

# ***“I like being involved in school stuff”*: Mothers’ Perspectives Around Their Participation in Family Engagement in Universal Prekindergarten**

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## **Abstract**

Family engagement is considered to be a cornerstone of successful universal prekindergarten (PreK) implementation. Using data from interviews with mothers, this study investigates the different ways families are engaged in their child’s PreK experience. Multiple themes emerged from the interviews, including: family engagement, parents’ knowledge about what their child is learning, learning through play, and parental goals for their PreK children (e.g., reading, writing, counting). Findings revealed mothers’ understandings and definitions of “family engagement” varied. Some mothers considered taking their children to school as a form of family engagement, while others believed actively being in their children’s classroom and helping the teacher was parental involvement. Still others defined it as spending quality time with their children at home. Mothers who were not engaged in these activities described different barriers contributing to the lack of engagement. The aim of this study is to help school leaders and teachers develop better understandings of family members’ perspectives and experiences around family engagement. The goal of this work is to foster reciprocal partnerships between teachers, school personnel, and family members to increase the potential for families to feel included in their children’s early educational experiences.

Key Words: early childhood education, family engagement, parental involvement, perspectives, play, preschool, school–family partnerships, universal PreK

## Introduction

For the past several years, there has been a significant increase in the number of publicly funded prekindergarten (PreK) programs in the United States. In 2019, there were 45 states offering some form of publicly funded preschool programs, but only a small number of these programs were universal (Note: universal programs are defined as free for all 4-year-olds, regardless of family income; Friedman-Krauss et al., 2019). In 2014, New York City rolled out an expansion of Universal PreKindergarten (UPK), which has opened more than 70,000 seats for 4-year-olds in public schools and community-based organizations across its five boroughs. Educational and political leaders of the PreK for All program promoted parent and family engagement as being a key component to the success of implementation. For instance, the *PreK for All Policy Handbook* (NYC Dept. of Education, 2018) outlines teachers' responsibilities around providing families with information and keeping open lines of communication with families. Furthermore, there is an extensive body of research that upholds the belief that families and school staff partnerships play an integral role in supporting children's academic success (Epstein, 1995, 2016; Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Family engagement also needs to be reciprocal, come from a strengths-based perspective, and foster positive relationships (Halgunseth et al., 2009).

With the increase of publicly funded preschools and heightened expectations for kindergarten readiness, it is imperative that researchers and educators understand family members' views to make better informed decisions around policy and practice. Souto-Manning and Swick (2006) asserted, "As school populations become ever more diverse, it is important that definitions of parent involvement apply to a variety of sociocultural backgrounds and honor these students and their very identities" (p. 189). Parents from different sociocultural backgrounds may prefer to be involved in their children's education at home rather than in school (Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Trumbull et al., 2003). Baquedano-López, Alexander, and Hernández (2013) call on educators and researchers to expand their definitions of parental involvement so that they better reflect the pluralistic and richly diverse society of the U.S. They argued that all too often parental involvement is defined in a static way and tends to position parents and family members in a deficit discourse or as passive participants in their children's education. While much of the research on parental involvement is based on teachers' and schools' perspectives (e.g., Epstein, 1995; Jeynes, 2005), parents' beliefs and practices are important as well.

The purpose of this study is twofold; one is to illuminate family involvement and engagement through parent perspectives, and the other is to shed light on the “school stuff” that is influencing parents’ ideas around PreK education and family engagement. Attention to parents’ perspectives on their children’s experiences in PreK provides a lens to better understand their beliefs about early education and their expectations for schooling. Parents’ conceptions of their child’s learning, as well as other sociocultural factors, including ideas about childrearing, daily schedules, and power dynamics between themselves and school personnel also influence their abilities to engage in their child’s education (Baquedano-López et al., 2013). From this perspective, our intention is to illustrate the variations in their involvement or engagement and to examine how they engaged in “practices of partnership” (Baquedano-López et al., 2013). We worked with families participating in universal PreK programs to explore the following research questions: (1) In what ways are parents involved in their children’s education? (2) What does learning mean to parents, and what is their understanding of learning through play?

## Literature Review

### Family Involvement and Engagement

Family involvement and engagement is a cornerstone of early childhood education; however, it is a contested topic, and people grapple with how to work with families in ways that are responsive to particular school communities or local contexts. Over time, the definition of parent involvement has varied at the local, state, and federal policy levels and in the ways schools themselves conceptualize parental involvement (Fan & Chen, 2001; Wilder, 2014). Some defined it as parents supporting their children’s literacy skills, while others defined it as family and school’s responsibility for children’s academic success (Hilado et al., 2013). Ferlazzo (2011) described parent involvement as the school identifying what the needs and goals are and telling parents how they could be involved to help. In contrast, he defined family engagement as listening to parents’ concerns, thoughts, and dreams and building a partnership with them. The Head Start Early Learning and Knowledge Center (n.d.) defines family engagement as a “collaborative and strengths-based process through which early childhood professionals, families, and children build positive and goal-oriented relationships” (para. 1). According to Halgunseth et al. (2009), a strengths-based approach to family engagement involves the recognition that all families are a part of their child’s education in some way. In addition to family–school partnerships, the community also plays an important role. When schools empower families rather than just serving families, they

also help improve family and community partnerships (Stefanski et al., 2016). Although parent involvement and family engagement are two different terms, we use them interchangeably in our study. For instance, family members will attend parent–teacher conferences, which is a form of parent involvement, but will talk while there about their hopes, concerns, or expectations, and this is considered to be family engagement. Additionally, some parents described being involved, not realizing what they described was also a form of engagement.

### **Factors That Influence Family Involvement and Engagement**

Differences in cultural practices around family involvement and engagement are evident in the literature. These studies suggest that parents' beliefs about their role in their child's education as well as their own experience in education influences their involvement. For instance, research conducted with 40 well-educated, middle-class immigrant Chinese and 40 European American parents showed that the European American parents participated in more school activities while immigrant Chinese parents did more home activities (Huntsinger & Jose, 2009). In another study, although well-educated Japanese mothers read to their children on a daily basis, they were less likely to participate in preschool activities than less educated mothers (Yamamoto et al., 2006). Latina/o parents tend to be involved in other ways such as asking the teacher questions about their children's progress or attending in- or out-of-school events (Poza et al., 2014). While these studies shed light on the variations in parent engagement, it is important to note that essential contextual information is missing to fully understand the reasons why some parents participate in some activities and others do not.

There are other factors that impact the level(s) of family involvement and engagement. Research findings have revealed that limited parental involvement in the school was often due to demands on parents' time and attention, including having a schedule that conflicted with the school's activities, taking care of a baby or toddler at home, moving during the start of the school year, and language barriers and differences in cultural norms and expectations between non-English speaking families and teachers (Baker et al., 2016; Lamb-Parker et al., 2001; Melzi et al., 2018). Parents' employment status was also a strong predictor of parent involvement compared to maternal education, satisfaction with Head Start program, barriers to participation, activities with children at home, and/or self-report of involvement (Castro et al., 2004).

Language barriers and unfamiliarity with the U.S. education system are common factors that hinder immigrant parents from being involved in schools or classrooms (Trumbull et al., 2003; Vera et al., 2012). Despite the limited parental involvement in school, parents in these studies sought other ways to support

their children by being involved in the home. A myriad of research has found parental involvement in the home to be a good predictor of children's academic success (Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Jeynes, 2005, 2012; Poza et al., 2014).

### **Play and Learning in Early Childhood**

Because play can also be a form of parent engagement and is essential to early learning, it is important to understand the cultural variations in parents' perspectives and beliefs about play for young children (Parmar et al., 2004). Play has been shown to enhance children's sociocognitive growth (Coolahan et al., 2000). In a study on children's play in 16 nations of developing, developed, and newly industrialized countries (Singer et al., 2009), mothers reportedly believed children develop social skills and increase confidence and happiness when they engage in experiential learning and play. Imaginative and pretend play were the most frequent activities among children in the U.S., Great Britain, Portugal, and Ireland (> 50%). Nonetheless, mothers of all countries were concerned about their children's lack of time to play and socialize with other peers.

In the U.S., African American parents had a positive perception and beliefs about play and valued its role in the development of cognitive and social skills (Fogle & Mendez, 2006). European American and immigrant Latina/o parents also perceived play to be important for learning (DiBianca Fasoli, 2014). Yet according to Kane (2016), White parents perceived play and learning as separate activities and valued academic learning more than play. Play was considered to be something "extra," not essential for academic success. While Mexican immigrant parents understood the American value of play-based learning in preschool, they preferred more learning than play because the purpose of going to school is to learn (Tobin et al., 2013). Even though play helps promote cognitive, social, and emotional development and also builds fine motor skills which are crucial for young children, parents often do not understand why play is important for their child's academic learning (Nicolopoulou, 2010). With this being said, Roopnarine (2012) brought attention to the differences in parents' beliefs about play across cultures and asserted that the realities of living within particular social contexts has strong influence over people's beliefs about the significance or purposes of play.

New York City's Department of Education requires 150 minutes each day for children to engage in play-based activities related to the units of study or children's interests, usually in small groups or through unstructured play (NYC Department of Education, 2017). Full-day PreK for All programs are 6 hours and 20 minutes long, while community-based organizations have extended hours and varied between 8 to 11 hours including afterschool programs. The play period covered one-third of the preschool day. For most of the schools in

our study, teachers allocated 75 minutes for children to play in the morning and another 75 minutes in the afternoon. Teachers would intentionally plan games and activities and set out particular materials to provide children with different learning experiences. During these times, children engage in adult-directed or child-initiated activities, depending on their interests or needs. These play sessions can be a combination of designated play areas for children to play or small groups of children doing an activity led by the teacher. The purpose of small group was to allow children who do not wish to join a designated play area to do other activities that allow them to socialize with their peers and for teachers to collect assessment data (NYC Department of Education, 2017).

### **Theoretical Framework**

Epstein (1995) outlined six types of family–school–community involvement, including parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision making, and collaborating with community. The outcome for each type of family involvement fosters parent, school, and community partnerships to support children holistically. For this reason, Epstein’s framework is used to give parent perspectives deeper meaning. We explored how mothers’ thoughts on PreK and their engagement in schools align with the different types of parental involvement to examine the ways in which families are engaged in their child’s preschool experiences. Though this conceptual framework is widely used, its focus is on teachers and administrators promoting involvement and may position parents as more passive participants in school communities (Baquedano-López et al., 2013). As such, we took up Souto-Manning and Swick’s (2006) call to learn alongside families of diverse backgrounds and discover the ways they support their child’s early learning. One important aspect was to value cultural diversity and learn from parents about their engagement in diverse sociocultural contexts, including schools. The goal of the current study is to help school leaders, teachers, and support staff develop reciprocal partnerships with parents to engage them in more meaningful and collaborative educational activities in a culturally sensitive manner. By informing parents of the routines and expectations for early childhood education, parents may be able to support their children in a more comprehensive or holistic way. Additionally, by educating teachers about the richness of family lives, teachers may be better able to support families. Both home and school engagement have a great impact on children’s academic success (Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Poza et al., 2014).

## Methods

### Programs

In the 2016–17 academic year, we recruited a total of eight schools in the New York City metropolitan area: one public school, three New York City Department of Education-sponsored schools, and four New York City Early Education Centers. These full-day PreK programs varied in a range of neighborhood resource levels (50% low, 37.5% moderate, and 12.5% high). Resource levels were determined by the concentration of poverty in community districts (low = more than 50% of the population; moderate = less than 30% of the population; high = less than 15% of the population). Within the eight schools, we conducted research in 14 PreK classrooms and recruited 14 PreK lead teachers to participate in the study. Recruitment flyers were given to PreK classroom teachers to promulgate our research study to parents. Research assistants were also at the preschools during drop-off time, pick-up time, and parent–teacher conference days to recruit parents to complete a survey about their background and their children.

### Participants

This was a two-phase project wherein family members were asked to fill out a survey and potentially collaborate with the research team as a focal family. Focal families were identified so that the members of the research team could carry out in-depth interviews with parents, classroom observations with their child, and could review assessment data of their children. A total of 152 parents were invited to participate. We recruited, obtained consent from, and surveyed 60 parents (40%; 59 mothers, 1 father) of diverse cultural backgrounds (White 6%, Latina/o 23%, African American/Black 23%, Asian 17%, mixed race/other 13%, and unspecified 18%). About 40% of the parents attained at least a high school diploma (range = high school diploma to Master's degree). The age range of the parents were 18–25 (10%), 26–35 (60%), 36–45 (28%), and 46–55 (2%). For 32% ( $n = 19$ ) of the parents, this was their child's first preschool or childcare experience. Parents who declined participation indicated they were preoccupied with work and did not have time to speak to our research assistants or had other home or personal commitments. There were a range of English-, Spanish-, and Bengali-speaking families surveyed.

According to the teachers and parents in our study, communication was challenging due to language barriers. Despite this, teachers used various strategies to communicate with non-English speaking families. Some teachers relied on bilingual Spanish–English speaking staff such as teaching assistants and family workers to help with translations between families and teachers. Parents



also used various strategies. For example, one Spanish-speaking parent relied on her spouse who is a bilingual Spanish–English speaker to translate for them. There were a high number of Bengali-speaking families at one of our partner programs. In this case, there were limited Bengali-speaking staff members available to translate for teachers and families. Sometimes teachers asked the children to help translate for their parents.

We recruited one to three focal parents from each classroom to participate in in-depth interviews. Focal parents were selected from the 60 parents who were initially surveyed. Teachers helped identify potential focal family participants, and these parents were asked if they would like to participate in subsequent interviews to share more about their child’s PreK experience. Of the 60 parents surveyed, 22 focal parents agreed to participate in parent interviews. All the interviewees were mothers as they were the family members who consented to extend their involvement in the study. Those who agreed to participate in the interviews signed a second consent agreeing to give permission for audiorecording the interview and for us to review their child’s assessment data. This article focuses on the 22 mothers interviewed. The characteristics of the 22 mothers are listed in Table 1.

### **Mother Interviews**

We invited focal parents from each classroom to participate in a series of qualitative interviews. The purpose of the interviews was to gain deeper understandings about family involvement and engagement, parent–teacher communication, parents’ perceptions about learning, their understanding of learning through play, and their goals for their children in PreK. Eight research assistants who are native English speakers (1 bilingual in English–Bengali) and one native Spanish speaker (bilingual in Spanish–English) conducted the interviews with parents. Four (36%) of the Latina mothers preferred a Spanish-speaking research assistant to interview them. The remaining interviews were conducted in English. All interviews were audiorecorded and each participant was assigned a unique identification code for the purpose of data management and analysis. As an incentive, mothers received a \$25 gift card after completing each interview.

The interviews were semi-structured, including guided questions and follow-up prompts. The initial interview consisted of general questions about parents’ understanding of curriculum and teaching, home–school partnerships, teacher–parent communication, and prompts about the systems of assessment. The two subsequent interviews delved into questions about their child’s academically oriented learning and PreK experiences, teacher–parent communication about the children’s academic progress, childrearing practices,



kindergarten readiness, and follow-up questions from previous interviews. Table 2 includes examples of key questions we asked in the subsequent interviews that pertain to family engagement.

Table 1. Characteristics of Interviewed Mothers ( $N = 22$ )

Characteristics	%
Age	
18–25	5%
26–35	72%
36–45	14%
Unknown	9%
Race/Ethnicity	
African American/Black	18%
American Indian/Alaska Native	9%
Asian	5%
Latina	50%
White	18%
Education Background	
High school diploma	27%
Associate’s degree	27%
Bachelor’s degree	18%
Master’s degree	18%
Unknown	10%
Home Language	
English	67%
Spanish	33%
Child’s School Resource Level	
Low	36%
Moderate	55%
High	9%

Table 2. Key Parent Interview Questions

<b>School-Related</b>
How is your child learning in school? What activities help them the most?
In what ways are you involved in your child's academics/education or in your child's classroom?
<b>Parent–Teacher Communication</b>
How often do you attend the events organized by the school? (e.g., students' performance in the auditorium, etc.)
How often do you meet with your child's teacher to talk about their learning or development?
What do you talk about in parent–teacher conferences?
<b>Transition to Kindergarten</b>
What are your expectations for your child in Kindergarten?
How do you think PreK will prepare your child for Kindergarten?
<b>Home Involvement</b>
Tell us about the aspects of home life you share with your child's teacher.
In what ways do you support your child in learning at home?

### **Classroom Observations**

In addition to the parent interviews, we also received permission from the focal parents to observe their children ( $n = 22$ ) in their classroom. Our research assistants conducted monthly classroom observations at the schools. Each classroom observation lasted between 1–2 hours in the morning when the class had *morning meetings*, during which children sat together to listen to the teacher starting the day, and *center times*, when children were stationed at different center areas (e.g., dramatic play, block building, reading, writing, math, science) and learn together with their peers and/or the teacher or assistant teacher. Classroom observations allowed us to capture the daily school schedule of the focal children and provided us with rich information about how they learn and interact with their peers and teachers. Classrooms had multiple areas for children to play and interact, including dramatic play areas, block building, math and science, arts and music, and a reading and writing area. During center time or structured play, children were encouraged to shift to different areas so everyone had a chance to do something different. Furthermore, we were able to gain additional insight on family involvement and/or engagement based on our presence in classrooms. For instance, we noticed trends in children's attendance (e.g., late arrival, multiple absences during the week) and saw interactions between teachers and parents during drop-off and pick-up times.

## Data Analysis

The audiorecorded interviews were transcribed verbatim. The four Spanish interviews were transcribed in Spanish and translated into English by bilingual research assistants. Data were coded for different themes derived from the transcripts using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Our analysis focused on family involvement and engagement, parents' perceptions about what their child is learning, and also different ways family members and school staff partner with each other to help children succeed. In the initial stage, broad themes were identified (e.g., goals of PreK, parental involvement, communication with teachers, academic learning, social and emotional learning). From the broad themes, research assistants developed codes to further analyze the data. For instance, under the theme of "academic learning," codes such as reading, writing, and math were generated. Parental involvement was comprised of Epstein's six types of parental involvement (parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision making, collaborating with community). Members of the research team read and coded the interviews independently, then met to discuss the process and to compare coded data to establish inter-rater reliability. There were two coders for each transcription, and reliability was established with at least 80% agreement. Interview data were coded and analyzed using ATLAS.ti 8.1.

## Findings

This section is organized into two parts. First, we discuss parents' views on children's learning and their goals for PreK to explore how their understandings of PreK education have influence over their involvement in, as one mother described it, the "school stuff." The "school stuff" is comprised of factors such as expectations for children's development, what children are learning in PreK, and kindergarten readiness. Next, we present findings that illustrate the types of family involvement and engagement carried out during their child's PreK year. Epstein's framework is used as a lens to interpret how mothers engage in parenting, communication, decision-making, and volunteering. There is a particular focus on what they are doing in their child's classroom, with their child's teacher, and at home to promote their engagement with the "school stuff." We also bring attention to the barriers that inhibit family engagement.

### Parents' Perceptions About Learning

A key factor to family involvement and engagement is staff sharing information with parents and caregivers to help them understand early learning and

approaches to teaching. When asked, “*What does ‘learning’ mean to you? How would you define it?*”, participants in our study made connections to the dynamic nature of gaining knowledge. One mother responded by simply saying, “Learning is discovering something new on a day to day base. Pretty much just gathering new information (laughs).”

Additionally, a mother explained,

*Aprendizaje...el cambio que va dando la persona en lo que va aprendiendo...el diario de la vida. Ella no sabía nada, ella aprendió a contar, aprendió a escribir...es lo que uno...para mí el aprendizaje es lo que va aprendiendo diariamente.* [Learning...how a person is changing, what the person is learning every day...about the life. She didn’t know anything, she learned how to count, to write...is what...for me, learning is what you learn every day.]

Another mother described learning in a holistic way,

*Todo lo que sea visual e interactivo, que ella pueda tocar, que ella pueda ver...eso es lo más que ella le llama la atención. Las canciones...lo que sea ver y escuchar y...todo lo que ella vea y sienta, eso es lo más que le motiva a ella. Las canciones la motivan muchísimo, el baile le motiva muchísimo. Yo entiendo que eso...por esa parte es que se está dejando de llevar mi hija.* [Everything that is visual and interactive, that she can touch, that she can see...this is what attracts her attention the most. Songs...whatever she can see and listen and...everything that she sees and feels, this is what motivates her the most. Songs motivate her a lot, dance motivates her a lot. I understand that this...this is the part that my child is interested in.]

We also asked them, “*How is your child learning in school?*” and “*What activities help them the most?*” While mothers understood their child is constantly learning because they are developing skills and showing progress across learning domains, they do not always know about what their children are doing to practice different skills. As one mother explained,

I am not, I can’t really say because I’m not really in [the classroom] to see. But I know he’s learning from the things that he tells me. He talks to me about what he learns for that day. So I know he’s learning.

Some of the mothers we interviewed told us about how they observed their child practicing certain skills during drop-off and pick-up times.

I’ve definitely seen an improvement in her drawing and in her, like the gross motor of actually making something look like the way it’s supposed to look, but also that she can, like, there seem to be two skills there that she’s improved on. One is like wanting to sit down and draw something

and actually making it look like what she's drawing...Often when I pick her up, she's like drawing on a whiteboard, or they're doing a lot of practicing sitting at a desk, drawing, writing.

As evident in their responses, the mothers were aware that their child(ren) acquired new skills or enriched their abilities throughout the PreK year. Based on this, we sought their perspectives on how this learning occurred. For some, learning is academically focused, but for others, play provided valuable educational experience and extended opportunities for parent–child engagement.

### **Learning Through Play**

Center times occurred in the midmorning, and working parents were only able to spend a few minutes watching their child in the classroom during drop-off time. Due to their schedules, they were not able to observe their children at center areas. One mother explains, “I don't know. I haven't been in the classroom during classroom time really, it's just drop-off and pick-up.” The short time parents spend in classrooms can inhibit their understandings of play-based learning. The mothers in our study viewed play as beneficial but not necessarily a support for learning more academically oriented concepts. For instance, one mother stated,

She likes to sit down and play, and, well, she actually talks about playing only. She plays in group, and that's all she talks about, and I tell her, did you learn anything else? “Oh, I read a book,” and I'm like, okay.

The mothers created a play–learning binary which shows that they view play as separate from learning and not as a form of learning. This shows that mothers had different levels of awareness of the benefits of learning through play.

He is learning here...everything: all the reading and writing, math... everything that a child is supposed to learn....I guess the play, the play time also. So it's a little bit of everything. You know, free play...they are very active.

Another mother mentioned,

Before, I felt I just dropped him off, and he was just playing every day. I saw a lot of artwork from the other teacher, but your focus shouldn't be always on art because you are not an art teacher. You know, you are a teacher for a class. These kids come in here, and they want to learn, you know...and I'm just noticing now, is very hands on...just this morning she was telling me what did they talk about yesterday, and a lot of them were like “oh, I know this and that.”

## Goals for PreK

Each parent had similar goals for their children, but there was some variability with regard to what they hoped they would achieve based on their child's needs and personality. When asked to name some goals, many parents stated they would like their children to be able to read and write simple sentences and count numbers in the correct order by the end of PreK. They believed kindergarten will be more about being able to use these skills. Parents also had different beliefs and values about education (e.g., achievement, respect, individualization). When asked, "*What would you like your child to accomplish by the end of PreK?*", most mothers reported academic skills, and only one mother mentioned independence.

He knows how to write his name, but I want him, he needs to learn it a little better for him to be able to improve in kindergarten. I would say writing his name, and numbers. He is still writing out of the line when writing his name. He came a long way because before he didn't even know how to write his name. So he know how to write the name, but I want him to write it on the line.

Another mother mentioned,

They're gonna be more independent, they gonna do more reading, more math skills, science, they gonna get to explore more different things because now they becoming older. (laughs) No more naps. Well with [the PreK teacher] you had naps, but [in kindergarten] you're not gonna have naps. You're gonna have a good night's sleep. A good breakfast. You're gonna work more.

A few mothers described the importance of social/emotional and behavioral development. They hoped their children will be able to enjoy school, make friends, and they emphasized their child's well-being.

Her social skills, you know. I baby my daughter so much that her social skills...she gets a little bit of intimidation with...following the other kids. I want her to be a leader. She is not leading right now. She is more following, more than leading. That's a struggling point right now. So I want my baby to learn how to be a leader and how to be strong, because we have given her so much love and babied her that she is soft now, and she needs to be a little harder. Honestly, it's a tough world.

Another mother stated,

It's all behavior, socioemotional behavior. One, more than likely she is crying because she wants something, and she won't share. Two, if someone calls her—a grievance. This is the opportunity for her to exercise

her communication skills and to discuss with the staff teacher in there, “Hey, this happened to me.” Learn to communicate, “Hey, he took— from me,” something like that. Yes, I have to chit-chat that because the problem is she doesn’t [have to] do it at home, she is her mother’s dream, like I said before. She is fully communicative at home. She is so happy; she is so loving, and she is just wonderful at home, but that’s before. It’s a different environment [at home]; she is comfortable; she has full autonomy of everything she wants.

### **Family Involvement and Engagement**

Our research suggests family involvement and/or engagement can be affected by several internal and external factors, such as busy schedules, resource levels, school dynamics, sense of community, or language barriers, among others. We asked the mothers, “*In what ways are you involved in your child’s academics/education or in your child’s classroom?*” Those who were involved in the classroom or even in their child’s learning explained how they got involved. They described different avenues of involvement, including: having conversations with the teacher, volunteering in the classroom, attending school events, and/or taking a role in the Parent Teacher Association (PTA) organized by the school.

For example, one mother said, “I’m always here, anything that they have, like performance or anything, I’m in there. So I’m involved in most of the activities that they do.” Another mother who attended the same school as a child and who currently has an older child attending the school elaborated on how she was actively engaged in things happening inside the school and classroom:

Well, since I have good communication with the teacher and, you know, for many years already, I like asking questions. I’ll ask her, like I said, if I can [come in] daily, even though if it’s like five minutes, two-minute thing. I’m always like I’ll go up, and you know I’m the type to be like, “Is everything okay?” I like being involved in the school stuff. So whatever it is, I’ll participate in, just to be as involved as I can in the whole school even though I work.

Sometimes parents would share responsibilities. As one mother described,

*El esposo mío fue el que...hicieron una actividad, a esa no pude venir, pero él vino, y vino con el niño, y hicieron como una pequeña rifa. Como de para... O sea, como para decidir...el tesorero y cosas así. Y él fue el que gana el área de ser tesorero. Pero en cuanto...yo solamente vengo a recoger a la niña, la traigo y le pregunto cualquier cosa. Cualquier cosa de información me la dan a mí de la niña.* [My husband was the one that...they did an activity, that time I couldn’t come, but he came with our boy, and they did like a



raffle. I mean, to choose the treasurer and stuff like that. And he won, to be the treasurer. But I...I only pick my girl up, and I drop her off, and I ask her [the teacher] anything. They share with me any information about my girl.]

Other mothers also perceived dropping off and picking up their children every day to and from school as a form of parental involvement. As one mother stated, "I don't think I'm particularly involved in the classroom beyond, you know talking with the teachers when I pick-up and leave, and you know, playing with the other kids."

It can also be difficult to check in with teachers during drop-off and pick-up times. As one mother mentioned, she did not have much opportunity to meet with her child's teacher because of her busy schedule:

I wish I had more opportunities to speak to the teacher...I work, so usually when I'm dropping [my daughter] off, I have to run over to the, to the other school, so I'm literally like running to get her here and then running to go to the other school, so I don't really get to speak to her as much.

She also elaborated on seeking alternative chances to talk with her child's teacher, but how this was also complicated:

I mean, if she catches me, usually at 3, I can get in a little bit more; like when I come to pick her up, I can get in a little bit more, but by the time I get there at like 3, [my daughter's] ready to go, like she's trying to get my attention when she sees me, so it's still hard, and it's difficult to have a conversation with the teacher.

Based on classroom observations at a number of family-school events, parents and other family members would usually sit with their children in the classroom, but there was minimal to no interaction between parents and the families of other children. This may be because they are working parents, and they only had time to drop-off and/or pick-up their children and could not stay longer to spend time interacting with other parents. When asked if they know other parents in the classroom, most of the parents said they do not; even if they do, it is just a simple greeting in the morning, they do not know the parents' names or their child's classmate's name. In one case, when asked if she talked to other parents, one mother stated, "Just basically, how is their kid, how do they like the school, and which school is their child going next or which kindergarten is their child going next. Nothing much."

Another mother spoke about not being able to attend PTA meeting due to the school cancelling the meeting, but she tried to be involved by volunteering to buy supplies:

I haven't gotten into attending anything; like, I was going to attend the PTA meeting, but they cancelled it one day so I just didn't get the opportunity. I just stay involved with the teacher. I supply them some juice for my child because they said she doesn't like to drink the water.

These comments show us that despite parents' inability to be consistently involved in their child's daily classroom experiences, many are engaged in their children's schooling in other ways.

### **Mothers' Participation in Home Learning**

Mothers found ways to be a part of their children's school experience by spending family time with them on the weekends and school breaks as well as assisting their children in completing activities at home. Mothers viewed these as an important resource for their preschool children.

I'm not really involved, like I don't go in the classroom and see, but at home I'm doing the same thing. The same thing he's learning, I try to refresh his memory with his numbers, names, you know, different activities.

Another mother mentioned,

I help him out with reading, writing, math, and science. We use songs and whatever they are using in class, I ask him. I ask the teachers how they teach them, and I use the same methods. Most of the time, it is repetition.

Mothers usually asked their child about what happens in school to get a better understanding of what they were learning. Sometimes they would replicate the activities done in school. They also received newsletters from teachers informing them about what was happening in the classroom. For most mothers, this was a way to support their children in learning; for others, it was a way to review what their children learned so they do not forget what was taught in school.

[The teacher] has like a short newspaper...a newsletter, about things they are going to...details, more details on what they are working on. You know, so it's pretty interesting, the bullet point, would be like "ok, this is what we need done as for your part, this is what we are doing in class, for the newsletter, we are working on sounds, ending sounds..." and things like that, yes.

The vast majority of the mothers in our research were involved in their children's education by helping them with their homework. They considered homework as something valuable in their children's education and development,

and consequently they talked positively about their children doing things like writing and learning letters and numbers. Although teachers do not call the activities “homework” but instead refer to them as “extended learning” in which families and children can engage in activities together to promote family engagement, parents treated the activities as homework.

Teachers also mentioned children who attended school regularly often completed the homework. To them it showed that these parents care about their children’s academics and well-being, and teachers suggested they tend to be more involved in school activities compared to families of children who are often absent (e.g., attend school once or twice a month). Mothers also discussed their role in their children’s home learning:

*Sí. Hace poquito como en septiembre u octubre, era a principio de mes, yo quería saber qué yo puedo hacer para ayudar a mi niño a que él mueva su manita más para hacer su tarea. Porque él hacía su tarea pero la hacía muy mal. Y yo quería, ¿pero cómo la hace allá para que yo la haga aquí en casa? La maestra me dijo que comprara una plastilina que la venden en una tienda que es gordita. Y la plastilina es gorda para que él haga ejercicios. Entonces él lo tiene en la casa y él hace, para que mueva... motor skills. Entonces, para que mueva su manita más mejor. Y que comprara un lápiz gordito, para que apoyara y coja el lápiz más mejor. Y así le ayuda más mejor con la tarea o con el trabajo que está escribiendo.* [Yes. A little while ago, in September or October, it was at the beginning of the month, I wanted to know what could I do to help him move his hand properly to do his homework, because he was able to do his homework, but very badly. And I wanted [to ask] “How is she doing it there [in the class] so I can do it at home?” The teacher told me to buy a thick playdough in a store, and with this thick playdough he can do exercises. So he has it at home, and he does, so he moves... motor skills. So he can move his hands better. And [she told me] to buy a thick pencil, so he could hold the pencil better, and this is helping him with his homework or classwork, when he has to write.]

Another mother said, “Yeah. I give him work. We practice writing his name, we go out, we look at the colors, we’ll look at the shapes, stuff like that. Especially in Central Park. That’s like our best friend. We’re always over there!”

One mother described how her son’s learning was ongoing and that it was important for her to engage him in activities at home to maintain the routines established at school:

I mean I’m pretty sure my son probably thought school was only about playing with blocks and clay and painting, but he knows that he’s gonna learn something every day because he comes home talking about it.

And he knows he has homework. So like he [is] already in the routine of doing work away from school....If he had a week break it'll still be like he's in school.

Parents also use electronic devices and other technologies as tools to help children learn. Parents view these learning applications as entertaining and educational for their children. For example, mothers downloaded learning applications on a tablet for their children to learn.

She play ABC Mouse [an early learning application]. She got games, but she [finds it] hard because I downloaded the games. I downloaded uhm, math. I downloaded you know the math that shows her one, two, three. Or I downloaded uhm shapes and colors. She hardly goes on them. She'd rather go to the ABC Mouse thing.

While many mothers were not able to be physically present in their children's classroom to understand what their child does in school, they made an effort to find out by asking children to describe their day in school or communicating with the teacher. Parents also found ways to be involved in their children's learning by following the teachers' examples. They also used technologies to help their children learn in a more entertaining way. As parents gained a better understanding of what their children were learning, they would set goals for their children that ranged from academic skills to social/emotional skills.

### **Barriers to Family Involvement and Engagement in School Activities**

The mothers in our study overwhelmingly wanted to be a part of their child's PreK experiences in some way but encountered some challenges or obstacles to participating in every activity. The barriers they faced resulted in missed opportunities or a lack of opportunities. Missed opportunities largely happened because of conflicting schedules and high demands. There were times they felt as though their opinions were not taken into account. As one mother stated,

One thing I was very heartbroken about was that there wasn't a lot of open opportunities for parents to get involved, so like...mystery readers. Once a week a parent volunteers to read a story to the children. I put the idea on the table for consideration, but it never came into fruition, and every other parent in my circle has done it. So it was heartbreaking. But, I mean, we can't have it all. And at the same time, we do things that other schools don't.

One mother said she struggled with being involved due to lack of communication between teachers and parents. She described how she would spend time in the classroom and observe the learning experiences taking place, but that there was minimal interaction with teachers.

But I am not as involved as they would...as they should prep parents. It's an open door policy where you can come in and kind of look, but, I mean...they should have parents involved in projects, you know, doing things with the kids, even if it is at home, send a note, "You know, we are working on this, at home you should do this, you should do that."

In subsequent interviews this mother also spoke about the newsletters not being the most helpful because they offer no guidance or explanation from the teacher on how to address their child's individual needs. Yet she noted some improvements with her communication with the teacher:

I kind of feel comfortable on how they interact with me now versus how before they didn't really tell you anything or help you. It was more just...I would get a letter, you know, and that didn't really help. You kind of wanna talk to somebody, and kind of know, even if some extra 5 minutes, you know, just tell me how was the day, what's going on, how can I help, if he did something wrong, what can I do to help him fix it...you know, things like that. So I'd like that they communicate more.

### **Parent-Teacher Conferences**

Parent-teacher conferences give parents the opportunities to talk about children's learning, and teachers will often share insights on the types of progress they observe children making in the classroom. Parents can also talk to teachers about things that are happening at home. Conferences also open possibilities for parents and teachers to build shared understandings and expectations for children. While they can be very beneficial, parents in our study had a range of experiences engaging in parent-teacher conferences. For example, in an interview that occurred in the spring, one parent said that she attended a parent-teacher conference only one time in the fall. The school was supposed to organize parent-teacher conferences at least three times a year, twice in the fall and once in the spring, but instead only one was organized. She attributed this to the fact that the teachers were getting accustomed to a new authentic assessment system and that this had consumed much of their time. At another school, a mother also said there were no conferences scheduled:

I don't know if I signed the paper it was supposed to do for parent-teacher conference, but it sounded like they're not actually doing the conference with, with me, I don't know, so I was like "isn't there like a day for conferences?" and she kinda went through "well she's doing fine, she's above, she's like way above grade expectancy."

When teachers and parents did meet for a conference, many different topics were discussed. The mothers in our study reflected on what they learned about

their child and provided insight on how they wanted their child to grow and learn as they progressed throughout the school year. Generally the focus was on children's social/emotional abilities, as well as their language and literacy and math skills. One mother said, "[The teacher] told me that areas that he needed to improve in, which was social and numbers and name, and now he has improved in that greatly this year."

Another mom, whose older child attended the same school explained,

Well, the only thing she tells me is um about what he's doing, he needs to um focus a little bit more on his friends in class 'cuz when my son came to school, he never used to be like talkative with his friends. So she like broke him into that, so he can start talking to everybody, and now he talks to everybody. Everybody talks to him. He's more, he's more talkative than he was before.

One mother mentioned the progress her child made throughout the school year was the main focus of the parent–teacher conferences she attended.

She mentioned the whole improvement thing about the writing from the very beginning till now. So that was one of the biggest points throughout the conference. She did a big improvement in her name, recognizing a lot more words, writing on her own without having me to spell them out for her or making a sound. That was one of the main topics in the conference.

Another mother said the parent–teacher conference comprised of various topics ranging from fine motor skills to academic skills:

She talked about his motor skills. His posture, how he's holding the pencil and certain tools and instruments. Um, how he's doing in music and science. The things they are doing, um his math, his progress in, in everything.

Based on the mothers' experiences, teachers were often the ones sharing information about children's progress. The mothers would be involved by listening to their observations about their child's experiences in school, as well as learning about their child's growth across learning domains. When we asked mothers if teachers asked them to share their own thoughts on their child or school, many said that they were not offered this opportunity. Instead they would share information about their child and their home life during informal meetings, such as conversations that took place during drop-off and pick-up times. Additionally, some parents did not feel the need to share personal details because of their cultural beliefs or due to the fact they were "comfortable" with what was happening at school and how their children were learning.

Most of the parents signed up for late evening conference time slots to speak with the teacher because of their work schedules. However, based on our observations at parent–teacher conferences, subsequent conversations with the mothers, and teachers’ reports, a number of parents who signed up for the conferences did not show up for the meeting due to conflicting work schedules. They often used alternative methods of communication to make up for the missed appointments by speaking to the teacher during drop-off or pick-up time, email correspondences, or phone conferences with the teacher late in the evening in order to stay informed about their children’s progress.

### **Discussion**

In this study, a number of factors resulted in various types of family involvement that are outlined in Epstein’s framework, as well as mothers’ engagement within these PreK programs. While we relied on Epstein’s framework of family–school–community involvement, we acknowledge that conceptualizations such as these may be too heavily based on the experiences of dominant/White culture. Many of the families in our study were of ethnic minority backgrounds, and it is not always appropriate to make assertions about their engagement using this lens. Thus, we position children and families to be people “at promise” (Swadener & Lubeck, 1995) and consider their participation to be different but not less important or passive. Teachers need to be sensitive and responsive to different family backgrounds and how they may play a role in each family’s engagement style.

The mothers who participated in the interviews were constantly impressed with what their children were learning in school. Parents can work together and teach one another about different aspects of early learning and schooling. Parent-to-parent networks and social media can be very helpful in connecting families and in offering support. Summer and Summer (2014) discuss the benefits of online photo-sharing via image-hosting websites with regard to fostering community and sharing learning experiences that happen at home and at school. The mothers in our study did not have much time to talk with other parents at school or in-person, thus creating an online community could bring them together in a different way. Additionally, forums like online communities could strengthen parent education, as well as helping teachers better understand families’ home lives. However, it is important to note that not all parents have access to the internet or use online forms of communication, and they might be constrained by their work and family obligations.

Teachers also have a responsibility to educate parents on a variety of issues related to their children’s growth and learning. They are in a position to share



critical insight on early childhood curriculum and the goals and objectives for preschool experiences, including learning through play. The mothers in our study sought information from teachers during drop-off and pick-up times but could not always use that short window to gain in-depth information about their child. Teachers should consider innovative approaches in their efforts to share information and be culturally responsive to diverse parents' involvement preferences. For example, teachers could be creative with their schedule when it comes to parents who want to meet with them and consider group conferences with parents rather than individual parent-teacher conferences (LaRocque et al., 2011; Trumbull et al., 2003). Schools can also offer workshops in the parents' native languages and survey parents on their needs and interests (Auerbach, 2010). This all requires teachers to first understand parents' cultural practices and beliefs through professional development or in-service education. Teachers also need to have support from program or school administration in order to execute effective parent and family education (Wegmann & Bowen, 2010).

Sometimes schools postponed or even cancelled parent-teacher conferences and family events for various internal reasons, and parents were not notified in advance of these changes making it difficult for parents to attend. Because many parents experienced difficulty meeting with teachers at schools and within the confines of particular hours, it is imperative for teachers and families to use other approaches to connecting with each other. One study found teachers who empathize with children and families are often successful in using different teacher-family communication methods such as making phone calls, writing notes, speaking to parents before and after school, and making home visits (Peck et al., 2015). Web-based forums or social media is another way to communicate with families (Summer & Summer, 2014). As Epstein noted, communication and collaboration are essential to positive family-school-community involvement. Reciprocal collaborations can only be established when both parties build mutual shared understandings around the expectations and experiences for children's school success.

In addition, when newsletters and flyers were sent home, not all materials were translated for non-English speaking families. A recent focus group study with parents (Baker et al., 2016) found that in order to break down these barriers between schools and home and to improve family engagement, parents had suggested that schools plan family events on the weekends to help parents connect with each other, improve the language barriers between teachers and non-English speaking parents, and improve the overall communication with families such as providing notifications of events ahead of time. By providing opportunities for parents to identify the problems and find solutions to the lack of family engagement, parents and schools can work together to break these barriers.

Mothers in our sample are of different cultural backgrounds, and many are recent immigrants to the U.S. Their constructions of learning are centered on academic skills rather than play due to influences such as their beliefs and values, as well as their conceptions of schools in the U.S. They overwhelmingly talked about language and literacy skills and mathematics and how they wanted their children to be reading, writing, and able to carry out basic math activities before entering kindergarten. Before No Child Left Behind (NCLB) became law, kindergarten was play-based (Repko-Erwin, 2017). Since NCLB, kindergarten has shifted over the years to a more academic focus (Bassok et al., 2016). Mothers' responses to questions about their children's PreK experiences showed an understanding that there are shifting expectations for their child's learning, particularly in the areas of language and literacy and mathematics. High stakes accountability and the trickle-down effect on curriculum is impacting PreK education, and researchers and practitioners are raising concerns. Brown, Englehardt, Barry, and Ku (2019) found that while parents, teachers, and school administrators understood kindergarten was a place to learn academic and prosocial skills, teachers and school administrators would like it to be more play-based learning instead of constant standardized testing. Previous research found most Latina/o parents preferred home involvement over school involvement (Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Trumbull et al., 2003). Similar to the findings in research done by Henderson and Mapp (2002), our study found some parents would replicate different activities that happened in the classroom at home or asked for homework to reinforce their child's learning and to bridge the two social contexts, without recognizing the value of learning through play.

Many of the mothers in our study discussed homework as a part of the activities they would do with their children outside of school. In their minds, homework was important in helping their children retain knowledge, as well as preparing them for kindergarten. According to Hoover-Dempsey et al. (2001), parents help their children with homework because they believe they are expected to do so, in addition to having a desire to make a difference in their children's achievement and development. However, homework does not always have a positive impact on school readiness. Learning in early childhood should be open-ended, inquiry-based, active and multimodal, and should foster curiosity and wonderment. Many early childhood educators do recommend home learning activities that encompass these qualities, but the pressures to prepare children for the academic rigors of kindergarten are diminishing the potential for them to be carried out in homes and schools.

Play is one way to promote family involvement and engagement between parents and children (Parmar et al., 2004; Schoppe-Sullivan et al., 2013). In

previous research as well as in our study, Latina/o parents prefer learning over play (Tobin et al., 2013). Parents of all backgrounds should be educated about the importance of play in their children's development and learning. One of the best ways for adults to learn about the benefits of play is to actually play themselves. It is also important to keep in mind that families from different cultural backgrounds value play and child development differently. Teachers need to take into account families' "funds of knowledge" to better understand the reasons why parents privilege other approaches to learning (Moll et al., 1992; Souto-Manning et al., 2018). Moll et al. (1992) defined funds of knowledge as "historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills essential for household or individual functioning and well-being" (p. 133).

As states continue to expand access to early childhood or preschool programs, and as policy documents are drafted to define family involvement and/or engagement, we urge researchers and educational leaders to cross boundaries and collaborate with teachers and family members to develop strengths-based models around programming and practices. At the school level, teachers can help families understand their value as active contributors to their child's learning, and families can help teachers honor their perspectives and lived experiences (Henderson & Mapp, 2002; LaRocque et al., 2011).

### **Implications and Future Research**

More research is needed to identify other ways for families, schools, and communities to build stronger partnerships within the shifting landscape of PreK education wherein the expansion of publicly supported programs is increasing accountability movements within the field. Additionally, there needs to be continued advocacy around expanding conceptions of family involvement and engagement to emphasize parents and family members as active partners of their children's educational experiences. We therefore make a call for collaboration so parents and teachers can work together and foster reciprocal relationships. As Epstein (1995) indicated, parental involvement is a three-way partnership between the school, family, and community to support children's academics. Future research should examine different ways for schools and teachers to promote more family engagement activities during the hours that fit parents' schedule (e.g., weekend or evening events). Teachers and schools should also incorporate more culturally responsive activities for better family engagement outcomes. Educators should facilitate educational workshops in schools and community spaces to help parents understand what their child is learning and provide materials on ways to help their children at home. Teachers can also attend professional learning sessions around families

and communities to better understand families' home lives. Programs such as early education, parenting education, health services, and family support services have also been found to be effective for parents to facilitate their children's academic, social/emotional, and physical development (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). These types of home involvement activities and family support have been linked to school achievement as well as positive attitudes toward school (Jeynes, 2012). These recommendations should take into consideration children's individual needs and the cultural beliefs and practices of families (Souto-Manning et al., 2018).

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**Acknowledgements:** The authors would like to acknowledge the Foundation for Child Development, which generously funded the Case Studies on Authentic Assessment Project in UPK Citywide. We also thank the members of the New York City Early



Childhood Research Network for sharing useful feedback on our study. Last, but not least, we are grateful for all the participants in our study who graciously offered their time, knowledge, and perspective. This work was supported by the Foundation for Child Development under Grant 7F223-0001. The authors have no financial interests or benefits from the direct application of the research.

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