & Kim, 2002). Hoover-Dempsey, Bassler, and Brissie (1992) found that high parent self-efficacy was associated with greater parent involvement in their children's classrooms, as well as in home learning activities.

In her comparison of working-class and professional parents, Lareau (1989) drew a connection between parents' role construction, self-efficacy, and involvement in their children's schooling. She found that working-class parents viewed home and school as separate entities, while upper-middle-class parents saw the two institutions as interconnected and mutually reinforcing. While the working-class as well as the middle-class parents valued education and shared a desire for their children to succeed, the working-class parents lacked confidence in assessing their children's needs and were reluctant to confront school staff. They made fewer demands on the school and were less likely to customize their children's school experience.

## Study Overview

The present analysis draws upon 16 in-depth interviews that explored mothers' perceptions of their parenting self-efficacy, their views of their own parenting (style, consistency, and effectiveness), and their confidence in interacting with their child's school. Mothers were chosen as participants because many studies find that mothers are the parents most closely involved in children's education (Eccles & Harold, 1996; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997; Redmond, Spoth, & Trudeau, 2002).

The following overarching descriptive questions guided the interview: (1) What types of learning activities do mothers report doing with their children at home? (2) What are mothers' expectations of the preschool? (3) In what ways do mothers become involved in the preschool? The analysis also posed two comparative questions in regard to each of these three areas: (1) How do mothers with less parenting self-efficacy compare with those with higher efficacy in their perceptions about parent involvement? (2) How do working-class and middle-class mothers compare in terms of their perceptions of parent involvement?

## Method

### Sample

The data reviewed in this study are part of a larger, ongoing longitudinal study. To recruit participants for the larger study, directors of 21 public preschools in the San Francisco area were contacted and asked if they were willing to share information about the research project with mothers whose children attended their preschool. The directors distributed information about the study to all mothers with children in the final year of preschool. Mothers who were interested in participating were given a survey to fill out at home and return by mail to the researchers. The survey asked mothers whether they were willing to be contacted for an interview. The survey packet also contained a consent form. Thirty-six percent of eligible mothers completed the survey. From the pool of 185 surveys, 16 women were selected to be interviewed based on their survey responses in the following areas: maternal parenting self-efficacy, ethnicity, education level, and household income. The objective was to obtain a sample of white mothers stratified according to SES and parenting self-efficacy. Approximately 80% of those contacted agreed to be interviewed.

### Measures

*Survey.* The survey was used to obtain a purposive sample of interviewees who varied along the dimensions of parenting self-efficacy and social class background.

The parenting strategy self-efficacy scale was designed by the authors to elicit self-evaluations related to specific parenting behaviors relevant to the preschool-age child. We decided against using existing scales because they are not tailored to the age group of interest and tend to be more global than behavior specific (Coleman & Karraker, 1998). In order to identify items that described elements of parenting relevant to parents of preschool-age children, we examined existing parent surveys and

consulted an advisory panel of child development experts (teachers, parent education specialists, and university researchers) about child-rearing issues of importance to parents in the early elementary years. The 10-item scale resulting from this process assessed mothers' perceptions of competence across a variety of parenting behaviors, following Bandura's (1989) recommendation that scale items be tightly tied to a specific domain. The items elicited mothers' sense of parenting self-efficacy in engaging in certain behaviors with or toward the child (e.g., "How confident do you feel in understanding your child's feelings?" See the appendix for items). A 6-point response scale was used, where 1 indicated *not at all confident* and 6 indicated *very confident*.

In order to identify a mother's level of parenting self-efficacy, we computed the average of her responses on the 10-item scale. The average maternal strategy efficacy score for the full sample of 185 women was 5.1, *SD*= .53. A sample of 16 mothers was selected whose self-efficacy scores represented the sample range from relatively low (4.0) to high (6.0) (see Table 1).

**Table 1**

Sample Demographics*

| **Working Class Household Income $20,000 to $40,000** | | | | | | **Middle Class Household Income $80,000 to $200,000** | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Pseudonym** | **Age Group** | **Maternal Efficacy Score** | **Education Level** | **Job Related** | **Ethnicity** | **Pseudonym** | **Age Group** | **Maternal Efficacy Score** | **Education Level** | **Job Related** | **Ethnicity** |
| Angela | 30s | 4.2 | Some College | Waitress *Full time* | Caucasian | Robin | 30s | 4.0 | BA | Sales Rep. *Full time* | Caucasian |
| Amanda | 20s | 4.4 | High School | Photographer *Full time* | Caucasian | Nancy | 30s | 4.5 | BA | *Not working* | Caucasian |
| Lauren | 40s | 4.9 | BA | Office Assistant *Full time* | Caucasian | Stephanie | 30s | 4.6 | BA | Banking/ Sales *Full time* | Caucasian |
| Margaret | 40s | 5.1 | BA | Treasury Complaint Filer *Full time* | Caucasian | Mary | 30s | 4.7 | BA | *Not working* | Caucasian |
| Valerie | 20s | 5.1 | AA | Med. Files Keeper *Full time* | Latina | Maureen | 30s | 4.7 | High School | Accountant *Full time* | Caucasian |
| Patty | 40s | 5.3 | Trade | Court Reporter *Full time* | Caucasian | Jen | 30s | 4.8 | BA | *Not working* | Caucasian |
| Maria | 30s | 5.4 | Some College | Personal Assistant *Full time* | Latina | Ellen | 30s | 5.8 | BA | *Not working* | Caucasian |
| Liz | 20s | 6 | High School | Pilates Trainer *Full time* | Caucasian | Sasha | 30s | 5.9 | BA | Decorator *Part time* | Caucasian |

*Ordered according to maternal efficacy score.

To identify equal numbers of working-class and middle-class mothers, household income, employment status, and education were considered. Working-class mothers were identified on the basis of their family income (below $40,000 a year), education level (mostly less than a bachelor's degree), and/or nonmanagerial work position (e.g., waitress, administrative assistant, exercise trainer). Middle-class mothers were identified based on having a higher household income (above $80,000 a year), a higher level of education (all but one had a bachelor's degree), and a managerial or professional job (e.g., sales manager, accountant, interior decorator).

*Interview*. This analysis is based on interview questions that addressed three interrelated parent beliefs areas: perceived efficacy, role construction, and expectations of the preschool. The interview also elicited mothers' views about their own parenting (style, consistency, and effectiveness) and their level of interaction with the schools. The interviews lasted from one to two hours and were conducted in a place chosen by the mothers. The interviews were conducted by a trained female interviewer. All interviews were tape recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim by the graduate student interviewers. Shortly after each interview, field notes were completed on the experience, in which the interviewer noted her overall impression of the interview, described the mothers' affect during the interview, and identified the themes that appeared to be most important to the mother. These notes helped to generate codes for the analytic work and helped to provide a context for interpreting the transcripts.

*Qualitative Analysis.* The interviews were analyzed by the authors, and check-coding was performed by a graduate student volunteer. Analysis of the interview data started with developing a coding glossary that included a definition of the codes and rules on when to apply them (MacQueen, McLellan, Kay, & Milstein, 1998). The purpose of the coding was to tag sections of the transcript that pertained to the major themes of the study. Based upon the parent involvement literature, as well as the field notes generated during the interview process, we developed a set of a priori, low-inference codes pertaining to role construction, hopes and goals, worries about child outcomes, self-efficacy (positive and negative self-analysis), problem solving, mother-child relations, description of child, role of father, marriage, family environment, support relationships, expectations of preschool, school involvement, and child's school experience. All 16 transcripts were coded using a qualitative data analysis software package, thereby enabling us to identify and retrieve all passages relating to each of the focal themes.

Check-coding was used to establish reliability to confirm coding consistency. Check-coding relies upon two individuals coding the same data set and obtaining a measure of reliability consisting of the number of coding agreements divided by the total number of agreements plus disagreements (Miles & Huberman, 1994). A volunteer was recruited to learn the coding system and recode five interviews. The check-coding process resulted in a reliability coefficient of .79. Individual code reliabilities ranged from .69 to .92.

We then developed a case summary model for each respondent that included her perceptions regarding parenting self-efficacy, parent role construction beliefs, school expectations, home activities, and school involvement. The last step of the analysis involved building case-ordered matrices by reordering the case summaries into groups based on SES and parenting self-efficacy (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

# Results

## What Types of Learning Activities Do Mothers Engage in with Their Children at Home?

When asked questions about the mother-child relationship and day-to-day activities in the home context, mothers reported engaging in a wide variety of learning activities. Mothers talked most frequently about engaging in activities related to the development of children's academic skills. All mothers mentioned reading to their children almost daily, and most of them reported frequenting the library on a regular basis.

There did not appear to be any relation between mothers' level of parenting self-efficacy and the nature of the activities that mothers engaged in with their children at home. However, there were differences in the way the working-class and middle-class mothers talked about the activities.

One difference was that working-class mothers expressed a desire to maintain their children's long-term interest in learning and were concerned that premature introduction of formal academic work would undermine this goal. Four of the working-class mothers specified that they didn't want to push academic skills on their preschoolers. For example, Amanda felt that her daughter would lose her interest if she were "forced" to learn:

> My friend's daughter ... knows how to write the whole alphabet and her name and everything, because they do it with her like, you know, almost everyday. [Now she is] at the point she doesn't want to do it any more.... I tried sitting down with Eliza ... but she's not ready and I'm not going to force her to, because I don't want her to be tired of it like her [friend's] daughter is. Like, you can't, you don't want them to be too smart too early 'cause then they are just going to be like "I don't want to do it any more."

By comparison, the academic experiences that the middle-class mothers described providing at home were more structured than those of the working-class mothers. For example, four mothers reported buying educational materials and setting aside a specific time for learning activities. Ellen, a middle-class mother, used the terms "work" and "project" to describe the activities she provided for her son: "A lot of times we'd work on some, uh, numbers and letters or coloring or an art project." Stephanie tied home activities to the school's curriculum:

> A lot of the books [at home] are educational, and I get 'em on the different topics they've been studying at school. Space and dinosaurs and whatever—you know those kinds of things too. And then the computer games—I get phonics based or educational.

In addition to engaging in academic learning activities, mothers also mentioned learning activities related to the acquisition of social and emotional skills as well as personal habits related to hygiene and nutrition. The social and emotional skills activities included getting along with peers, acquiring family values, becoming aware of the consequences of certain actions, and being independent. Those pertaining to personal habits were manners,developing good hygiene practices, and developing good eating practices. There did not appear to be any salient SES differences in the way that the nonacademic activities were approached by these mothers.

## What Are Mothers' Expectations of What Their Child Will Learn in Preschool?

Almost all of the mothers who talked about their expectations viewed the preschool as a place where their child would develop social skills. For most mothers, this meant getting along with other children and making friends. Patty, a working-class mother, explained the social aspect of preschool in the following manner:

> He's really good socially; he knows how to make friends. He's not, you know, he can just go up to any group—girls, boys—and involve everybody in some interesting project, and everybody likes him.

The second type of expectation of the preschool held by 47% of mothers was "discipline" and "structure" related. Mothers who held this type of expectation hoped their child would benefit from the school's use of consistent practices related to socialization. Angela, a working-class mother, explained that preschool "is helping mom with the discipline aspect of things. I think the, consistency of schedule; there is a whole plethora of things."

Only 30% of the mothers had expectations related to the development of academic skills. Within the academic category, they hoped the school would help their children learn such skills as number and letter recognition and how to write their names. Thus, for most of the mothers, the preschool was not seen as introducing the child to new academic skills; rather, the child's school experiences were seen as reinforcing the skills that were being acquired at home. Jen, a middle-class mother, was teaching her son to read and believed that the school staff did little to advance the skills he had acquired. Initially uneasy with the school's lack of academic emphasis, she concluded: "This is preschool, and you know, and they are definitely, you know, play based.... So I thought, you know, I'm just going to let it ride, and you know we do our things at home."

In addition to discussing their expectations concerning what the child would learn from being in preschool, some mothers mentioned another important function of the preschool—providing support to the mother herself. The working-class mothers with lower efficacy who expected the preschool to provide appropriate discipline and structure also looked to the teachers for support in their parenting. Angela—who worked nights and who found it difficult to get her daughter to school on time—

indicated that she had sought advice on this problem from her child's teacher:

> I discussed it with one teacher, there is always a strict one in the bunch, the one you tend to not like, but really they are the ones looking out for you. I approached [her] to say, "You know I need to work on this." She said, at least I knew what I need to do,... now it's just a matter of doing it [laugh]. And again it's consistency. And it's up to me to do that and that's one of the biggest challenges [of being a mother].

Another working-class mother with low efficacy who reported having a hard time "controlling her daughter" at home used the strategy of observing the teachers rather than getting direct advice:

> I just observed ... and ... I picked up that the teachers are being trained on certain ways of handling situations.... They talked very respectfully to the children and in a calm way, and I think that's what's important.... So I think it's good and I try, actually I try to follow what they do.

In contrast, the mothers with higher efficacy did not expect the school to help them with their discipline problems. Valerie talked about discipline in the following manner:

> So I don't discipline her so much as walk her through it so that she's not upset.... Um, there are times when I'm just too tired, I don't know if that is bad?... I know that if it's something serious that I have to discipline her about I will. But if it's something that, the next time she does it I'll tell her, I just kind of let it go because it's just not worth the tantrum.

Regardless of their efficacy level, none of the middle-class mothers seemed to look to the teachers for parenting support. Some of the middle-class mothers with low efficacy indicated that they respected the work of the teachers and did not want to interfere with classroom activities or take them away from the children. Thus, their perceptions of the teacher's professional role seemed to stand in the way of establishing contact and obtaining advice.

## In What Ways Do Mothers Become Involved in the Preschool?

The 16 mothers in this sample reported being involved in the preschool in the following four ways: (1) *frequentinformal parent-teacher interactions,* in which parents interacted casually with the teachers while at school, including spending time in the classroom; (2) *schoolwide involvement,* in which parents attended parent association and school board meetings, served on planning committees, participated in schoolwide events, and supported the school financially; (3) *parent-initiated meetings,* in which the parents asked to meet with the director and teachers to address classroom issues, to make sure their child's needs were being met, or to request help solving problems; and (4) *occasional school visits* (mainly formal conferences), in which mothers reported not wanting to disturb the teachers and described attending routinely scheduled parent-teacher conferences.

Analysis of mothers' involvement patterns revealed trends related to social class and parenting self-efficacy (see Table 2). Six mothers (five working class and one middle class) said that they frequently paid informal visits to the classroom. They mentioned that they usually spent time daily assisting their child to make the transition to school or checking in with the teacher. The following quote from Lauren highlights her perception of these informal visits: "I kind of was this piece of the furniture; it became, like two of three days of the week I'd sit there and I didn't eat [breakfast] but I'd sit next to Zack and I'd get to know all the other kids." Lauren also used the time to get to know her son's teachers: "If I'm the one that picks him up, I hang out and visit with the teachers."

**Table 2**

Preschool Involvement Patterns Related to Parenting Self-Efficacy and Social Class

| | | | Frequent Informal Parent- | | Parent- | Occasional School Visits (mainly |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|

| Efficacy Level | Social Class | Mother's Pseudonym | Teacher Interactions | Schoolwide Involvement | Initiated Meetings | formal conferences) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Lower Efficacy | Working Class | Angela | X | X | X | |
| | | Lauren | X | X | | |
| | | Margaret | X | X | | |
| | | Amanda | X | | X | |
| | Middle Class | Nancy | | | X | X |
| | | Stephanie | | X | | |
| | | Maureen | | | | X |
| | | Robin | | | | X |
| Higher Efficacy | Working Class | Patty | | | X | X |
| | | Maria | | X | | X |
| | | Liz | | X | | X |
| | | Valerie | X | | | |
| | Middle Class | Jen | | | X | X |
| | | Sasha | | X | | |
| | | Mary | X | | | |
| | | Ellen | | | | X |

The eight mothers in the "occasional school visits (mainly formal conferences)" category, five middle class and three working class, maintained that they tended to not enter the classroom and did not want to disturb the teacher or infringe on her authority. For example, Maureen, a middle-class mother, said:

> [With the preschool] I feel like, even though I want to volunteer ... I feel like, once she's passed the door, she's on her own, and she needs the teachers to tell her what to do. You know what I mean? She needs the teachers to ... they gotta be the ones, they're gonna be the ones to tell her what to do.

Examination of the number of different patterns that each woman reported engaging in revealed that the working-class mothers with lower efficacy were involved in the preschool in more ways than the middle-class mothers. In contrast to the traditional type of volunteer activities, these mothers were less likely to emphasize the formal interactions they had with the teacher, and they were more likely to engage in informal exchanges during the course of dropping off and picking up their children. They were also more involved in schoolwide activities (five working-class mothers and two middle-class mothers).

One factor that may have shaped the involvement of working-class mothers with low efficacy was the support seeking discussed in the previous section. A second factor that seemed to shape the type of interactions the working-class mothers with low efficacy sought at the preschool was a sense of isolation. Margaret described her hope that the preschool would be an opportunity to interact and exchange information with other mothers as well as the teachers:

> Because of differing schedules and stuff we're slowly, you know, [seeing friends] less and less.... We are slowly developing relationships with people from school and um that's all that we really have time to do.... The silent auction potluck family picnic was a lot of fun. That was really good. I—I really hope that there is more involvement like that because um it brings everybody together. You know, you get to see other people.

In contrast, the majority of middle-class mothers with low efficacy made infrequent visits to the classroom, and their main form of school involvement was formal school-initiated conferences. As mentioned above, some of the middle-class mothers indicated that they did not want to interfere with

classroom activities or take the teachers away from the children. The middle-class mothers also appeared to have established other types of social connections and sources of support unrelated to the preschool. They described participating in a variety of informal and somewhat more formal activities where they could interact with other parents and their children; for example, five of these mothers had participated in parenting seminars, and five of them talked about arranging and hosting play dates for their children. The working-class mothers with higher efficacy (Liz, Patty, and Maria) were also in the lower involvement category. Like their middle-class counterparts, they did not express a need for support by the teacher or a desire for social interaction—the reasons cited by the working-class mothers with lower efficacy for their frequent classroom visits.

## Discussion

Many quantitative studies have linked levels of parent involvement to family socioeconomic status. Compared to their middle-class counterparts, working-class parents are often found to engage in fewer of the parent involvement activities that teachers value and define as helpful (Lareau, 1989; Stevenson & Baker, 1987; Weiss et al., 2003). In contrast to the somewhat negative portrait that emerges of working-class parents in this early work, this qualitative study provides a complex picture of parent involvement that contradicts this stereotypical view in some important respects.

The first question addressed in this study asked what types of learning activities mothers engaged in at home. The analysis revealed that most mothers were engaged in home learning activities that promoted academic skills. More working-class mothers than middle-class mothers reported they would not pressure their child to learn academic skills at home. By comparison, the middle-class mothers tended to take a more formal approach to learning, linking it with the school curriculum. The finding that working-class mothers were reluctant to pressure their children in home academic activities was somewhat unexpected given that previous studies have tended to find that working-class mothers take a more structured approach to learning than middle-class mothers (Holloway, Fuller, Rambaud, & Eggers-Piérola, 1997; Stipek, Milburn, Clements, & Daniels, 1992).

It is possible that sociocultural changes are creating a reversal of the patterns that have been observed in earlier studies. The literature suggests that some working-class parents lack skills and knowledge of developmentally appropriate activities to do with their children (Joffe, 1977; Holloway, Fuller, Rambaud, & Eggers-Piérola, 1997). Our data suggest that these working-class parents are aware of what other parents do to prepare their children for school but are worried that their children may develop a dislike for school if they are pressured to engage in learning activities. This finding may represent a change in this group of parents that may have been brought to the fore by the increased focus on developmentally appropriate practice in early childhood education.

The second question focused on mothers' expectations for what their child would gain from attending preschool. Overall, the mothers viewed preschool as a place where their child would gain social skills, and they put less emphasis on academic aspects of preschool. An additional theme that emerged pertained to mothers' expectations of receiving support from teachers in addressing their concerns about discipline. Mothers with lower efficacy expected the preschool to provide structure and discipline for their child. They also used the preschool staff as a source of support and advice in their parenting, whereas the middle-class mothers relied on other sources of support.

The less-efficacious mothers in this sample somewhat resembled those described in the work of Wells-Parker, Miller, and Topping (1990), in that they took the seemingly "passive" coping approach of expecting the preschool to provide discipline and structure for their child. However, upon closer analysis, it became apparent that the low-efficacy working-class mothers' method of coping with the problem was not passive in the sense that they actively solicited support from the teachers. To the extent that they were seeking new strategies for interacting with their children, they could be seen as moving in the direction of higher efficacy. In that sense, they resemble the mothers with high efficacy described by Donovan, Leavitt, and Walsh (1990), who tended to interpret difficulty as a challenge that necessitated greater effort and application of their skills in creative ways.

This analysis suggests that there may be formative periods in the development and maintenance of maternal parenting efficacy. At this point in their development as a parent, these mothers are just beginning to experience the role of parenting a school-age child. Periods of transition where mothers

are developing task-specific efficacy are not addressed in the literature. However, the notion of "formative efficacy" aligns with Bandura's (1995) belief that efficacy is changeable. Future work should investigate the notion of formative levels of efficacy in relation to parenting. Specifically, when are the key periods in which self-efficacy forms regarding parenting activities and school involvement? How could this nascent sense of efficacy be best supported by teachers and other professionals?

Future research should also investigate how the amount of social support available to mothers affects their self-efficacy and relationship with staff at their child's school. The working-class mothers in this sample talked about feeling isolated and viewed the preschool as a context for interacting with other mothers. Future studies can establish the prevalence of these social class patterns and continue to examine the way that different forms of social support operate in various socioeconomic groups.

The third question pertained to the types of involvement that parents sought with the preschool. We found that working-class mothers sought opportunities for informal interactions with the teachers, both in the classroom and in the context of schoolwide events. Similar to the study by Weiss et al. (2003), we found that mothers are involved in the preschool in ways not widely acknowledged in the parent involvement literature. The finding that working-class mothers frequently visited the classroom to interact with the teachers was somewhat unexpected given studies indicating that parent involvement in K-12 schooling is more common among middle-class parents (Lareau, 1989). The working-class parents in this study seemed to have a more connected view of the home and school than those described by Lareau (1989), for whom home and school were separate spheres. This may be because Lareau studied elementary school children, which, compared to preschool, may afford fewer opportunities for informal interactions in the classroom and with the teacher.

Due to the small sample size, the results of this study should be considered to be preliminary and should be interpreted with caution. Furthermore, there is a potential response bias in selecting the mothers who indicated a willingness to be contacted for an interview. As with any qualitative research based on a small sample, generalizations cannot be made to the population from which it was drawn. It should also be underscored that for this sample the mothers with lowest efficacy had scores of 4 on a 6-point scale. This ceiling effect may reflect a social desirability bias or may indicate that the scale was not sufficiently sensitive to detect a greater variability among mothers.

The findings from this study provide a number of implications for practice. The fact that many parents are highly motivated to engage in learning activities at home suggests that teachers should encourage parents' initial forms of educational involvement by responding with age- and context-appropriate ideas of things mothers could do to support their child's development and complement the school experience. In providing these suggestions, teachers should be alert to working-class parents' concerns that their children may develop a dislike for school if they are pressured to engage in learning activities. Teachers may demonstrate their awareness of this issue by helping parents understand what motivates children to learn and strategies for helping them maintain an intrinsic interest in learning.

The parents in this study reported that they expected the school to provide social experiences more than learning per se. Some parents may not be aware of the opportunities for learning that are embedded in a play-oriented curriculum. Teachers can help parents by explaining the learning goals that are fostered by classroom activities. The tendency of the mothers in this sample to view preschool as providing social rather than cognitive experiences puts them somewhat at odds with current pressure to introduce more formal academic content at the preschool level (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2005). To the extent that teachers incorporate academic material in their curriculum, they will need to be prepared to help parents understand how and why this is being done.

This study also suggests that parents may seek involvement and support from teachers in a variety of ways. Teachers can remain cognizant that working-class parents may take advantage of informal interactions to get suggestions and advice from teachers, rather than relying on formal meetings. Teacher education programs can help preservice teachers learn how to make the most of these informal opportunities. Furthermore, preschools could schedule more time in the morning and evening for these informal information-gathering interactions.

Since parent involvement tends to decrease as children get older (Eccles & Harold, 1996; Stone,

2003), the early years provide the best opportunity to form a good working partnership between parents and the school. As Eccles and Harold (1996) suggest, the degree to which schools encourage parent effort affects the attitudes that parents form about schools. Learning more about the areas in which mothers feel confident and those where they lack confidence is key to understanding and supporting their parent involvement efforts.

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## Author Information

Jessica Taisey Petrie is a Ph.D. candidate in Human Development at the University of California, Berkeley's Graduate School of Education. She is currently finishing a dissertation on the parental beliefs and life context factors that affect mothers' confidence levels in their ability to promote social and academic outcomes in their preschool-age children. She is interested in the field of early childhood education, especially family processes and language and literacy development.

Susan D. Holloway is a faculty member in the School of Education at the University of California, Berkeley. She is interested in the socialization and education of young children, and her work focuses particularly on how parental beliefs and practices occur in the context of culture, ethnicity, and social class.

Susan D. Holloway
4309 Tolman Hall
Graduate School of Education
University of California
Berkeley, CA 94720-1670
Telephone: 510-642-4201
Fax: 510-642-3555
Email: s_hollo@berkeley.edu

## Appendix

# Parenting Strategy Self-Efficacy Scale

"How confident do you feel in doing the following?"

1. Letting your child know you love him/her
2. Praising your child when he/she does well
3. Explaining things so that your child will understand
4. Setting a good example by being polite
5. Listening to your child
6. Disciplining your child firmly when he/she misbehaves
7. Understanding your child's feelings
8. Creating a calm peaceful home
9. Controlling your emotions in front of your child
10. Avoiding over reacting when your child misbehaves