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Becoming Good Human Beings: Low-Income Mothers' Dreams for Children and Their Insight into Children's Needs

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Abstract

A case study approach was employed to investigate low-income families' aspirations for their children and their understandings of their children's developmental needs. Participants were four women whose children or grandchildren were enrolled in an urban early childhood program and were considered "at risk." Qualitative methods including interviews, observations, and analysis of artifacts were used. Results indicated that the participants' aspirations for their children included going to college, as has been shown in other studies to be characteristic of middle-class families. Results also suggested that the participants were insightful about child development, young children's learning, and the needs of young children. Analysis indicated that participants understood the importance of a shared role between families and teachers in their children's development, and they wanted to work with their children's teachers in that manner. The participants expected early childhood programs to not only prepare young children for school but to prepare them to negotiate successfully social interactions with both children and adults. Implications for teachers, administrators, and teacher education programs are discussed.

Introduction

Regardless of ethnicity, religion, or social class, most parents have dreams and aspirations for their children. These dreams are grounded in cultural belief systems, which reflect particular values and perspectives, and are translated into expectations that shape the way families think, live, and act. Beliefs about education and aspirations that families hold for their children are likely to influence their engagement in children's learning. Indeed consideration of these beliefs and aspirations may "further help in the search for forces that guide parents' actions" (Neuman, Hagedorn, Celano, & Daly, 1995, p. 804). The extent to which such underlying ideas are influenced by economic class has been widely debated, with prominent authors suggesting that poor families devalue education (Payne, 1998), and others providing a solid research base for refuting these claims (Compton-Lilly, 2003, 2007; Gorski, 2006). According to Rank (2004) "research has repeatedly demonstrated that those who fall below the poverty line...hold the same fundamental aspirations, beliefs, and hopes" (p. 48), including those related to education, as do wealthy and

middle class individuals. Ogbu (1995) found, across ethnic groups, that low-income parents care deeply about their children's intellectual development and provide rich opportunities to develop children's love of learning and commitment to their future education. This finding is supported by additional research into lower-income families' promotion of early literacy experiences in the home (Volk & Long, 2005; Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988) and their beliefs about learning and literacy (Neuman et al., 1995). Tarsi, Greenberg, Kennedy, and Gettys (1994) found that low-income mothers of children in early childhood programs also wanted their children to get a good education, to finish school, to succeed in life, and to have respect for people.

While beliefs about the value of education may indeed be constant across class lines, their expression may vary. In Lareau's (2003) study comparing children and families living in poverty with their more affluent peers, findings indicated that all of the participating families wanted their children to be happy, to grow, and to thrive. Families' views of child development, however, differed significantly. Middle-class families promoted "concerted cultivation"—enrollment of children in specific activities that would enhance their talents and skills—while less affluent families subscribed to "the accomplishment of natural growth," with children being given more autonomy and allowed to grow spontaneously through interactions with peers and their environment. Similarly, Gorman (1998) found that middle-class parents emphasized skills and attitudes for a changing economy as an aspiration for their developing children, while their lower-income peers indicated a desire for their children to be happy in their occupations. Regardless of income, however, both groups of parents affirmed the importance of their children being ethical, responsible, hard working, and open minded.

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Neuman et al. (1995) found that the African American low-income teen mothers they interviewed had a wide range of beliefs about how children learn best (from direct transmission of knowledge to a more constructivist orientation) and expressed a strong desire for their children to thrive socially and intellectually in safe environments. Similarly, a study of parents' expectations of a universal prekindergarten program showed that they gave high priority to having the program provide a safe environment for children and help children to develop social skills (Basile & Henry, 1996).

Kusserow (2005) has coined the descriptive phrases "hard individualism" and "soft individualism" to describe key differences in perspectives on raising children. Valuing of self-expression and a child's uniqueness are characteristic of the soft individualism. When helping their children learn about their world and their place in American society, upper-middle-class parents tended to promote a soft individualism by, for example, using quiet words and emphasizing children's feelings. In contrast, the working-class families in Kusserow's study felt that their children were resilient and could account for themselves against the harshness of life. These parents teased, were blunt with disagreement, and did not rate self-expression highly. Kusserow pointed out that schooling in America tends to be planned and staffed by those who have grown up with soft individualism, thus potentially placing children from working-class and poor families at a disadvantage.

This study is grounded in a bioecological framework of child development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), which is critical to understanding the multiplicity of influences affecting children's development. According to Lang (2004), "(Bronfenbrenner's) model of the ecology of human development acknowledges that humans don't develop in isolation, but in relation to their family and home, school, community and society." Children's direct contact with family, peers, and teachers affect daily experiences, while linkages between systems such as home and school provide either

consistency or dichotomy of interactions and expectations. A series of concentric circles is often used to illustrate this framework. At the center of the model is the child; those in the first ring, the *microsystem*, are the people in the child's life who have the most direct influence on the child's development and learning. Successive rings, including the *mesosystem*, *exosystem*, and *macrosystem*, include less direct but nonetheless significant influences on children's development. The child's teachers or caregivers would be part of the microsystem, and the extent to which their expectations of and aspirations for the child are congruent with those of the parents may affect the child's transition from home to an early care and education setting. According to Okagaki and Diamond (2000), "when there is a lack of congruence between parents' and teachers' expectations, children may have the additional burden of determining the implicit rules and expectations that govern the early childhood classroom" (p. 76), and teachers should not assume that their hopes and expectations for children are the same as parents'. The congruence between families' beliefs about children's needs and development with predominant beliefs among those who work in early education settings may have direct implications for family engagement and may affect outcomes for children. Research has indicated the importance of shared understandings between home and school; when schools acknowledge the relevance of children's homes, cultures, and communities, the extent to which they can engage and empower families in their children's education is strengthened (Ramey & Ramey, 1999; Rhodes, Enz, & LaCount, 2006).

Methods

This article addresses two research questions from a larger study that was designed to develop a more detailed understanding of low-income parents' expectations for their children:

1. What do families in poverty perceive as their young children's needs?
2. What goals and aspirations do families in poverty have for their young children?

A case study approach employing qualitative methods was used to allow in-depth exploration of the perceptions, beliefs, and values of low-income families toward their children's early education.

Program Site

Participants were recruited from a nationally accredited early childhood program that served primarily low-income families in two sites in a large midwestern city. The program is a nonprofit funded in part by United Way and the archdiocese of the metropolitan area. The program, which was influenced by the early childhood programs of Reggio Emilia, Italy, served 3- to 5-year-old children considered to be "at risk," many of whom were referred to the center by medical or social service agency representatives.

The executive director and curriculum director expressed willingness to be involved in the research. Most teachers were female and had four-year degrees. One social worker at each site provided play therapy to identified children, while another social worker met weekly with specific families to provide information, support, and encouragement.

Ninety-one percent of the children in this program were low income as measured by the federal poverty guidelines. Children enrolled in both sites composed a diverse population: 22% were identified as White, 54% Black, 18% Hispanic, and 4% "Other." This contrasts with the general population of the metropolitan area where the sites were located, which was approximately 77% White, 15% Black, 6.2% Hispanic, and 2.6% Other (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010).

Participants

Four discrete cases were chosen from family members who provided primary care for the children, were able to communicate in English, qualified for the federal free or reduced lunch program, and were willing to be involved in the study. Three mothers and one grandmother who provided the majority of care for her grandchildren were selected.

Elizabeth. Elizabeth was a white, 50-year-old grandmother who owned a home with her husband. Their 27-year-old daughter and her three young children moved in with them after the daughter's husband was incarcerated. The family income consisted of Elizabeth's husband's disability check and their daughter's TANF (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families) payments. Elizabeth's eldest granddaughter attended kindergarten, and the other two were enrolled in the early childhood education program. Elizabeth indicated that she was tired of being in the "mother" role again after raising her own three daughters but felt that she had no choice because her daughter and granddaughters could not afford to live on their own.

Sydney. Sydney, who was African American, had three children: a 7-year-old with multiple disabilities and a 4-year-old and 1-year old who did not appear to have any developmental delays. She was a single parent, and the family lived on the eldest child's disability checks. She had attended college for one year. The family's apartment had at one time qualified for federal rental assistance. However, the building's owner refused to complete repairs needed to maintain that qualification, and at the final interview, Sydney was hoping to have moved out of the apartment before being served with eviction papers.

Jennifer. Jennifer, a mother of three, had been encouraged by her brother to come to the United States from Mexico to join him. She and her husband hoped to save money from their work in America to build a house in Mexico. However, her brother had returned to Mexico, and she felt discouraged about having been able to save very little. She lived in a trailer in a large trailer park and cleaned at a large downtown office building several evenings a week. Most of the interviews with Jennifer were held in her home which, she said, had everything she needed.

Reina. Reina, in her mid-30s, was the mother of two boys, a kindergartner and an almost 4-year-old. She and her husband were born and raised in Mexico. Her husband worked for a roofing company, and she cleaned homes as a part-time job. She had attended a bilingual school growing up in Mexico and spoke heavily accented English. Reina often spoke with a serious look on her face, as though wanting to make sure she was communicating effectively.

Data Collection

Three data sources were utilized—interviews, observations, and examination of artifacts (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; LeCompte & Schensul, 1999; Merriam, 1998; Stake, 1995). The researcher, a doctoral candidate, became a participant observer at the site selected, helping during school events, volunteering on field trips, and interacting with families in informal situations such as when families brought children to the center or picked them up.

Interviews took place at the early childhood center or in the families' homes. They were audio recorded with participant permission and transcribed. Open-ended questions ([Appendix](#)) were used "...which enable[d] a more varied and in-depth participant response" (Cannold, 2001, p. 180).

Each participant was also asked to create a "timeline of learning" to indicate her understanding of what learning takes place over one's life course and to approximate when this learning occurs. The researcher provided a blank sheet of notebook paper, with the left side representing birth and the

right side representing the end of life, and asked participants to identify learning that occurred during one's lifetime. This timeline was used as a starting point for one of the interviews.

Participants were given disposable cameras during the study and asked to take pictures of things that represented the concept of childhood. The use of photographs as a research method in other studies has allowed children and parents to contribute to the research data (Percy, 2003; Einarsdottir, 2005a, 2005b; Moss, 2001; DeMarie, 2001). These pictures were developed and used to promote further discussion about the participants' ideas of childhood in the interviews.

In addition to the interview notes, timelines, and photographs, the researcher took field notes after each visit with the participants and during or after school events at which the women were present. These field notes were included in the data analysis.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Codes were assigned to statements from transcribed interviews, field notes, and participants' photographs and timelines. Categories were created, and emergent themes and patterns were identified and checked against the data and propositions. The researcher then reflected upon the properties of the codes and compared the incidents to the properties to "...make some related theoretical sense of each comparison" (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 109).

During the process of coding and identifying categories, two professors provided alternative perspectives. The researcher also used member checking (Stake, 1995) to ensure validity; each participant reviewed and responded to the researcher's summary of her interviews to confirm, correct, or clarify her interview comments.

Findings: Emergent Themes

Three identified themes emerged that addressed the two research questions, relative to parents' hopes for their children and perceptions of what children need: (1) "Becoming good persons/good citizens," (2) "Strength comes from freedom and security," and (3) "Building tools for learning."

Becoming Good Persons/Good Citizens

Participants all described positive personal traits when discussing their aspirations for their children's futures. The name for this theme emerged from two interviews with Reina; she stated once that she wanted her sons to be "good persons" and later that they should be "good citizens." "... I would like them to be first...good human beings," she said. Reina expressed hope that her children would also hold their family's values of respect and faith. She aspired for them to be self-confident, independent, and responsible.

Sydney indicated that she wanted her children to grow up to demonstrate kindness, independence, respect for all, and perseverance. She hoped that they would be safe and would learn to respect authority. Jennifer hoped that her children would be friendly, generous, and responsible people, stating, "I think like...sharing with other kids, like [having] respect for the teacher." Reina echoed this concern about respect when she stated, "I'm afraid...many cultures here, different values, and nowadays I see children are not showing too much respect to the adults and [it] makes me afraid."

The participants expressed the desire that their children would show compassion and kindness to others. Jennifer stated, "They are sharing everything in the school and the other kids...like respect, respect other kids and rules..." Elizabeth indicated that young children need opportunities to give to others. She said, "If you see somebody and you got something—it might not be much,

but give it to them." She added that children "need to see how other kids have life, you know, how 'rough' other kids' lives are compared to theirs. And then think to themselves, what can I do to make that child happier?"

All of the participants indicated that they wanted their children to be able to "get along" with a variety of people. Elizabeth said that she wanted her granddaughters to become compassionate and grateful, "strong enough to speak their mind, but compassionate enough to do it in a way that won't hurt someone else." She also wanted them to have opportunities that other children have, and she connected this to the hope that "someone who cares out there" would reestablish a community center in her neighborhood that would provide programs such as dance classes that she cannot provide for the girls. This center would help the parents, and "the kids would learn to interact with other kids, other adults."

Strength Comes from Freedom and Security

The participants indicated a belief that both freedom and a sense of security would play roles in children's ability to get what they needed throughout their development. Analysis of the participants' timelines and photographs suggested that they were knowledgeable about important aspects of child development and the needs of young children—needs that theorists and child development specialists have identified, including the understanding that children "can't grow and develop fully if they don't trust that adults can care for them and that they are safe and secure" (Carlsson-Paige, 2008, p. 11). The participants acknowledged stages of development and recognized that security was important for this development to take place. For example, Elizabeth said that from birth to 3, "it's more about getting secure in their lives...knowing that it's a safe place to come home to."

For the participants, "security" referred not only to attachments to trustworthy adults but also to financial stability as they moved from schooling into adulthood. Reina believed that her role in her children's lives was to help develop their self-esteem and sense of security. She referred to parents "building roots for them." She commented, "I think the self-esteem that I'm trying to...develop; I respect what [they] choose and [that] makes...them feel more secure, right?"

Elizabeth also spoke of financial stability for her grandchildren: "I don't care if they have riches, I want them to be comfortable in their lives and not have so much worry about where their next meal's coming from." The participants also wanted their children to appreciate what they had. "[B]e grateful for what you do have," Sydney stated, "Because maybe I don't have a car, but I have a roof over my head, I got food in my fridge, I'm not letting it stress me."

The participants all indicated the belief that good relationships with adults and children help build children's feelings of security. Reina stated that children need to "...see that they can trust in somebody like a parent, here in the building." She felt that the advantages of attending an early childhood program included children becoming more secure and less dependent upon the adult at home and more confident generally. "...I think this is a good time for them to share, to play with other children the same age," she said. "[T]hey'll learn the basics, routines, and life is like a routine." Young children need good role models, both male and female, she said, and they need a trusting relationship with at least one adult in their early education program. She stated, "[W]e are not always around our family circle...at school, they also need adults they can trust." She also commented, "...[T]hey need the presence of other adults in their lives, so they can interact with other adults...; it's not always mom and dad."

Although all participants wanted their children or grandchildren to go to college, they also wanted them to feel free to follow their own interests in choosing what to study in college and what career paths to follow. Jennifer said about her son, "I want...anything he want[s], but I like [for him to]

go to college." She said that she wanted him to have "not [an] easy job," but one which would not make him "work too hard." Sydney hoped her children would pursue their interests, attend college, and feel excited about learning something new every day. "I want them to get as much education as possible," she said. "I want them to experience college life, because that's one thing I did get to experience...meeting different people..."

Reina desired that her sons go to college but added that she would like them to take care of the family, if they are needed; if she or her husband would get hurt, she said, she wanted her sons to help with any necessary care. Elizabeth commented that young children need time with parents as well as other adults who take an interest in them. She also referred to children's need for unstructured play, "[Be]cause...there's got to be play in the mud time and stuff like that. That they can play...increases the mind." She indicated that childhood is characterized by having freedom, freedom from worry and lots of responsibility. However, she also stated that young children want *some* responsibility and should be given small chores, such as helping with the dishes, when they are interested, which she said occurs at about 4 years old.

Building Tools for Learning

One participant used the phrase "building tools for learning" to describe what young children need, and it emerged as a theme in the comments of other participants. Through their timelines of learning, they demonstrated knowledge about stages of human development; each stage was seen as preparation for the next stage. They indicated that they remained aware of their children's development by observing the children, asking them questions, and listening to them. Reina believed that physical skill helped prepare children, and that the early years were a good time to build a foundation for the future. "It's very essential...to learn motor skills like when they go to the park. This is the best stage when you are a person. Because I think they're like a little play dough that you can, how do you say (making gestures with her hands)...that you mold with more skills. Like playing: you can encourage them to be more secure [in] themselves, like let[ting] them be free."

Their responses suggested a shared belief that children need a foundation for learning; basic academic skills (which one mother called "the mediocre stuff") were seen as necessary for young children to be successful. The "basics" that they identified included counting and learning the alphabet, colors, and basic geometric shapes. For example, Jennifer described the early childhood program as a "real school," because the children were learning fundamental academic and social skills.

The participants indicated that they believed that families can provide the basis for children's initial eagerness for learning. Elizabeth said, "Parents have to get them on that road, to get them started...finding out something new every day is enjoyable, so I continue on in school." Sydney stated, "If a child sees that a parent's not really interested in what they're doing at school, they won't be interested in going to school."

Elizabeth felt that for a child being in an early childhood program was building for the future. "They are out of the home environment into an educational environment...they have to learn the things that they're going to need in regular school, how to play fair with other kids, share with other kids, put things away when they're finished with it, have reading time."

Learning to interact with different kinds of people, to learn manners, responsibility, and respect are basic tools, according to some participants. Sydney elaborated,

Some people have different religions and most people who have that strict religion sect, those kids are learning those types of ways and they have those certain rules

that they have to abide by. And there's the race factor. If there's someone with a different color than I am and speak a different language than I do, then I need to know there's lots of people around the world that are different from you, but it's okay.

Jennifer also expanded on the need to be able to work with a variety of people. She said, "I think everybody needs to, because at the job, in the school like there are different people....[E]verybody [is] different, think[s] different."

Sydney considered curiosity to be an essential characteristic of childhood, and that a child's curiosity leads to exploration which leads to learning. "Young children don't know a lot," she said. "...[T]hey'll see things and wonder...what this is and why..." She added, "The more they want to know about it, the more they're going to find out." The young child learns by routine, by repetition, she suggested, but by far the strongest teaching comes from children watching and learning with other children and adults. "...[K]ids watch, kids look and listen," she said. Similarly, Reina commented, "I think they learn a lot in the way what you say; how you act is example. They are a reflection, like a mirror."

Discussion

We began with two questions. What do families in poverty perceive as their young children's needs? What goals and aspirations do such families have for their young children? The participants in this study, all of whom had poverty-level family incomes, expressed both awareness of children's developmental needs and particular aspirations for their children that are consistent with others studies' findings that parents of low-income children tend to have what might be termed "mainstream values" for their young children (Tarsi et al., 1994).

Young Children's Needs

The participants noted that to be successful, children needed both security and freedom. They indicated the basic belief that young children need secure relationships with trusted adults in order to learn to deal with other adults and children. It was imperative, they said, that their children have friends and be exposed to people from a variety of backgrounds; their children would need to be able to get along well with others in a diverse world. This finding differs somewhat from findings in Harding's (2006) study of lower- and middle-class mothers. All participants in Harding's study regarded "getting along" as an aspect of preparation for kindergarten, but it was most important to the middle-class European American mothers, while the African American mothers considered academic preparation most important and Latina mothers gave priority to children's respect for authority.

All four participants in this study also considered academic skills to be among the "tools for learning" that their children would need to be prepared for kindergarten, elementary school, and life generally.

Goals and Aspirations for Children

All of the participants referred to characteristics of "good persons" and "good citizens" when discussing their aspirations and goals for their children. They wanted their children to be kind and considerate, honest and responsible, respectful of themselves and others, and to care for others by showing compassion. They also hoped that their children would become independent and have self-respect.

All of the participants indicated that they wanted their children/grandchildren to attend college. This may be related to the fact that three of them had had some education or training after high school, and two of Elizabeth's own daughters had attended college. Though the women wanted their children to go to college, they also said that they wanted the children to be able to pursue their own interests in choosing a path of study or a career. In contrast, other researchers have found that parental desire for further education sometimes runs along class lines. For example, Gorman (1998) found that middle-class parents planned on their children going to college; in contrast, working-class parents did not feel that a college degree was essential, although some saw that in today's world it might be necessary; confidence and common sense were seen as more necessary than college. Like the working-class parents in Gorman's study, participants in the present study said they wanted their children to be happy in their occupations.

Implications

Findings of this study and others like it may help to increase understanding between early childhood programs and the families they serve by providing a closer look at the expectations and aspirations that low-income families have for their young children enrolled in early childhood programs. While the findings cannot be generalized to other low-income families outside of the study, those who work with low-income families may use the findings as the basis for further insight into what the families they work with may expect and want for their children.

It is apparent that low-income parents have aspirations for their children that include personal characteristics as well as goals such as attending college. They have a foundational understanding of children's development, a strong sense of their children's particular needs, and a belief that during the early years young children need to build a foundation for their future schooling and success. The extent to which early childhood educators understand and value families' aspirations for and understandings of their children will affect the partnerships formed between home and school.

Participants in this study often linked what they were saying to their own childhood experiences, including their experience with schooling. As Okagaki and Diamond (2000) suggest, children, their families, and early childhood programs all benefit when teachers invite parents to express their "own experiences, beliefs, and values, and listen when parents talk about their perspectives" (p. 76).

Other research has documented a multitude of benefits when families are involved in children's education (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Research indicates a direct correlation between children whose families are involved in home/school partnerships and higher test scores, better attendance, less grade retention, less participation in special education, higher rates of graduation, and more attendance at college (Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Jeynes, 2005; Kreider, Caspe, Kennedy & Weiss, 2007; Reynolds & Clements, 2005). Harding (2006) posited that "true partnerships between home and school will occur when parents believe that the schools value their goals and values" (p. 236). Initiatives that would enable families to share their goals and expectations for their children are likely to strengthen these partnerships. All families need opportunities to be involved in the planning and promotion of these initiatives. Early childhood professionals, both administrators and teachers, should begin to understand not only the *needs* of the families they serve but also the desires that families have for their children in general and for their early education in particular.

The challenge to identify and understand the hopes that families have for their children and for their education needs to be addressed in teacher education programs as well. Teacher preparation should help preservice teachers reflect upon their own assumptions about families, so that they may uncover areas in which their ideas about children and parenting may differ from the families with whom they work. As Howard (2003) notes, "It is critical for teacher educators to provide

spaces for preservice teachers to express their uncertainties, frustrations, and regrets over prejudiced notions" (p. 199). Teacher education faculty should consider how a family involvement component could be implemented throughout their curriculum (Baum & McMurray-Schwarz, 2004). Nieto (2006) observes that although teachers need to have a good knowledge of pedagogy and subject matter, they also need qualities that "...include a sense of mission; solidarity with, and empathy for, their students; the courage to challenge mainstream knowledge and conventional wisdom; improvisation; and a passion for social justice" (p. 457). Helping preservice teachers to identify and develop these characteristics will facilitate their consideration of parents' perspectives as they step into the classroom as professionals.

It is important that those involved in early childhood programs consider what families expect from their children's education, including their hopes and dreams, their knowledge of children, and their own experiences. This study sought to increase our understanding of the perspectives on childhood and early childhood education of families living in poverty, with the goal of increasing positive outcomes for young children.

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Appendix

Questions for Focus Group Interview

- How do the people at the center help your child?
- What would you like your child to get from his/her time at the center?
- What are your hopes and dreams for your children?
- What will your child need to fulfill these dreams?
- What kind of an adult do you want your child to become?
- What does your child need to become this kind of an adult?
- How does your family help your child develop or progress?
- If you could tell the people who run this program what three things would you tell them it would be good to do?