“So We Would all Help Pitch In:” The Family Literacy Practices of Low-income African
American Mothers of Preschoolers

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1. Introduction

As a language-based skill, emergent literacy falls squarely within the practice of speech-language pathology (American Speech-Language and Hearing Association [ASHA], 2001). Emergent literacy builds on oral language skills, such as vocabulary and phonological awareness, and applies them to a formal printed code. Code-related skills focus on the understanding of printed symbols; for example, reading in English requires understanding that words are made up of letters which represent sounds, and writing requires using letter-to-sound mapping in order to spell words (Dickinson & McCabe, 2001; Sparks & Reese, 2013; Washington, 2001). Emergent literacy is a significant factor in school achievement and differences have been documented, both in skills and achievement, related to race and social class.

Relative to White and middle-income children, African American and low-income children are reported to have fewer literacy skills and are disproportionately at risk for being unready for kindergarten (Lee, Autry, Fox, & Williams, 2008). Despite the likely contribution of numerous environmental factors, including neighborhood safety, exposure to toxins, nutrition, school resources, teacher characteristics, and the privileging of mainstream culture (e.g., Adger, Wolfram, & Christian, 2007; Aikens & Barbarin, 2008; Alim & Smitherman, 2012; Currie, 2005; Kukla-Acevedo, 2009; McKown & Weinstein, 2008; Miranda, Kim, Reiter, Galeano, & Maxson, 2009; Reichman, 2005), much of the research on literacy development within communication sciences and disorders (CSD) and related fields has focused on maternal interaction. Specifically, quantitative studies report race and class differences related to maternal practices such as shared-book reading, access to books, and amount and “quality” of talk (Hart & Risley,

1995; Neuman & Celano, 2001; Raikes et al., 2006). Yet, these studies employ a White middle-class model of family practices, use standardized assessments that obscure culturally-based family practices and child competencies, and miss heterogeneity and, in some cases, resilience within low-income African American families (Hammer, Farkas, & Maczuga 2010; McLoyd, 1990; Prins & Toso, 2008). This deficit-based perspective focuses on what African American families are *not* doing as opposed to what they *are* and fails to offer a first-person perspective on family practices. In contrast, qualitative studies provide descriptive accounts of family literacy practices that value participants' perspectives, recognize cultural variation, document heterogeneity, and identify resilience (Mapp, 2003; Purcell-Gates, 1996). Yet, the qualitative literature on literacy practices within low-income African American families is relatively small and dated.

The present study builds on this prior literature by examining mothers' first-person perspectives regarding the literacy practices of low-income African American families. Specifically, we address two key questions: 1. What in-home practices do mothers report using to promote child literacy development? 2. Who do mothers report as helping with in-home literacy practices?

2. Literature Review

Researchers report social class and racial differences in children's language and literacy skills (Dickinson & Snow, 1987; Foster & Miller, 2007; Restrepo et al., 2006) due to family and home factors (Storch & Whitehurst, 2002). A few studies have documented poor outcomes for emergent literacy skills in low-income African American children relative to their White peers (Hammer et al., 2010; Hindman, Skibbe, Miller, & Zimmerman, 2010; Qi, Kaiser, Milan, & Hancock, 2006). These studies also demonstrate greater emergent literacy outcomes for

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4 children of mothers with higher education and higher income levels (see also Puranik, Lonigan,
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6 & Kim, 2011). While these studies have highlighted specific demographic variables and their
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8 associations with child outcomes, this review focuses on those demographic studies that have
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10 linked child outcomes with group differences in maternal/paternal practices. Specifically, we
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12 have organized this literature according to method, first reviewing quantitative studies of
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14 emergent literacy based on race and social class, including those that focus on variability within
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16 race, and second, reviewing qualitative studies focused on documenting emergent literacy
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18 practices within African American families.
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23 24 **2.1 Quantitative Research on Emergent Literacy and Race and Social Class**

25
26 In a well-known study, researchers examined race and social class and their influence
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28 on children's vocabulary (Hart & Risley, 1995). The Kansas study included 42 families, 13
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30 upper class socioeconomic status (SES), 10 middle-class SES, 13 lower SES, and six families
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32 on welfare. Of the 17 African American children in the study, one African American family
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34 was upper SES income, three were middle-class SES, seven were lower SES, and six were on
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36 welfare. Assessment of vocabulary growth included detailed coding and the Peabody Picture
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38 Vocabulary Test-Revised (PPVT-R; Dunn & Dunn, 1981). Social class accounted for
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40 variations in children's vocabularies: According to observations of parental practices, the
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42 researchers found that parents on welfare spoke less and used more discouraging words to their
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44 children resulting in lower child vocabularies, whereas professional families talked more and
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46 used more encouraging words to their children, resulting in larger vocabularies. The authors
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48 concluded that middle-class family practices and child outcomes were superior to those of
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50 lower social classes. Of particular interest, findings from more recent studies have indicated
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4 that the association between parenting behaviors, such as maternal sensitivity, and child
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6 outcomes may differ according to race (e.g., Dotterer, Iruka, & Pungello, 2012).
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9 Focused specifically on parental involvement in children's reading, Coley (2002)
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11 included a diverse sample of Black, White, Hispanic, and Asian kindergartners from the Early
12
13 Childhood Longitudinal Study, class of 1998-1999 (ECLS-K). Family SES was also diverse,
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15 including families receiving welfare. Sixty-two percent of higher SES parents read to their
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17 children compared to 36% of lower SES parents. Although the differences were small, Asian
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19 and White parents read to their children more on a daily basis than Black parents (see also
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21 Baker, Cameron, Rimm-Kaufman, & Grissmer, 2012).
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25 Similarly, Yarosz and Barnett (2001) identified family characteristics predicting family
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27 reading activities for young children (0-6 years), using data from the National Household
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29 Education Survey of 1995. The sample was racially diverse and included families from diverse
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31 SES groups, including single parents. Parents were asked how often children were read to by a
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33 family member. Based on parent interviews, at every educational level, African American and
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35 Hispanic non-English speaking families read less frequently than White families. In African
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37 American and Hispanic families, larger decreases in reading time were linked with an increase
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39 in the number of siblings. However, there were smaller decreases in reading when the number
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41 of siblings increased to three or more. Household income and number of parents in the home
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43 did not impact reading frequency.
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50 Raikes et al., (2006) explored aspects of book reading and child language and cognitive
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52 development at 14, 24, and 36 months. Data was derived from the racially diverse Early Head
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54 Start Research and Evaluation Project. Mothers' verbal ability (The Woodcock-Johnson
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56 Psychoeducational Battery-Revised, Picture Vocabulary Test; Woodcock & Johnson, 1989),
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4 book reading practices, book reading frequency, and book access were assessed. At 24 months,
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6 African American mothers and English-speaking Hispanic mothers were less likely to report
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8 reading to their children daily than White peers. Mothers who were White, highly educated,
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10 and parenting firstborns reported reading to their children more consistently during all three
11
12 stages. Researchers found variability among low-income mothers. Specifically, maternal
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14 education, verbal ability, and participation in Early Head Start increased the likelihood that
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16 mothers reported reading daily to their children at 24 months. This trend was also seen at 36
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18 months, along with African American children and Spanish-speaking Hispanic children being
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20 two-thirds as likely to be read to than their White peers.
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26 Using data from the national Early Head Start Research and Evaluation Project,
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28 Cristofaro and Tamis-LeMonda (2011) examined oral language conversations between
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30 mothers and children and school readiness. The sample comprised racially diverse mothers
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32 from diverse educational backgrounds. Video-taped home mother-child play sessions and child
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34 assessments, including the PPVT-III (Dunn & Dunn, 1997) and The Woodcock-Johnson Tests
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36 of Achievement, Letter-Word Identification and Applied Problems (Woodcock & Johnson,
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38 1989) were used. African American mothers asked more wh-questions than Latina and
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40 Caucasian peers. Mothers who had greater lexical diversity and who asked more wh-questions
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42 had children who scored higher on the PPVT-III (e.g., receptive vocabulary), which in turn
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44 predicted their child's school readiness.
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51 Finally, Serpell, Baker, and Sonnenschien (2005) studied teaching approach using
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53 a multi-method study with a racially- and socioeconomically-diverse sample of Baltimore
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55 families. Children ranged in age from pre-K to third grade. Two approaches emerged.
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57 The skills-based approach was characterized by teaching reading and literacy skills
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4 through practice or repetition activities, such as tracing letters, writing names, using
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6 flashcards, or watching educational TV. The entertainment-based approach entailed
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8 flexible methods such as, reading storybooks, playing games involving print, and telling
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10 stories. More low-income families used the skills-based approach, whereas more middle-
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12 income families used the entertainment-based approach. The entertainment-based
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14 approach was positively associated with multiple emergent literacy competencies (e.g.,
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16 phonological awareness, reading comprehension, word recognition). A skills-based
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18 approach showed a zero or negative correlation. Further, low-income children taught by
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20 the skills-based approach were read to less, experienced less affective reading
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22 interactions, were read to by less fluent siblings, and enjoyed reading less, in contrast to
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24 middle-income peers using the highly emotive entertainment-based approach (see also
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26 Fitzgerald, Spiegel, & Cunningham, 1991; Lynch, Anderson, Anderson, & Shapiro,
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35 2006).

36 Some studies focus on variations within low-income, African American samples.
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38 Britto, Brooks-Gunn, and Griffin (2006) explored maternal reading and teaching patterns in
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40 low-income African American families. African American mothers (ages 14-20), none of
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42 whom had completed high school at the beginning of the study and their preschoolers were
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44 recruited through the Newark Young Family Study. For mothers, reading level, receptive
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46 vocabulary, shared book reading interactions, and puzzle solving assistance were assessed, and
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48 for children, school readiness and expressive and receptive language were measured.
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51 Researchers found variations in maternal reading styles. *Story-reader* mothers concentrated on
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53 reading from the text without comments. *Story-teller* mothers used decontextualized language,
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55 solicited input from children, gave feedback, and utilized expressive language. Children's
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expressive language was linked to mothers' decontextual and expressive language used during shared book reading. Mothers who were highly engaged during shared book reading and teaching activities had children with stronger expressive language skills in comparison to children who received low levels of maternal engagement. Maternal high school completion, as reported two years after baseline, was positively related to higher children's receptive vocabulary score.

Also documenting variability within race, a study by Roberts, Jergens, and Burchinal (2005) of low-income African American families from southern cities examined the role of home literacy practices in language and emergent literacy skills, including shared book reading. Researchers measured frequency of shared book reading and videotaped interactions of mothers reading to their preschoolers to assess maternal reading strategies (e.g., simple description, elaborate description). Mothers using more book reading strategies had children with higher receptive vocabulary, as measured by the PPVT-R, at age three and at kindergarten entry.

2.2 Qualitative Research on Emergent Literacy Practices Within Low-income African American Families

In contrast to quantitative studies, qualitative research studies have focused on what low-income African American families are doing as opposed to what they are not doing, relative to their White middle-class peers. A small body of qualitative research identified the home literacy practices of low-income, urban African American families and young children. In a classic study, Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines, (1988) conducted longitudinal fieldwork with "Shay Avenue" families. Focusing on low-income African American families that included preschoolers, the researchers found that contrary to deficit perspectives, literacy was a routine

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4 part of children's home lives. The collaborators described parent-child reading activities.
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7 Homes were rich with printed materials, including letters, greeting cards, newspapers,
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9 children's books, and prayer books. Over time they documented children's scribbles
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11 developing into letters.
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14 Similarly, in the Boston/Cambridge area, Purcell-Gates (1996) used participant
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16 observation to describe in home uses of print and young children's emergent literacy
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18 knowledge. The study included 10 African American families, some with preschoolers.
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20 Researchers documented print items used in the home (e.g., bills, TV guides), functional uses
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22 of literacy (e.g., reading, reading letters), and use of print in neighborhood outings (e.g., store
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24 signs). Families used print for entertainment (e.g., reading newspapers, playing board games)
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26 and daily routines (e.g., cooking, shopping). Children also gained written language knowledge
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28 by observing family members reading and writing.
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33 Although the study was not specifically focused on literacy development, but a study of
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35 resilient maternal management strategies of 18 African American single mothers in a "high"
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37 risk neighborhood, Jarrett and Jefferson (2003), described "in-home learning strategies" to
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39 facilitate the "intellectual" development of preschoolers. Based on interviews, mothers
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41 described teaching their children the alphabet and colors and shapes, and using educational
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43 tools as part of teaching (e.g., songs, memory games, magnetic letters, books). Additionally,
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45 some of the mothers reported using routines and words of encouragement in their home literacy
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47 practices. In addition to mothers, siblings, grandparents, and nieces were mentioned as engaged
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49 in reading to children.
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55 Ethnographic studies with samples of older children report similar findings. Mapp
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57 (2003) conducted research with racially diverse, low-income families, including nine African
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American parents with children in a kindergarten-fifth grade school in Boston. The researchers reported home-based activities that included verbal support, encouragement, and praise to motivate children to do well in school, and help with homework. Parents described how their children loved to read books and how they encouraged them to read. Mapp (2003) identified grandparents and siblings who provided help with homework, as well as providing indirect verbal support and encouragement.

Located in an urban African American neighborhood, Jackson and Remillard (2005) used qualitative interviews and observations to explore low-income, African American parents' home-based involvement in their children's (2nd, 3rd graders) learning. The researcher found that mothers created learning opportunities for their children, including purchasing educational materials (e.g., flashcards) and computer games and board games. Mothers also reported checking their children's homework.

In an ethnographic study Harry, Klingner, and Hart (2005) examined in-home practices of low-income African American families in an urban setting. The investigators identified extensive and engaged reading practices. In a home visit, after the mother reported how much she loved to read to her children, her six-year-old led the researcher to a room and revealed a shelf full of children's books. Demonstrating multiple print artifacts in low-income homes, a grandmother presented her granddaughter's scrapbook, filled with report cards, notes home from the teacher, mother's day cards, and other mementos of school achievements.

In sum, key strengths characterize research on child emergent literacy and the role of family. Scholars have identified child competencies associated with emergent literacy, including the meaning and content of emergent literacy skills for young children. Empirical investigations have documented how early literacy skills and practices vary demographically.

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4 Comparative quantitative studies have identified the critical role of social class and race in child
5 literacy and family practices, although some studies document racial differences even when
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7 controlling for social class. Quantitative studies with African American samples have reported
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9 variability *within* low-income African American families with respect to family practices and
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11 child literacy outcomes. Using first-hand accounts, qualitative researchers have described
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13 supportive family (including extended kin) practices associated with child literacy
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15 development.
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21 Several limitations characterize existing research. Some demographic studies infer
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23 that differences in child literacy outcomes suggest shortcomings in family practices. Such
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25 studies use White, middle-class models of family life and biased standardized assessments
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27 (Dudley-Marling & Lucas, 2009; Miller & Sperry, 2012; Prins & Toso, 2008), failing to
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29 consider positive culturally-based parenting practices and positive child literacy development.
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32 Some demographic research emphasizes outcomes rather than family processes, overgeneralize
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34 negative findings to all low-income, African American families, and conflate race and social
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36 class (Coll et al., 1996; cf. Hammer et al., 2010; McLoyd, 1990). Qualitative literacy research is
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38 underdeveloped. Relatively few studies focus on family practices and child literacy
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40 development of preschoolers, and insights derived from older studies may not reflect current
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42 family conditions (Jarrett & Jefferson, 2003; Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988). Building on this
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44 prior literature, we offer findings from a recent qualitative study that privileges the perceptions
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46 and first-person perspectives of low-income African American mothers regarding the literacy
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48 practices in their households.
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3. Research Design

3.1. Research Focus

Data used for this article derived from a study of school readiness. This project included low-income, African American mothers (described below) of preschoolers transitioning to kindergarten and preschool and kindergarten teachers. Focusing on the different perspectives of participants, the study examined beliefs about child school readiness abilities, parenting practices, and parental school involvement.

3.2. Methodological Approach

Our qualitative methods were informed by an interpretive approach that examines the meaning making processes and daily-lived experiences and practices of participants (Brantlinger, Jimenez, Klingner, Pugach, & Richardson, 2005; Cresswell, 2007). This approach privileges the life knowledge and stories of groups that are often marginalized (Krumer-Nevo, 2005). The interpretive approach helped us to better understand participants' meanings, experiences, and behaviors around parent involvement and child literacy. Moreover, in their focus on the lived experience and participant agency, qualitative methods can identify positive practices and behaviors that are often overlooked in conventional research that uses mainstream middle-class models (Goode, 2002; Ungar, 2003).

3.2.1. School setting. Mothers were recruited from the Mariette Myers¹ Head Start Program located in the Lincoln Heights² neighborhood. Head Start is a federally funded program developed to enhance the development of economically- and socially-disadvantaged preschoolers (Office of Head Start, 2015).

¹ Pseudonym for Head Start program

² Pseudonym for neighborhood

3.2.2. Sample and recruitment. An African American female researcher recruited parents by introducing the project at parent meetings at the school site. The University's Institutional Review Board approved all procedures. Purposive sampling was used to recruit parents (Patton, 1990). Twenty participants who met the following criteria were recruited: 1) identified as African American; 2) were at least 18 years of age; 3) had a household income at or lower than 185% of the Federal Poverty Level³; and 4) had at least one target child at the Myers Center who was transitioning to kindergarten (see Table 1).

3.2.3. Data collection. Interviews took place between June 2012 and December 2012. An African American female interviewer recruited all participants and conducted all interviews. Interviews ranged from 60-90 minutes. We used an interview-guide approach (Patton, 1990) with open ended, semi-structured questions. Relevant to our present focus and analysis of maternal and family practices, we asked participants two key questions: 1) What are some of the things that you are doing to help your child get ready for kindergarten? 2) Who are some of the people helping you to get your child ready for kindergarten? Interviews were conducted at participants' homes or at the preschool site. Participants received a \$20.00 gift certificate for their participation.

3.2.4. Data analysis. Interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. NVivo, a qualitative data management program facilitated the coding process by allowing us to classify and sort the data from the interviews (Bazeley & Jackson, 2013; Tesch, 2013). NVivo

³ We used the 185% poverty line that is consistent with governmental programs, such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), the National School Lunch Program, the Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program, and the Children's Health Insurance Program, and it is the poverty level used by Head Start where we recruited our caregivers from. This poverty line/threshold is typically used by other poverty researchers (see for example, Burdette & Whitaker (2005) whose work focuses on Head Start). Our participants completed a screener identifying the various types of public assistance they received (WIC, TANF, etc.), as well as utilization of Head Start.

allows the analyst to code directly to the electronic copy of the transcript or to manually code the transcript and then transfer the codes to the electronic copy. Initial a priori codes (e.g., literacy practices, literacy skills) derived from guiding questions and substantive literatures, and served as sensitizing concepts. They were complemented with new or emergent codes (e.g., kin-based literacy assistance, sibling literacy assistants) during multiple passes through the data (Mayan, 2009; Lofland, Snow, Anderson, & Lofland, 2005; Patton, 1990).

Coding included the PI and two research assistants. Prior to coding the transcripts, team meetings were held to discuss substantive literatures/debates on school readiness and to review the logic and practices of analysis (including coding). During early team meetings, the PI and two team members met to discuss preliminary readings of several transcripts as a way to familiarize ourselves with the data. Next, two team members and the PI coded three transcripts independently. We selected the most detailed transcripts because we believed that they would provide the greatest range of codes. The two team members then each coded half of the remaining transcripts. As we began focusing on specific areas of interest, such as kin contributions to mothers' home literacy practices, the team members and the PI returned to relevant sections of the transcripts and coded those data again. We used data displays to aid in data reduction, to facilitate interpretation, and to identify patterns within the data (Miles & Huberman, 1994). These included matrix displays for each participant, for each question, as well as displays comparing participants along demographic characteristics. Throughout the process, we wrote analytic memos to further develop our analyses and interpretations of the data (Charmaz, 2003).

3.2.5. Managing data quality. We used several strategies to enhance data quality. We began with a culturally relevant protocol. The questions were based on the PI's long-term

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4 experience working with low-income, African American families in Lincoln Heights and
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6 similar communities (Jarrett & Jefferson, 2003; Jarrett, Jefferson, & Kelly, 2010; Jarrett, Bahar,
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8 & Taylor, 2011). A culturally competent, African American female interviewer familiar with
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10 the Lincoln Heights community conducted all interviews. With interview training, she
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12 conducted interviews that were conversational in nature, non-judgmental, and guided by
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14 active listening and probing. Field notes were also taken during the interviews. Spending
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16 time at the site in informal and scheduled meetings, the interviewer established rapport with
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18 parents prior to the interviews. To enhance the reliability of the coding process multiple
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20 transcripts and data segments (e.g., codes related to kin support of maternal literacy activities)
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22 were coded by the PI and two research assistants. Coding disagreements (e.g., name of code,
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24 meaning of code) were resolved through a group discussion process (coding by consensus)
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26 (Hill et al., 2005; Olesen, Dries, Hatton, Chico, & Schatzman, 1994; Willging, Waitzkin, &
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28 Nicdao, 2008). Development of the code book also included group discussions. Through
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30 multiple reviews of the data and resulting codes, the code book was developed and included
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32 definitions and exemplars. This collaborative process added greater depth and clarity to
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34 interpretations. We gained feedback on our findings through peer debriefings and conference
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36 presentations.

4. Findings

4.1. Focused Areas of In-home Literacy Practices

50 We describe the child literacy abilities that mothers said they targeted through their in-
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52 home practices. When we asked mothers what they were doing to prepare their children for
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54 kindergarten, they identified three broad literacy areas, reading, spelling, and writing, and
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56 detailed how they promoted these child abilities.
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4 **4.1.1. Emergent reading skills targeted through in-home practices.** Mothers
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7 targeted six child emergent reading skills as part of their in-home activities (see Table 2).
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9 **4.1.1.1. Book reading.** Consistent with the concept of shared book reading, 17 mothers
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11 reported on reading activities with their children (Britto et al., 2006; Roberts et al.,
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13 2005). For example, Ariel stated: “I read books to Asia and Tierra three times a week” Ashlie
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15 said: “I read to Precious in the afternoon...I read her a story at night.” Courtney reported on
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17 reading to Niara: “I read to her at least one book a night.” Dawn told us: “I wanted Darius to
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19 actually kind of learn to read, like three letter words, two and three letter words and that was
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21 my main focus...I work with him on those.” Mothers encouraged independent reading through
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23 *mimicry, and play-acting*. Courtney shared that Niara imitated the adult reader role: “Niara ...
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25 sets her teddy bears and her dolls up like she’s reading to them.” Teyana’s preschooler Raven,
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27 like Niara, took on an acting role in her reading efforts: “She doesn’t know how to read, yet,
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29 but if you put a book in front of her, she can basically act out what’s going on in the book.”
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36 Books were widely discussed as being used to support children’s reading competencies.
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38 LaSenda reported: “I have Marcus [on] starter reading books.” Malliqua told us: I
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40 would...give Kennie little booklets, books and stuff.” Ashlie’s account was similar: “I buy
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42 [Precious] different kinds of books, reading books, coloring books.” Some mothers described
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44 home libraries. Amira told us: “Imani and Ahmad can choose their own books, because we
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46 have like a little library.” Similarly, Monique reported: “Jamal has a whole bookcase full of
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48 books.”
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53 **4.1.1.2. Alphabet mastery.** Consistent with the concepts of letter knowledge (Evans &
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55 Shaw, 2008; Ghoting & Martin-Diaz, 2013), fourteen participants reported teaching
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57 preschoolers their ABC’s. Mastery of the alphabet represented the most basic literacy skill that
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4 mothers associated with school readiness. The following examples illustrated this focus. Ashlie
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6 quickly described the ABC's when queried: "I was teaching Precious her ABC's." Anika
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8 similarly stated: "The parent, me helping her at home as far as things she needs to learn...[like]
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10 ABC's." Aaliyah declared: "To be sure Darryl was ready [for kindergarten], we made sure he
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12 knew his alphabet."
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16 Participants also identified the instructional strategies used to help children learn their
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18 ABC's. Some mothers used the practice of *reviewing* or "*going over*" the alphabet with their
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20 preschoolers. For example, Monique asserted that she was "constantly going over work,
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22 ABC's" with Jamal. Malliaqua stated that she helped Kennie verbally *recite* the letters of the
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24 alphabet: "We would ask Kennie to say his ABCs." Crystal reported that she asked Tyrone to
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26 recite the alphabet through *singing* the letters: "We have our songs we do with the alphabets."
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31 **4.1.1.3. Word and letter recognition.** Similar to skills highlighted in the literature on
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33 emergent literacy (Dickinson & McCabe, 2001; Sparks & Reese, 2013), eight mothers focused
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35 on word recognition, while six focused on letter recognition as part of developing children's
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37 reading skills. Word and letter and recognition were distinct from learning the ABC's, which
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39 was considered memorization without being able to distinguish letters. Monique's comments
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41 captured this subtle distinction. She said:
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45 When [children] learn the alphabet, they learn it in that song way...and they
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47 just singing it. I think they should also be able to recognize it and don't say it in
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49 that song version. When Jamal gets to the LMNOP, he says it like it just one
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51 whole word...So I think that instead of teaching them in that song version, if it
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53 could be done individually.
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4 *Showing* (introducing, presenting) and *telling* (explaining) were instructional strategies
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6 that some mothers used to develop children’s skills. Using colors as prompts for word
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8 recognition, LaShawn stated: “I’ve been introducing or showing Jada...a word a day. That
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10 really haven’t been working, so I give her a word a week now. So she remembers a word she
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12 wanna’ remember like ‘the’ and ‘red.’” Malliqua told how showing flash cards helped Kennie
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14 recognize words: “I show Kennie little shapes and colors and stuff like that, flash cards, you
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16 know, with the shapes. They have like different shapes. You find the shape. Like if it says
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18 rectangle, find...the little picture or whatever.”
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24 Some mothers reported using *pointing* to help their preschoolers with letter and word
25
26 recognition. Ariel, Asia and Tierra’s mother, told us: “Asia’s acknowledging the different
27
28 letters...She brings [the poster board] to me and she starts pointing her letters out.” Ariel noted
29
30 with pride: “We have her letters down pat, as far as recognition.” Diamond also said she used
31
32 *pointing* and newspapers in the home to help her daughter identify words: “If I’m looking at the
33
34 newspaper, I tell Shaneesha, ‘Point out certain letters. What’s this letter?’”
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38 Brandy told us that she used the oral strategies of *recitation* and *showing* to
39
40 promote DeAndre’s word recognition skills: “He calls out words that he recognizes,
41
42 that he’s been introduced to...to be able to recognize letters, so he can begin to read.”
43
44 Kim described a board used to enhance Demetrius’ word recognition: “[I] made a game where
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46 he can find like words.... He had like ten words on his board and we would just swap them out
47
48 as he would learn them.”
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53 Mothers were sometimes challenged in their letter and word recognition activities.
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55 Monique said Jamal was stumped by the letter H: “For the longest time he would get the ‘H’
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57 mixed up,” Monique stated that she responded by utilizing multiple techniques (*showing*,
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4 *pointing, and telling*): “We literally would hold up the ‘H’ with a heart and just trying to tell
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6 him, ‘H’ stands for heart...Just finding a whole bunch of words with the letter ‘H’ in it and just
7
8 constantly pointing out to him.”
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11 Similarly, LaShawn described a “fun” activity to help Jada recognize words:”
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13 She’ll just get stuck [on a word]....So we tried this word game, the word
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15 scramble....So we write the words down on the flash card and we’ll turn them over and
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17 try to get her to match it.” Further, LaShawn described using an electronic device to
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19 improve word recognition: “It’s a...*Leap Frog* toy...If she doesn’t know the words she
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21 will push the word and it’ll tell her the word.”
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26 Malliqua told how she used *encouragement* to address Kennie’s word recognition
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28 challenges: “I’m trying to see how can I get Kennie to really think[I say], ‘Remember now,
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30 think now.’ But he’s doing good ‘cuz one day we were walking he said, ‘Mama look; That
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32 says ‘go.’” Despite challenges encountered by her son, Monique also disclosed that she
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34 *encouraged* his efforts: “I’m still pushing Jamal at home myself, you know, so he can
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36 recognize some words.”
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41 **4.1.1.4. Sight words.** Five mothers reported helping children learn sight words.
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43 Aligning with the emergent literacy literature, sight words are commonly used words that
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45 children commit to memory as part of learning to read quickly and accurately with no effort to
46
47 decode (Ehri, 1995; see also Burgess, Lundgren, Lloyd, & Pianta, 2001). Highlighting their
48
49 importance, Courtney asserted: “I want Niara to get really more focused on her sight words.
50
51 Like I’m working with Niara on basic sight words just to help her reading fluency.” Similarly,
52
53 Ike’s mother Kalia said: “They’re kinda’ expecting kids to come in knowing a lot of sight
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55 words....That was the kind of the things we worked on.” Destiny focused on teaching tools: “I
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4 had started with flashcards with Marquis on like sight words, so he could start reading.” Kim
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6 similarly noted: “I looked up sight words on the Internet. I had flashcards already, of course
7
8 [for Demetrius].” Nia mentioned that she was “working with Jalen with sight words,” and said
9
10 she purchased books specifically to use to memorize sight words.
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14 **4.1.1.5. Vocabulary.** Consistent with the focus on vocabulary in the emergent literacy
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16 literature (Sparks & Reese, 2013; Washington, 2001), four mothers were promoting an
17
18 expanded vocabulary, an inventory of accessible words that preschoolers had in their
19
20 repertoires. Destiny used an outing that enlarged Marquis’ vocabulary: “We went to the
21
22 museum because he wanted to see the dinosaurs. So now he knows all the dinosaurs’ names. I
23
24 can’t pronounce half of them, but apparently he can.” Crystal and LaShawn identified other
25
26 tools to promote their children’s vocabulary. Crystal said she “loved” the Hooked on Phonics
27
28 program because, “it builds vocabulary.” LaShawn reported how she used TV programs with
29
30 Jada: “I’ll put on different programs and try to introduce different words. Like Sesame Street,
31
32 they’ll try to introduce words to her.” To enhance Jamal’s vocabulary, Monique reported
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34 creatively using a picture book “that tells him all the parts of your body, the different types of
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36 clothes that we wear.”
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43 **4.1.2. Emergent spelling and writing skills targeted through in-home practices.**

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45 In addition to reading-related skills, mothers said they targeted spelling and multiple
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47 writing abilities through their in-home activities (See Table 3).
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50 **4.1.2.1. Spelling.** Often noted in relation to literacy development (Puranik et al., 2011),
51
52 eleven mothers focused on spelling through their in-home practices. Spelling entailed
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54 children’s ability to write or name the letters of words in an accepted sequence according to
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56 standardized usage. For example, Ashlie said she worked with Precious on the spelling words
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58 “sent home from preschool” and that Precious “knew how to spell.” In preparation for
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4 kindergarten, Aaliyah told how she promoted spelling competence: “I made sure Darryl knew
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6 how to spell some words, some three letter words.” Amira shared: “I’ve been working with
7
8 Imani and Ahmad, [so] they know how to . . . spell their names.”
9

10
11 Mothers described verbal *recitation* practices to promote spelling acumen. Ariel said:
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13 “Asia knows how to spell her name . . . I ask her to spell her name.” Amira proudly stated:
14
15 “Ahmad likes to spell them [words] out [loud].” Some mothers instructed children with
16
17 spelling through written formats. LaShawn said that she encouraged Jada to “write the words
18
19 down on the flashcards.” Nia stated: “Jalen writes down words and then, sometimes he asks me
20
21 how to spell some words.”
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25 **4.1.2.2. Writes own name/writes letters/words.** Consistent with previous literature on
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27 literacy development (Puranik et al., 2011), name writing was mentioned by eleven mothers
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29 and letter writing was mentioned by eleven mothers. Often mothers began by sharing their
30
31 general writing experiences with their children. For example, Aaliyah told us: “I am helping
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33 Darryl to write.” Focusing on frequency, Kalia told us that “actually, Ike do a lot of writing.”
34
35 Other mothers spoke specifically about the writing process. Diamond said: “I tell Shaneesha
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37 just sit down and write her name.” Malliqua reported that she was preparing Kennie for
38
39 kindergarten by having him “write on paper his name and stuff like that.” Destiny, Marquis’
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41 mother, described the book she used: “It has the alphabets already written in it and . . . you write
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43 your ABCs.”
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50 Mothers used the instructional technique of *tracing*, or the process of following
51
52 the outline of existing letters and words, to enhance writing abilities (Hawken,
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54 Johnston, & McDonnell, 2005, see also Cosby, McLaughlin, & Derby, 2009).
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56 Tracing was frequently mentioned with name writing. For example, Dawn told us: “I
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4 had Darius sit down and I had him trace his name, so he be able to write his name
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6 pretty good when he get in kindergarten.” Monique stated: “I’m like, Jamal, that’s how
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8 you’re going to learn how to write your name, by tracing the letters and stuff like that.”
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10
11 Several mothers revealed child writing challenges. For example, Anika shared this
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13 common concern about name writing: “The only problem that Ebony had... she couldn't get
14
15 certain letters down right.” Teyana said that her daughter was struggling with name writing:
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17 “It’s just hard getting her to write her name.... it’s just not where it need to be.” In response,
18
19 some mothers addressed writing challenges through *practice sessions*. Amira described
20
21 practice opportunities: “Imani is kind of wild with her handwriting.... We are doing worksheets,
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23 trying to get the hand form together.” Destiny was concerned with Marquis’s “sloppy writing,”
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25 and also reported on her work sessions: “We worked with [Marquis’ writing]... so he can get
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27 up his penmanship.”
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33 34 **4.2. Supports to Maternal Literacy Activities**

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36 We asked mothers who were the people helping them to prepare their children for
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38 kindergarten. In addition to their own reported child literacy activities, all of the
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40 participants described support from other family members, including partners,
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42 grandparents, aunts, and siblings. This support included varying combinations of resident
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44 and non-resident adults and younger children within the household (see Table 4).
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49 **4.2.1. Partners.** Fourteen mothers said husbands or companions, who were also
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51 children’s fathers, were a source of child literacy support. Reading was an important
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53 activity. LaShawn said of her husband: “Shiloh is reading [to Jada].” Courtney reported on her
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55 coresident partner: “Geo does a lot as far as like the reading... with Niara.” LaSenda who lived
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57 with her partner offered a similar story: “Marcus’s father works with him.... Joahkim does the
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4 reading.” Kim told of her partner’s complementary reading role: “Javion does the same stuff,
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6 sit and read with Demetrius.” Destiny and Amira highlighted the types of print materials
7
8 their husbands used. Destiny said: “Jasen’s always bringing Marquis home postcards from
9
10 where he has been and then he tells Marquis... ‘can you find it on the map?’” Amira told us:
11
12 “Amahl [is] reading comic books to Ahmad.” Writing assistance was also reported. Monique
13
14 said: “My husband Stephon is also left-handed. So my son is left-handed. So when it comes to
15
16 the writing part, Stephon would be the one that would do the writing with him.” Similarly,
17
18 Ariel said of her partner and Asia and Tierra’s dad: “Keywon will go over the poster board with
19
20 them... They write their names.” Some mothers reported that partners assisted with particular
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22 literacy activities, such as homework. Anika said of her partner Daniel: “Ebony’s father also
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24 helped with homework.” Similarly Dawn said: “Clayton’s very involved. He help Darius with
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26 his homework every day.”
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33 **4.2.2. Grandparents.** Six mothers identified literacy assistance from their resident
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35 or non-resident parents (preschoolers’ grandparents). Grandmothers’ assistance included
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37 helping children with reading and homework. LaSenda told us: “Marcus’s grandmother
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39 Anita does reading.” Courtney said: “Niara and my mother read books.” “Aaliyah’s account was
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41 comparable: “Jenny reads some of the same things I do [to Darryl].” Teyana’s account of her
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43 mother Bonnie continued this theme: “She just sits and reads to Raven.” Tenisha reported that
44
45 both of her parents provided support with homework: “LaVicia helped Malik with “a small
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47 daily quiz of just stuff Malik learned every day.” Chrys “goes over what Malik did in school
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49 today.”
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55 **4.2.3. Aunts.** In three instances, mothers’ coresident siblings (children’s aunts)
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57 provided them with literacy assistance. Such support focused on writing, spelling, and
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4 homework. Tenisha described Malaya's literacy help: "She kinda' does flashcards with
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6 Malik and like just writes little three letter and four letter words." Diamond said her sister
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8 Tatiana helped her niece practice spelling: "She kinda' got a long name....Tatiana like [says],
9
10 'Spell your name Shaneesha.'" Anika described her reliance on her sister Lorraine: "They
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12 gave out like little homework.... If I couldn't help Ebony...Lorraine would come and help."
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16 **4.2.4. Siblings:** Eleven mothers reported assistance from children's siblings, adding up
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18 to a total of 19 siblings. Only mothers with one child did not report receiving sibling support.
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20 Siblings ranged in age from 6-21 and often focused on reading. LaShawn, Brandy, and Crystal
21
22 had the youngest sibling helpers. LaShawn reported: "Anrea [age 6] will read to Jada."
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24 Brandy told us: "J.J [age 7] reads stories to DeAndre." Crystal, Tyrone's mother reported on
25
26 what her older son did in his book reading sessions with his younger brother: " Julius [age
27
28 6] pretend reads or he actually reads."
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33 Preteen and teen siblings were resources for other mothers, helping them with various
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35 child literacy competencies. For example, Kim said Joya (age 9) read to her brother with an
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37 added benefit. "We are building Joya's reading skills. So she actually reads to Demetrius all the
38
39 time." Kalia reported on help from her older sons: "Kareem [age 13] does a lot of reading with
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41 Ike....Glen [age 11] does *my* spellin' tests." Dawn, Darius' mother, reported on her two sons',
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43 Noah, age 15, and Lebron, age 14, contributions: "They help their brother with his
44
45 homework....They teach him the new [computer] technology." Adult siblings, like younger
46
47 sibs, focused on key child literacy skills. Crystal shared that Tyrone's sister Shyrece (age18)
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49 "reads to Tyrone and Julius." Malliqua said she had support from two adult children: "Jamaica
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51 [age 19] and Damian [21] pretty much helped Kennie. We did flash cards... Jamaica reads
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4 stories to Kennie.” On visits to the household Nia said that her son Michael (age 19) “teach
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6 Jalen how to spell.”
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9 10 **5. Discussion**

11 The goal of this article was to explore in-home literacy practices and emergent child
12 literacy development among a sample of low-income African American mothers of
13 preschoolers. We used qualitative methods that focus on participant agency to consider family
14 processes that were poorly articulated in quantitative studies and to challenge family deficit
15 interpretations. Participants’ first-hand accounts revealed that mothers actively utilized family
16 resources. With the support of various family members, mothers promoted their preschoolers’
17 literacy development.
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28 Two key findings emerged from the present study. First, the low-income African
29 American mothers in this study shared a number of literacy practices that have been
30 associated with emergent literacy development. For example, almost all participating
31 mothers mentioned some form of shared book reading (Britto et al., 2006; Roberts et al.,
32 2005), and many incorporated practices that targeted code-related skills, such as teaching
33 the alphabet, teaching letter recognition and word recognition, and working on spelling
34 and writing of names, words, and letters (Dickinson & McCabe, 2001; Puranik et al.,
35 2011; Sparks & Reese, 2013). These emergent literacy skills have been shown to lead to
36 formal reading and writing development (Cabell, Justice, Konold, & McGinty, 2011). In
37 addition to these frequently-documented practices, many families also emphasized verbal
38 practices that differed from the usual written format that may reflect the strong oral
39 tradition among African Americans (Gardner-Neblett, Pungello, & Iruka, 2012; Grace,
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Smith, & Hinchman, 2004). Mothers described how their children acted out stories that were read to them and used verbal reciting along with hand clapping to aid in spelling.

The second key finding was the importance of extended kin who were reported to support mothers' child literacy practices (Mapp, 2003). The cultural importance of extended kin social support is well established (Hill; 2003; Jarrett, Jefferson, & Kelly, 2010), and we demonstrate its role in child literacy. Children's literacy development entailed support from multiple adult family members, not only mothers (Jarrett & Jefferson, 2003). Partners (children's fathers), grandparents, and aunts expanded the number of literacy enhancing opportunities for preschoolers.

In particular, we highlight the significant literacy role played by siblings of all ages. Some research suggests that multiple children in a family deplete maternal resources for individual children (Yarosz & Bennett, 2001). However, we found that siblings of varying ages expanded personnel available for child literacy activities. Presumably adult siblings had more literacy knowledge and teaching skills than younger siblings, but younger siblings' contributions were important. Contrary to research that suggests that low proficiency child readers negatively affect siblings' reading (Serpell et al., 2005), we offer another interpretation. Young siblings may not be as proficient as adult readers, but through a "pantomime of reading," can symbolically engage preschoolers in the reading process. In some instances there could be a reciprocal gain: Preschoolers' literacy skills were enhanced by a somewhat older sibling who, in the process of being a "teacher," practiced his/her academic skills.

6. Implications

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4 Childhood educators can capitalize on families' in-home literacy activities and consider
5
6 ways to further enrich home activities that help children's transition to kindergarten. Preschools
7
8 can help families work on child literacy competencies that are consonant with kindergarten
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10 expectations (Neuman, 1999). While some debate the relevance of the competencies that low-
11
12 income African American families promote for kindergarten, (Barbarin et al., 2008), it is
13
14 critical that schools do not devalue families' efforts, but build upon strengths and honor home
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16 cultures (Delpit, 2006),_cornerstone values of Head Start. For example, educators can capitalize
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18 on parents' existing reading activities, and help parents to include more dialogic reading
19
20 practices and phonological awareness activities during shared reading times (Cristofaro &
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22 Tamis-LeMonda, 2011). In particular, findings suggest that educators might want to ask
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24 caregivers directly what their current literacy challenges and frustrations are and offer
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26 suggestions accordingly, rather than providing standardized enrichment materials.
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33 The research has implications for clinicians. When working with African American
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35 children from low-income families, speech-language pathologists (SLP) should acknowledge
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37 the literacy rich homes of children, recognizing practices as strengths and not deficits. There
38
39 should be an awareness of culturally-based family resources that can be marshalled to support
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41 literacy skills. SLPs can make use of home resources, such as newspapers and post cards to
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43 enhance letter and word recognition or phonological awareness skills. Further, clinicians can
44
45 utilize the strong oral tradition of African Americans to work on oral language skills (e.g.,
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47 vocabulary) and develop skills needed to map oral language onto print. In particular, clinicians
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49 can build upon the rich oral literacy activities that African American children are already
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51 showcasing in their homes (e.g., acting out stories, miming characters).
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58 **7. Future Directions**

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4 Future research should explore home practices and literacy competencies discussed here
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7 with large random samples that provide generalizable results. In light of our findings more
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9 complex measures of family composition should be used, rather than relying on single-parent
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11 or two-parent measures. Other important research topics include, how mothers determine
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13 which child abilities to focus on, which activities mothers believe are most important for
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15 children's outcomes, the relationship between family practices and child outcomes, and how
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17 home practices relate to preschool programming. In light of our findings, more research should
18
19 focus on the interactions and perceptions of other kin and household members. Moreover,
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21 studies using multiple qualitative data collection strategies that offer culturally sensitive and
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23 more valid representations can be used to explore patterns identified in this study (see for
24
25 example Gardner-Neblett et al., 2012)
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31 In addition to the focus on family factors, researchers need to explore other
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33 environmental influences on child literacy, language development, and cognitive development.
34
35 Researchers are beginning to document likely candidates that influence child development,
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37 including neighborhood safety and living conditions (Aikens & Barbarin, 2008), child
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39 nutrition and health (Curie, 2005; Reichman, 2005; Smith, this issue), environmental toxins
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41 (Dzwilewski & Schantz, this issue), school resource levels, and teacher preparation and
42
43 expectations (Aikens & Barbarin, 2008; Kukla-Acevedo, 2009; McKown & Weinstein, 2008).
44
45 A particularly important area for SLPs is a consideration of the multiple ways that school
46
47 environments privilege White middle-class values, linguistic forms (e.g., Mainstream
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49 American English), and materials used in the classroom and may be contributing to the
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51 achievement gap for African American children (Adger et al., 2007; Alim & Smitherman,
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53 2012; Hamilton, 2014a; Hamilton, 2014b). As this study reveals, our low-income African
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American families collectively worked together to create enriching early learning environments for their young children. These insights provide suggestions on ways that SLPs can collaborate with families to ensure that children’s early developmental trajectories are sustained.

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Table 1

Maternal Demographics (N=20)

Participant (Target Child)	Age	Education	Employment Status	Marital Status	Household Composition
Aaliyah (Darryl)	25	SC	Employed	Single	LWP
Amira (Imani & Ahmad)	35	AD	Student	Married	MH
Anika (Ebony)	25	SC	Unemployed	Single	CH (Sister)
Ariel (Asia & Tierra)	34	SC	Student	Single	CH
Ashlie (Precious)	52	SC	Employed	Married	MH
Brandy (DeAndre)	27	SC	Employed	Single	FHH
Courtney (Niara)	31	SC	Employed	Single	CH
Crystal (Tyrone)	33	AD	Employed	Single	FHH
Dawn (Darius)	33	BA	Employed	Single	CH
Destiny (Marquis)	25	SC	Student	Married	MH
Diamond (Shaneesha)	24	HS/GED	Unemployed	Single	LWK (Sister)
Kalia (Ike)	31	AD	Employed	Single	FHH
Kim (Demetrius)	29	MS	Employed	Single	CH
LaSenda (Marcus)	30	AD	Employed	Single	CH
LaShawn (Jada)	28	SC	Employed	Married	MH
Malliqua (Kennie)	43	SC	Employed	Single	FHH
Monique (Jamal)	36	HS/GED	Unemployed	Married	MH
Nia (Jalen)	38	SC	Employed	Single	CH
Tenisha (Malik)	24	SC	Employed	Single	LWP (Sister)
Teyana (Raven)	28	AD	Unemployed	Single	LWP

Note. AD= Associates Degree; BA= Bachelors/4 years; SC= Some College; HS= High School; MA=Masters; CH= Cohabiting Household; FHH= Female Headed Household; MH= Married Household; LWK; Living with Extended Kin; LWP= Living with Parents.

Table 2

Emergent Reading Skills Targeted Through In-Home Practices (N=20)

Participant	Book reading	Alphabet mastery	Word recognition	Letter recognition	Sight words	Vocabulary
Aaliyah	X	X				
Amira	X					
Anika		X				
Ariel	X			X		
Ashlie	X	X				
Brandy	X		X	X		
Courtney	X	X			X	
Crystal	X	X				X
Dawn	X	X	X			
Destiny	X	X			X	X
Diamond		X	X	X		
Kalia	X				X	
Kim	X		X		X	
LaSenda	X					
LaShawn	X	X	X			X
Malliqua	X	X	X	X		
Monique	X	X	X	X		X
Nia	X	X			X	
Tenisha		X	X	X		
Teyana	X	X				
Total	17	14	8	6	5	4

Table 3.

Emergent Spelling and Writing Skills Targeted Through In-Home Practices (N=20)

Participant	Spelling	Writes own name	Writes letters/words
Aaliyah	X	X	X
Amira	X		X
Anika		X	
Ariel	X	X	X
Ashlie	X	X	
Brandy		X	X
Courtney			
Crystal			X
Dawn		X	
Destiny			X
Diamond	X	X	X
Kalia	X		X
Kim			
LaSenda			
LaShawn	X	X	X
Malliqua	X	X	
Monique		X	
Nia	X		X
Tenisha	X		X
Teyana	X	X	
Total:	11	11	11

Table 4

Family Members Noted as Supporting Maternal Literacy Activities (N=20)

Parent (Target child)	Partners (Fathers)	Grandparent(s)	Aunt	Siblings (Age)
Aaliyah (Darryl)	-	Jenny		0
Amira (Imani & Ahmad)	Amahl	-	-	Shaquille (17 yrs) Karl (16 yrs) Nandi (14 yrs)
Anika (Ebony)	Daniel	-	Lorraine	0
Ariel (Asia & Tierra)	Keywon	-	-	0
Ashlie (Precious)	Melvin	-	-	0
Brandy (DeAndre)	-	-	-	J.J. (7 years)
Courtney (Niara)	Geo	Shelly	-	Patrina (15 yrs) Helena (13 yrs)
Crystal (Tyrone)	Dave	Nariah	-	Julius (6 yrs) Shyrece (18 yrs)
Dawn (Darius)	Clayton	-	-	Noah (15 yrs) Lebron (14 yrs)
Destiny (Marquis)	Jasen	-	-	0
Diamond (Shaneesha)	-	-	Tatiana	0
Kalia (Ike)	-	-	-	Kareem (13 yrs) Glen (11 yrs) Joya (9 yrs)
Kim (Demetrius)	Javion	-	-	0
LaSenda (Marcus)	Joahkim	Anita	-	Anrea (6 yrs)
LaShawn (Jada)	Shiloh	-	-	Damian (21 yrs) Jamaica (19 yrs)
Malliqua (Kennie)	-	-	-	Braelin (17 yrs) Michael (19 yrs) Taccarra (14 yrs)
Monique (Jamal)	Stefon	-	-	0
Nia (Jalen)	Armel	-	-	
Tenisha (Malik)	Niles	LaVicia & Chrys	Malaya	0
Teyana (Raven)	-	Bonnie	-	0
TOTAL:	14* (14)**	6* (7)**	3* (3)**	11* (19)*

Note. *Number of Families; **Number of Family Members