

# Maternal Recollections of Schooling and Children's School Preparation

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## Abstract

Parents are the primary managers of children's development during their early years and greatly influence how children are primed for school. Therefore, understanding children's school preparation should involve appreciation for the unique developmental histories and perspectives that parents bring to the relationship with the child, with the teacher, and with the school. The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore mothers' memories of their own schooling and how those memories currently influence their behaviors in preparing their children for school. Forty mothers with preschool-aged children participated in a semistructured interview on their school-related histories. Analyses of the interviews revealed four themes related to mothers' own memories as the most meaningful in guiding their behaviors in preparing their own children for school: (1) intergenerational influences, reflecting how they, themselves, were primed for and supported through school, (2) transitions between school settings or grade levels as sensitive periods, (3) school settings, including characteristics of schools they attended and goodness of fit, and (4) diversity, particularly lack of diversity or an appreciation of diversity in their own schooling. Findings underscore the importance of understanding parents' educational histories in order to better understand children and highlights the types of memories that may be most lasting and influential for mothers as they prepare their children for school. We discuss implications for educators to strengthen family connections, as well as implications for future research.

**Key Words:** school experience, academic socialization, intergenerational influences, transitions, family–school connections, mothers, family, preschool, kindergarten, memory, memories, readiness

## **Introduction**

Children's school readiness has gained significant attention at both national and local levels. In attending to this issue, there is growing interest in the role of the family, and how the family may promote or hinder early school success for children (Barbarin et al., 2008; Pelletier & Brent, 2002; Ricciuti, 1999). Although there is limited research on parents' own memories of school, the way parents remember their own school experiences may influence the way in which they think about their children's schooling and the learning-related behaviors they engage in with their children (Barnett & Taylor, 2009; Taylor, Clayton, & Rowley, 2004). This study explores maternal recollections of schooling and how memories influence mothers' thoughts and behaviors in preparing and supporting their children in school. Connecting parents' stories to their cognitions and behaviors as they prepare their children for school helps strengthen our understanding of parents' learning-related involvement. Findings from this study amplify the importance of understanding parents' educational histories to better understand students and their home environments. Our findings also highlight the types of memories that may be most lasting and influential for mothers as they prepare their children for school.

The transition to kindergarten is an influential developmental period, as patterns of achievement and behavior presented in the early school years can profoundly impact children's developmental trajectories for school success or failure (Pianta, Cox, Taylor, & Early, 1999). This period of change, for both children and their families, requires significant support in order to prevent negative outcomes (McAllister, Wilson, Green, & Baldwin, 2005; McIntyre, Eckert, Fiese, DiGennaro, & Wildenger, 2007; Pianta & Walsh, 1996). School transitions take place in an environment driven by transactions between the child, school, classroom, family, and community (Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000). Preparing children to be successful in school requires an understanding of the processes that may influence parental behaviors and successful transition practices. Parents' activities to prepare children for schooling may themselves be embedded in the parents' own development and experiences (Taylor et al., 2004). Therefore, an exploration of children's school preparation should involve exploring the unique developmental histories and perspectives the parents bring to their relationships both with their child and with school staff.

Understanding how parents conceptualize their own school experiences may enrich our understanding of parental cognitions about schooling and their learning-related engagement with their children. This understanding is critical for practitioners, given that parents are the primary managers of their children's environment and are responsible for children's learning outside of school (Machida, Taylor, & Kim, 2002; Mapp, 2003). Establishing a junction between recollections and parenting practices may enhance conceptual models of in-home learning and parental school involvement, ultimately highlighting important targets for interventions aimed at maximizing the positive contributions that parents make to children's school readiness and general school success (Barnett & Taylor, 2009). In this study, we explored how mothers' personal, social, and academic experiences in school influence their thoughts and actions about their children's future schooling.

Bronfenbrenner (1986) believed that children should be viewed within the complex systems of their changing environments. Children's development, as well as family development, is shaped by the extended family, religious community, school, friends, organizations, government, and culture. It is the interaction of these various systems that influence family processes. Children's learning takes place reciprocally with other individuals and within a social context; therefore, many scholars endorse that school readiness may be best understood through an ecological perspective (Kohl, Lengua, & McMahon, 2000; Machida et al., 2002; Pelletier & Brent, 2002; Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000; Taylor et al., 2004). By using an ecological approach to investigate parents' ideas, beliefs, and perspectives about school readiness, we are able to appropriately incorporate the influences of social, economic, and political factors that shape experiences of "readying" children for school (McAllister et al., 2005). Taylor et al. (2004) proposed a conceptual model of academic socialization and achievement, which supports the central ideas of ecological theory and suggests that children's socialization evolves under the broader context of socioeconomic and cultural contexts. This model extends our understanding of child development by emphasizing how parents' school experiences shape their beliefs about schooling and their academic socialization practices.

As adults recount their childhood experiences, their stories are exposed by way of their own interpretations, and the events selected for sharing are ones that they have come to see as formative in their lives (Lapadat, 2004). Memories do not constitute precise truth, but a type of personal truth upon which belief systems and daily actions are built, and they provide an abundance of insight into the factors that contribute to parental behaviors (Rothenberg, 1994). It is suggested that memories of childhood experiences in school are reactivated as parents prepare their own children for similar experiences (Taylor et

al., 2004). Parents' recollections of schooling contribute to the formation of a more general attitude towards education and children's learning (Raty, 2007); in fact, impressions of those school experiences may be more influential than the details of the actual experiences.

Thinking about children's academic socialization in terms of intergenerational influences provides a way to consider parents' developmental histories and their current behaviors. Parents describe how their own parents' level of participation in their education was a major influence on why and how they were involved in their children's educational development (Mapp, 2003; Taylor et al., 2004). Mapp's (2003) research on school-family partnerships looked at *how* and *why* parents were involved in their children's education. Eighteen actively involved parents participated in interviews as part of the study, and many reported that their own experiences and history influenced their level of involvement. The amounts and ways in which their own parents were involved in their learning influenced their own drive to be involved, and in some cases, the way they chose to be active. This finding suggests that working with today's parents on how they can assist in their children's academic development may have long-range effects: How parents are involved today creates a model for how their own children will be involved in the future.

Barnett and Taylor (2009) also found intergenerational influences quite striking in their work using structured interviews with 76 mothers of a diverse sample whose children were approaching kindergarten age. They concluded that mothers who recalled school involvement on the part of their parents more positively reported engaging in academic transition activities with their own children, even after controlling for income and current self-esteem and self-efficacy. The authors propose that positive recollections of schooling could support the notion of intergenerational continuities in education. They also suggest that parents' own experiences in school 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 past experiences and therefore feel less confident in engaging with schools. Pianta and colleagues (1999) suggest that contextual factors, such as neighborhood poverty level and family ethnicity, may influence transitions into the school setting and simultaneously lay the foundation for future family-school relationships.

Researchers repeatedly spotlight the importance of high quality family-school connections in optimizing outcomes for children (Castro, Bryant, Peisner-Feinberg, & Skinner, 2004; Hill & Taylor, 2004; McCarthey, 2000).

In a school community, this requires addressing barriers that obstruct the process of communication and coordination efforts between the home and school (Christenson, 2003). It also requires schools to acknowledge that all children and families are different, and outreach must be sensitive to context-specific issues and flexible (Kohl et al., 2000). Families bring unique backgrounds and experiences that need to be acknowledged in forming and sustaining these fundamental relationships.

## **Purpose**

Parents' internal working models of school result from personal school recollections, their attitudes, values, and beliefs about school. These internal models of school, in turn, impact parents' academic involvement, as well as their satisfaction with their children's school (Mapp, 2003; Raty, 2007; Taylor et al., 2004). The purpose of this study was to explore maternal recollections of schooling and to identify main themes that inform mothers' thoughts and practices on preparing their children for school entry. The guiding questions were (1) What do mothers remember about their experiences across their primary and secondary school years? and (2) How do recollections of schooling influence how mothers think about preparing their children for school? By employing an ecological perspective, as well as a conceptual model of academic socialization (Bronfenbrenner, 1986; Taylor et al., 2004), we considered how the experiences of one generation may influence the next, with a concentration on school preparation within the family unit. This theory and model support the interconnectedness of lives between parents and their children in preparing for school.

We aimed to identify the most robust themes across school memories to gain insight into how they may contribute to maternal cognitions about school, learning-related activities, and children's preparation for formal education. Unlike previous research in the area, our approach was to step away from a dichotomization of experiences as simply positive or negative. Instead, we uniquely explored deeper descriptions of schooling, emotions that mothers assign to these experiences, and how their past recollections inform how they think about their children's school beginnings.

## **Methods**

### **Sample**

Data for this student-led project were collected as part of a larger university-funded study of maternal and home environment predictors of neurocognitive

development and school readiness ( $n = 48$ ; Dilworth-Bart, PI). Participants were recruited in a small Midwestern city through child care providers, mailings, community centers, and local events. The sample consisted of 40 mothers of children aged 4½ to 5½ years old. The age of mothers ranged from 23 to 50 ( $M = 35.27$ ,  $SD = 7.33$ ), with reported household incomes from \$0–\$200,000 ( $M = \$59,690$ ,  $SD = \$44,740$ ). A large portion reported their highest education level to be a college degree (42.5%), with fewer reporting some college (17.5%), a graduate degree (12.5%), high school completion (10%), less than high school (2.5%), vocational training (12.5%), and other (2.5%). Most mothers identified as White/European American (70%), and fewer identified as African American (22.5%) or Multiracial (7.5%). A complete summary of mother characteristics is offered in Table 1.

Table 1. Sample Characteristics ( $N = 40$ )

Variable	Frequency	%	Mean (SD)	Range
Mother age (years)			35.27 (7.331)	23–50
Household income			\$59,690 (\$44,740)	\$0–\$200,000
Mother education				
Less than high school	1	2.5%		
High school/GED	4	10.0%		
Trade/Vocational school	5	12.5%		
Some college	7	17.5%		
BA/BS	17	42.5%		
Graduate degree	5	12.5%		
Other - AA degree	1	2.5%		
Mother race/ethnicity				
Black/African American	9	22.5%		
White/European American	28	70.0%		
Biracial/Multiracial	3	7.5%		
Mother marital status				
Single/Never married	7	17.5%		
Married	30	75.0%		
Living with a partner	3	7.5%		

### Procedure

This study was conducted in collaboration between a graduate student (Miller) and a faculty mentor (Dilworth-Bart). Although the larger study used both qualitative and quantitative approaches to investigate parenting behaviors and

child outcomes, we used a qualitative research design and thematic approach to investigate maternal responses to a one-on-one, semistructured interview. Two doctoral-level graduate students administered the interviews at the beginning of a home visit protocol. Mothers were asked to explore both academic and social memories of their schooling, such as how they recalled themselves as students, quality of teaching instruction, consideration given to individual needs, how fairly students were treated, and their social involvement. They were also asked to consider how their own school experiences may or may not currently influence how they are preparing their children for school or thinking about their education. Interviews ranged in length from 14–45 minutes, reflecting the amount of information parents were willing or able to share within the structure of the home assessment (most interviews clustered around 30–45 minutes, with only 2 interviews falling in the bottom range). The interviews were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim for analysis. Data were collected from Fall 2008 through Summer 2009.

### Analysis

Our research team included three graduate students and two upper-level undergraduate students. Our membership consisted of three White, one Taiwanese, and one African American student; all students were female. Members of the research team summarized the raw data from the transcribed interviews into the form of outline summaries. Outlines were presented and discussed at weekly meetings to identify emerging themes from the data. Based on group discussions, we developed deductive and inductive codes from the research questions and from the data itself. Codes were applied to a subset of interviews to address definitional concerns and comprehensiveness of the coding manual. As coding and meetings proceeded, we identified four main memory-oriented themes that were continuously linked to mothers' current behaviors and practices: (1) intergenerational influences, (2) transitions, (3) school setting, and (4) diversity. The team refined a coding scheme based on these themes and subthemes that clustered within them (Boyatzis, 1998).

For the purpose of reliability, each transcript was double coded (Miles & Huberman, 1994); codes were applied to each transcript by two separate coders. They then addressed discrepancies in their coding until they reached consensus. The team continued to meet weekly to collectively code transcripts and discuss concerns or definitional clarity in the process. Coded materials were reviewed by the first author, and the data were organized for full analysis using NVivo08. Finally, the team focused on each theme and discussed characteristics and patterns across the data. We selected specific samples from maternal interviews that elucidated our central themes, as presented under findings.

## Findings

Based on our research team's thematic coding and group analysis, a variety of themes emerged across interviews. Four themes were identified as the most pronounced and meaningful in guiding mothers' cognitions and behaviors related to their children's schooling. While these themes will be presented independently, it should be noted that many memories straddled several of the themes simultaneously. It was common for themes to operate in tandem as demonstrated by a number of quotes. Also, mothers were asked to consider how their own experiences influence how they think about preparing their children for school; however, responses were not limited to the transition into kindergarten. In fact, mothers frequently discussed how they would support their children's ongoing education through the years and at different stages based on their own educational history. This is reflected in our findings.

### Theme 1: Intergenerational Influences

Mothers commonly reflected on how they, themselves, were primed for school as they considered their involvement in preparing their children for school entry. They described that their parents' level of involvement, or lack of involvement, presently influences their behaviors with their own children. This theme split across two subthemes: *intergenerational continuity*, and *intergenerational discontinuity*. When mothers assessed that certain parenting strategies were effective, they planned to continue with those strategies. Conversely, when parents viewed their parents' interactions unfavorably, they planned to avoid them.

#### *Intergenerational Continuity*

Mothers reporting positive memories of their parents' educational participation voiced a desire for intergenerational continuity and a replication of these practices with their own children. For example, a 25-year-old, African American mother of four children applauded the structure her mother had created for her during her childhood. Her mother raised her with a consistent routine that she now employs with her own children.

I do it the same way that I was taught....When you come home, you sit down, and you do your homework. And then if there's time left, you know, take care of your business. They're not old enough, but I make them come do a little wind-down and do like five pages [worksheets]. It's so they know it already, when they start to have homework. So it would be them not thinking, oh I'm going to play basketball after school. No, it's, "I'll catch you later. I gotta get to the crib and do my homework."



With seven to eight individuals living in the house at any given time, including three generations, it is important for this mother to facilitate organization and structure for her children. It is a habit that she acquired through her own upbringing and is consciously passing on to the next generation.

Not all mothers were cognizant of intergenerational continuity prior to the interview. In fact, some mothers only noticed intergenerational similarities as they revisited their educational histories. In these cases, they were unaware of recycling their parents' behaviors. A 36-year-old, White mother of three children made this connection during our visit. As this mother reflected on her upbringing, she recognized how much her own learning-related involvement, as well as the making of educational decisions, paralleled that of her parents. "You know, looking back, I mean it seems like we're kind of following the same course." She and her husband were sending their children to the same type of schools, creating similar routines, and supporting extracurricular involvement in a congruent manner to how they were raised. This mother described a positive school experience for herself and wanted the same for her children; she estimated that what worked for her would serve them as well.

### *Intergenerational Discontinuity*

The majority of responses clustered around the subtheme of intergenerational discontinuity. Mothers desired to correct what they judged as unfavorable from their pasts. A number of mothers identified a lack of involvement or awareness on the part of their parents. They viewed these experiences or circumstances as disadvantageous and expressed motivation to make things different within their own families.

A 33-year-old, Biracial mother of three children remembered her mother's lack of involvement. She recalled her mother being around but not strongly investing in her education.

I don't remember my mom going through my backpack or doing homework with me...so it's important for me when she comes home from preschool—we go through her backpack. We talk about her day. She has a journal, and she shows us the picture just so I can be connected with that school piece.

She remembered her mother taking her to the library but then leaving her on her own to explore the shelves. Her parents gave her everything she needed and transported her places, but she perceived it as going through the motions. For that reason, she and her husband have made their children's learning top priority. They both work part-time jobs in order to spend more quality time with their children, connect with their children's teachers, and offer their children greater involvement.

For the mothers that recalled limited involvement on the parts of their parents, they did not express resentment or harbor negative feelings towards their parents. Rather, they identified both social and economic constraints that hindered their parents' school-related connectedness. Some mothers cited a lack of time or hectic work schedules, and others framed it as limited knowledge in the area of child development and the school system.

A 30-year-old, African American mother of one child regretted the amount of involvement displayed by her mother. Her mother was working numerous jobs when she was a child, which precluded school support and involvement.

[I want] to be involved, you know, in whatever she wants to do, or like being in PTA, different things like that...field trips. Since I never had that. And to make sure she knows it's important to have an education.

A 26-year-old, African American mother of two children wished she received more communication from her mother about the importance of school. She remembered her mother "kicking her out of the house" each morning to attend school, but her mother never discussed *why* it was important. This mother cited many negative components of her schooling experience, such as fighting, expulsion, and a general anger towards individuals at the school. It was not until she was pregnant with her first child as a teenager that she participated in a parenting class that helped her put things in perspective. She stated that she now understands the positive impact of ongoing communication with her children about school and stresses its importance.

A 38-year-old, White mother of three children discussed the unique experiences she faced as a daughter of immigrant parents and learning to navigate the school system on her own.

They were hands-off. I think they just come from a different, I mean, they come from a poor, a very, very poor country where survival is really truly, you know, first priority....So, they didn't get involved like other parents did. I think I grew up too fast because of that. I had to make choices early on about school and education and so forth...I certainly would have liked a little more guidance.

This mother further discussed her decision to leave her corporate career so that she could spend more quality time with her children and give them the necessary guidance they needed to begin and excel in school.

In addition to social influences, responses often named historical context or time as a dominant factor in the parenting they received. "They didn't know what we know 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 often pardoned these

unfavorable memories, they still recognized that it was a component of their own upbringing that they actively desired to avoid with their own children.

Memories of intergenerational involvement emerged across interviews and exposed a variety of ways parents remembered the role of their parents in their education. Whether mothers 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. These passages support the idea of an intergenerational dynamic of learning-related involvement (Mapp, 2003). As the data present, evaluation of one's own upbringing informs the upbringing of the next generation.

## Theme 2: Transitions

As mothers revisited their K–12 years, they recalled changes in school settings or grade levels as sensitive or memorable times. Most mothers reported difficulty associated with these transitions; however, a few remembered their transitions as liberating in offering a fresh start or new environment. Transitions fell into three subthemes: *geographic transitions*, *between-school transitions*, and *public-private shifts*. As mothers reflected on these periods of transition, social perils related to friendship and adjusting to a new school environment were most troubling; however, some academic struggles also surfaced, such as finding themselves behind in academic skills and content.

### *Geographic Transitions*

The first subtheme, geographic transitions, involved mothers' memories of their families relocating across cities or states. It was a disruption that required them to bring closure to some friendships and subsequently seek out new friendships in a new environment. It also forced them to learn the culture and norms of each new school system and negotiate how they fit into their new setting.

One of the participants, a 35-year-old, White mother of two children, devoted most of her interview to detailing the numerous transitions she faced as a child and adolescent.

I moved a lot. My dad, when I was young, was in the military, and when I got older he was in the business world, and we moved quite a bit. So, that made it hard, that really made it hard. I changed schools a lot, which certainly, I think, shaped my education and my perspective of how things work. And even when we weren't moving, just the switch from the elementary school or the preschool—I remember those switches. So, it seemed like we changed a lot. So, I would say that shaped my perception.

Later in her interview she acknowledged that moving around can teach individuals how to interact with a variety of people, but she never wants to put her kids through a similar series of transitions. She expressed gratitude that her employment as a preschool teacher and her husband's position with the police department granted them some geographic stability.

### *Between-School Transitions*

Between-school transitions were another subtheme described by mothers. Mothers recalled being promoted into a new school and/or grade level (elementary, middle, high school) as an important component of their schooling. Mothers reflected on this phase of readjustment in facing a new structure or system of learning, and in many cases, interacting with a different assortment of students. A 38-year-old, White mother of one child even recalled her first day of kindergarten as a painfully memorable transition.

I remember kindergarten for me being terrifying. I still remember clinging to my mom...the experience of transitioning was terrifying. And I am going on 40, and I still remember that! I mean, so I don't want his [her son's] experience to be like that. And I just remember holding onto my mom and just going, "What are you doing? Are you leaving me in this place?"

In addition, this mother recalled several other fragile transitions during her schooling which made a lasting impact on her experience. Given her troubles surrounding school changes, this mother reported being "nervous" about her son's transition into kindergarten from preschool. In order to prepare him for the transition and remove any potential fear, they visited the school on several occasions to meet teachers and to familiarize him with the building. Currently, she makes a habit of pointing to the building when they are driving in the area and telling him, "That is your school." As a divorced parent, she regrets that the child's father is not reinforcing some of her transitioning efforts, but she is being as attentive to the process as possible.

### *Public-Private Shifts*

The third subtheme, public-private shifts, captured transitions across school sectors. Mothers documented a marked shift in the culture and values of these environments. Many mothers remembered a distinctive difference in school climates and that it was sometimes an uncomfortable process of adjustment. In some cases, they suffered a stressful transition in leaving behind what they recalled as a "safer" or more "morally" enriched setting and struggling with unanticipated peer pressure in the public realm. Conversely, some mothers cited this shift from the private to public—or public to private—setting as a liberating time in their educational journey. In either case, mothers expressed a desire

to place their children in just one setting, rather than creating movement between the two.

Several mothers noted different academic standards between the public and private schools they attended; they reported content and expectations in private schools were above those of public. This placed some mothers at a perceived double disadvantage if they shifted into a more demanding school, by needing to adjust socially and struggling in the classroom. One 38-year-old, White mother of two children described her transition from a rural public school into a private Catholic school located closer to a city.

And then you get slapped into a private grade or a private high school, and you know practically nobody—so it was a big jump from 8<sup>th</sup> grade to freshman year; 8<sup>th</sup> grade you were at the top of your game. I struggled in math, but nobody really cared. And then you get to high school, and you realize how weak you are in math and science, because you're compared to these other kids you don't even know, who've already dissected frogs and pigs in 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade!

Even after many years, this memory still evoked a certain level of anxiety for this mother in relationship to her math experience. As those memories were reactivated, she made it clear that she did not want to put her daughters through the same situation. In anticipating that some transitions might remain unavoidable, she stated that she wants to make sure that her girls are prepared academically for any type of transition they might endure. To this day, this mother still views herself as deficient in math, so she has her husband work on math skills with their daughters each night.

Mothers' stories often gravitated to points of transition during their schooling. These periods of change were perceived as both positive and negative phases for mothers depending on the circumstances. A few mothers celebrated transitioning into a more desirable setting, while others regretted the unfortunate loss of friends and stress associated with starting over. Overall, stories more heavily recognized the stress and insecurities attached to transitions, and many mothers voiced a conscious desire to either avoid unnecessary transitions or to better support their own children in these processes. Mothers wanted educational continuity for their children, to the extent that some mothers were attempting to locate schools that contained numerous levels in one building (e.g., K–8 schools).

### **Theme 3: School Setting**

In describing school experiences, many mothers informed us of the type of school settings they attended. The type of schools attended framed both social and academic memories in their responses. Outlining characteristics of

their schools often laid the foundation for their stories. For many mothers, the subthemes of *school traits* (e.g., size, location, religious affiliation) and *goodness of fit* held the most weight. It was not just about describing their schools and communities, but how well matched they personally were with these settings. These characteristics were continuously linked to how mothers experienced their education. For many participants, these memories were influencing the kind of setting they preferred for their children.

### *School Traits*

When mothers described specific traits of their schools, they often reflected on the size and location of the schools they attended and how it afforded or constrained opportunities. Some celebrated attending a small school, recalling the cohesion they felt with peers and faculty. However, others voiced disappointment with the lack of opportunities that existed in such environments.

A 32-year-old, White mother of two children recalled her school and rural community as limiting.

Well, it was a very small school, so socialization was limited. But it was the area that we grew up in. Every small community had their own little school, and that's exactly how it was, and it was, you know, something I would never put my kids through. I mean, I can still name all of the kids in my class in alphabetical order! (laughs)

The size of the school and system made a lasting impact on the mother's experiences and even influenced the type of district she desired for her children. For many mothers it is a driving factor in where they choose to live and send their children to school.

Other mothers discussed private or religious traits of their schools as influential. This type of designation provided a distinct foundation for how their schools functioned, who attended, what was taught, availability of resources, and general expectations for students. A 38-year-old, White mother of three remembered the values she received from her Catholic school upbringing.

I mean because I really believe that if I hadn't done the private [school] growing up, I don't think I would have had the morals and values that I needed to get through and that I never regret, you know. And that's what I wanted to give to my own children, where I judge they wouldn't get that in the public schools. You know and again, maybe making a judgment statement, but you know I really feel that they're learning, the things that they learn in the private school they're not even being taught in the public school, so it's a sacrifice we pay to send our children there. It's not like we're these wealthy people that can send them there, but it's a choice that we made.

*Goodness of Fit*

As mothers recalled the types of school settings they attended, they often reflected on how well the school environment matched their individual social and academic needs. This subtheme was labeled as goodness of fit. Some mothers noted that there was nothing inherently wrong with their school, but that it was not a good match for them. As mothers reflected on and assessed the qualities of their school, they addressed dissonance or consonance in regard to their needs as a student. For example, a 37-year-old, African American mother of one child expressed disappointment in her parents' choice to send her to a technical school rather than an art-oriented school, which was her passion at the time.

It would have been a much better experience overall if it wasn't a technical school, but of course I didn't know at the time. My parents were the ones that made the choice for me to go to that. It is something I have been thinking a lot about lately, as far as trying to figure out what his [son's] gifts are and then trying to figure out—ok, how do I find a school that you know works with him with that.

This mother devoted a great deal of her interview to describing the mismatch between her own characteristics and what was required by the school. She recognized that the school provided a quality setting for students and taught some practical skills, but it was not the right fit for her. It is an issue that is at the fore of her mind when thinking about her son's education.

The type of school mothers attended was a repeated theme across interviews. Mothers perceived that size and location, religious affiliation, and goodness of fit really mattered. Not only did school settings frame how they remembered school, but it now transcends into their current behaviors with their children in considering future placements.

**Theme 4: Diversity**

Issues related to racial and socioeconomic diversity emerged within many interviews and across all racial groups. Diversity-related stories generally fell into two subthemes: *lack of diversity* as a drawback, and *diversity enrichment* as a benefit. Mothers either recognized the enrichment they received from exposure to diverse individuals, or they regretted the homogeneity of their schooling. Both subthemes typically prompted mothers to consider diversity issues for their children in relationship to their future placements and in creating meaningful opportunities for learning about differences.

*Lack of Diversity*

Mothers often discussed the composition of their schools' student body in relationship to race, class, and religion. This finding was quite surprising, given

that the majority of our mothers identified as both White and middle-class and reported attending fairly homogenous school settings. However, for many of these mothers, the lack of diversity provided by their schools was viewed as a deficit. A common complaint centered on how “White” their school community was in relationship to the rest of the world. Growing up in such an unvarying environment did not prepare them for the “real world.” For many it was a negative aspect of their upbringing and an important factor in seeking out school settings for their children.

A 45-year-old, White mother of one child described the monocultural and monoracial community where she grew up. She perceived the lack of diversity as a negative aspect of her experience in school.

We didn't have a lot of people with color. I remember one Hispanic family, and I think they probably weren't treated very well. And there was some class bias definitely. For her [my daughter], meeting other people, and with different ages, you know, interacting with people of different ages is important also. I mean it's critical to meet people outside your religious and class and ethnic and racial background—[pause] diversity.

Currently, this mother is looking for a diverse setting for her daughter to begin her formal education and desires to enroll her in a bilingual program. She is very pleased with the amount of cultural inclusion her preschool provides and hopes her daughter will have a similar classroom in kindergarten.

Some families reported actively seeking out residence in neighborhoods that provided a demographically mixed environment. Raising their children in a diverse setting and providing opportunities to experience and discuss diversity stood out as a current practice and concern for mothers. A 35-year-old, White mother of two children commented that both she and her husband regularly discuss such issues related to socializing their children for school and interacting with others.

I think my own schooling experience has changed the type of schooling experience I want for her. My parents have offered to pay for private school for our kids, but we feel strongly that they be in a public school system.... We want them to have a more well-rounded experience than a private school can offer. The school experience I had was pretty sheltered in terms of what the community at large was experiencing. Because we want them to have that, we bought a home in a diverse neighborhood, because that's what we wanted them to have.

This mother also reported transferring her children into a different preschool so they were part of a more diverse community of students. Diversity, in regard to race and income levels, was a theme that dominated most of her interview.



A few mothers reported facing discrimination and racism in their White-dominated settings, which profoundly impacted their experiences and memories of school. In revisiting her school days, a 26-year-old, African American mother of five children recounted several disturbing memories of blatant racism and intolerance from classmates.

I was the only Black person at my school, and so I got racially threatened, all that stuff. And I still kept going. The older boys in high school, like I was a freshman, and they were like seniors, juniors, and stuff like that. When I became a sophomore they seen how cool I was and stuff like that—and I was like, “nah, remember you wrote all that stuff on my locker?” They used to write on my locker, like “n\*\*\*\*\*” on my locker. My sister had to come up to my school like every other day to say, “You do something about this,” and they never did.

This mother credited her involvement with athletics as the turning point in her experience; being part of a team helped her gain acceptance from others. Sports involvement moved her from feeling like an outsider to an insider in her school. She reported wanting to get her own children involved with sports as soon as possible, so that they can socialize with people who are on their team and connect with a community within their school. She also shared that she is currently talking about Black history with her children and supporting them in taking pride in their heritage.

### *Diversity Enrichment*

On the other side, several mothers recognized the benefits they received from attending an ethnically or economically diverse school. They appreciated the opportunity of attending an environment that offered them a mixture of individuals. Such a collection of students enriched their experience and in some capacity enhanced their education. A 36-year-old, White mother of two children positively remembered her integrated experience as teaching her tolerance and life skills.

I had a lot of different friends across different groups. I was like the only White girl on my basketball team, so I was aware of different social situations and seeked (sic) them out. I went to a really good mixed school. A realistic-like school, mostly Black and White...I don't remember any racial tensions at the school, which there could be.

Later in the interview, the mother reflected on schools their children have and will be attending.

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

Currently, her older son attends a crowded school where 75% of the students are on reduced lunch, and she appreciates that he is part of a diverse community. This mother enjoyed the richness of her own experience and wants the same for her children. Teaching her children tolerance and acceptance of a variety of differences is of top priority for this mother.

The theme of diversity surfaced in many recollections of schooling and in current practices with their children. A number of mothers viewed their experience as unrealistic and limited, which did not fully prepare them for the real world. For mothers that did attend a more mixed setting, they acknowledged its enriching contribution to their development. Diversity was viewed as something both positive and necessary for an appropriate education and preparing children for future endeavors. These findings support previous research suggesting that families of color are often interested in building pride in children's heritage, and White mothers address diversity in promoting tolerance of other groups (Katz & Kofkin, 1997). However, many of the White mothers reported not just providing subtle messages but creating a more inclusive lifestyle (e.g., living in a diverse neighborhood, seeking out diverse school settings).

## **Discussion and Implications for Practice**

Findings from this study offer insight into the complex process of school readiness in regard to how parents' personal school experiences may influence decision-making around children's learning and education. Previous research in this area has focused primarily on parents' own socialization and levels of involvement from their parents (Mapp, 2003; Taylor et al., 2004). This study broadens understandings of the relevance of parents' own school experience by identifying other influencing contextual factors such as school traits, sensitive transitional times, and diversity within the school setting. Almost all mothers reported that their school experiences influenced how they are preparing their children for school. This implies that school recollections claim a substantive role in the school transition and preparation process for families, as well as on more long-term thoughts on schooling. Mothers recalled a variety of stories that evoked a full gamut of emotions. The memories that mothers chose to share were shaped through their own interpretation; however, they represented academic and social experiences that were perceived as the most formative from their school days. Even when mothers categorized their overall school experience as positive, they still identified a variety of both favorable and unfavorable memories that fed into their cognitions and practices with their children. A 50-year-old, White mother of two children concluded her interview by saying:

Well, I think if you had a good experience, you, you want your child to have a good experience as well. If you had a bad experience, I think you learn from that and you look for things that would also—things that were maybe hard or bad for you—you look for something different for your child.

Work in this area often frames school experiences in terms of positive or negative experiences, and even in preparation for this study, we anticipated that mothers would fall into one of these categories. However, the way in which our mothers retold their stories suggests that this is not merely a binary phenomenon. Rarely were memories all positive or all negative, but instead they were a mixture of both that created the educational history of each individual. This expands practitioners' understanding of parents' experiences as merely "good" or "bad," but rather much more complex and nuanced. Whether mothers looked kindly on their school days or recounted a number of events that compromised their academic or social well-being, all mothers recognized that their own experiences contributed to the way they think about their children's education.

There was a great deal of emotion attached to the stories that mothers selected to tell, further supporting the idea that the significance of life events rests on affective reactions to those events and that emotions play an important role in influencing parenting (Dix, 1991). No matter where mothers' experiences fell on a positive to negative continuum, memories, and the emotions they assigned to those memories, were connected to their current thoughts and practices about schooling. As research suggests, as parents begin to prepare their children for school, there is often a reactivation of memories that surface (Barnett & Taylor, 2009; Mapp, 2003; Raty, 2007) which can both support or challenge a healthy transition. Most recognizable in these interviews were issues related to their own parents' involvement, diversity, school setting, and transitions. They also pointed out paternal involvement and the influence of fathers' own educational histories.

These findings suggest that mothers are concerned about their children's readiness and academic success and are calling upon their own memories, consciously attempting to either replicate their own positive experiences or avoid unfavorable moments like those they endured. It also supports Taylor et al.'s (2004) conceptualization of academic socialization, in that "who parents are" helps explain "what parents do." Ultimately, this exploratory work can inform our understanding about the family transition to the school setting and enhance efforts in supporting both parents and children during this period and beyond. It acknowledges parental perspectives and concerns in relationship to preparing children for school and highlights potential points of intervention

for families. An understanding of parents' own developmental histories and how they could influence parents' relationships with their children's learning and education could be beneficial for school staff and counselors.

### **Listening to Stories**

Epstein (1995) writes, "The way schools care about children is reflected in the way schools care about the children's families" (p. 701). 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. 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 (Gomez, Rodriquez, & Agosto, 2008; Graue, 2005), parents also bring their past to their learning-related involvement. These personal histories are excellent tools to create meaningful bonds with families. Schools have traditionally thought about family outreach as unilateral (school to home), instead of a mutual process (Bernhard, Lefebvre, Kilbride, Chud, & Lange, 1998; Christensen, 2003; Lareau & Horvat, 1999). However, creating meaningful bonds with families must be considered a joint process; both sides must take an equal investment in the child's development.

Some points of interest that were especially relevant to the mothers we studied included issues related to intergenerational influences, transitions, school setting, and diversity. 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 needed for practitioners to use these emotional stories and personal histories in order to better understand the home environment of children. A parent can share anecdotes and observations from his or her 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. In addition, as teachers help parents revisit their school memories, parents may become aware of the motivation behind their thoughts and actions.

### **Limitations**

Our findings should be interpreted with the acknowledgment of study limitations. While there was some racial and economic variation in our sample, the majority of our participants self-identified as White and reported comfortable income levels. This sample limitation suggests that identified themes might not fit everyone's story, or that additional themes may present themselves in

a higher risk sample. Our analysis relied on interviews as our primary source of data, and therefore is limited to maternal reports of current thoughts and behaviors as well as interpretations of their own experiences. It also relied on mothers' willingness to share these personal stories and current socialization practices. While investigators worked on building rapport with mothers from the initial phone screening and throughout home visit activities, some mothers provided less in-depth responses in regard to their schooling, even when a number of prompts were provided.

## Conclusion and Future Research

As demonstrated in this study, many studies focused on parents' experiences are limited to maternal reports. However, given the magnitude of maternal responses that incorporated the role of fathers and other family members in school preparation, future research should consider other family members' school experiences and their influence on the transition process. It would also be productive to explore school recollections in a higher risk sample, given the greater educational disadvantage that many children in this category face (Murnane, Willett, Bub, & McCartney, 2006).

Parental recollections on schooling guide cognitions, learning-related behaviors, and decisions parents make about their children's education. In sum, these thoughts and actions have immense influences on a child's readiness to learn and succeed in school, as well as on subsequent school years. Listening to parents needs to begin early and be sustained throughout a child's education in order to promote optimal levels of success. We as educators also need to suspend assumptions about parents' backgrounds and involvement in learning and open ourselves up to the variety of children's learning experiences, including learning that occurs within 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 students.

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