



# **‘So many books they don’t even all fit on the bookshelf’: An examination of low-income mothers’ home literacy practices, beliefs and influencing factors**

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## **Abstract**

Given the need to enhance the academic language and early literacy skills of young children from low-income homes and the importance of the home literacy environment in supporting children’s development, the purpose of this qualitative study was to better understand the home literacy environment of low-income African-American and Latino mothers of preschool children living in the United States. Specifically, research aims were to examine home literacy environment practices, beliefs and influential factors as well as to compare the home literacy environment of African-American and Latino, specifically Puerto Rican, families. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 African-American and 10 Puerto Rican mothers. Data were analysed using the consensual qualitative research method. Twelve themes were identified: provision of educational materials, engagement with books, focus on print, implicit language opportunities,

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focus on other pre-academic skills, social interactions with books, influence of school, influence of other adults, parents' reading interest/ability, child's reading interest, parents' commitment to child's success and family stressors. Few differences emerged between African-American and Puerto Rican mothers. Implications for language and literacy intervention development are discussed.

**Keywords**

Home literacy environment, language, early childhood literacy, family involvement, home practices, cultural diversity, Latinos/as

It is well documented that the early language and literacy skills of preschool-aged children predict later reading success in the school-age years (e.g. NELP, 2008). Young children from low socio-economic status (SES) homes often have lower academic language and early literacy skills than their peers from higher SES backgrounds, and are thus on a trajectory for poorer reading skills in the school-age years (e.g. Brooks et al., 2007; Hart and Risley, 1995; Hoff, 2006; Korat et al., 2007; Washbrook and Waldfogel, 2010). In the United States, this is a critical concern, given that 48% of children six years of age and under live in low-income homes (Jiang et al., 2015). Children from a racial/ethnic minority experience disproportionate rates of living in or near poverty (69% of African-American (AA) children, 66% of Latino children, 34% Caucasian children; Jiang et al., 2015). Furthermore, the population of racial/ethnic minority children is expected to become a majority by 2020 (Child Trends, 2014).

International data evidence that the home language and literacy environment is a way to improve the academic language and early literacy skills of young children (e.g. Aikens and Barbarin, 2008; Aram and Levin, 2002; Farver et al., 2006; Justice and Ezell, 2000; Korat et al., 2007; Raikes et al., 2006; Sénéchal and Young, 2008; Whitehurst et al., 1994) and support later reading achievement (Leseman and de Jong, 1998; PIRLS, 2007; Sénéchal and Young, 2008). Furthermore, the home literacy environment (HLE) mediates the relation between SES and children's early language and literacy development (Foster et al., 2005; Raviv et al., 2004). As conceptualized by Sénéchal and LeFevre (2002) in their HLE model, the HLE comprises both formal, such as direct literacy teaching (e.g. explicitly teaching letter names and sounds), and informal interactions, such as adult-child book-reading. Furthermore, HLE practices are often differentially associated with children's language and literacy skills. For instance, the quantity and quality of adult-child book-reading and conversations (i.e. informal dimension) are typically related to language development, whereas direct literacy teaching (i.e.

formal dimension) is related to early literacy skills (e.g. Aram and Levin, 2002; Bus et al., 1995; Evans et al., 2000; Fritjers et al., 2000; Kim, 2009; McDuffie and Yoder, 2010; Mahoney and Powell, 1988; Raikes et al., 2006; Reese and Cox, 1999; Sénéchal and LeFevre, 2002; Sénéchal and Young, 2008).

Given the importance of the HLE, early childhood initiatives and interventions often target enhancements to it, especially in the case of low-income children who are at risk of less than optimal school performance. For instance, in the United States, Reach Out and Read is a national initiative whereby paediatricians provide parents of young children with free books and suggestions on how to promote language and literacy development. In Mexico, the National Reading Program's (PNL) 11 + 5 Actions for Integrating a Community of Readers and Writers in Preschool entails preschool teachers actively supporting the HLE. Yet, a recent meta-analysis of 31 home-based language and literacy interventions, conducted primarily in the United States, found that interventions were less effective for low-SES than for high-SES families (Manz et al., 2010). This finding aligns with the meta-analysis conducted by Mol et al. (2008), which focused specifically on dialogic reading and its relation to children's oral language outcomes; Mol et al. found a striking difference in effect sizes for children who came from lower SES homes ( $d = .13$ ) versus higher SES homes ( $d = .53$ ).

It is possible that the diminished effectiveness of HLE interventions for low-income families is due to the fact that many existing interventions are configured based on the beliefs and practices of higher SES homes and schools. Language and literacy (and other) practices are culturally defined and are associated with parents' goals for children, views and uses of language and literacy, and the overall home environment (e.g. Carrington and Luke, 2003; Gillanders and Jiménez, 2004; Heath, 1983). Interventions that do not align with families' values, strengths and goals are often associated with higher participant attrition or lower implementation of desired practices, whereas interventions that do align with families' perspectives may be more effective (Boyce et al., 2010; Carrington and Luke, 2003; Janes and Kermani, 2001; Roggman et al., 2008). In the US, the National Association for the Education of Young Children (2009) recognizes this critical need for culturally and linguistically responsive interventions that support children's skills in a way that builds positively on families' beliefs and practices. In order to design more effective interventions for children from low-income homes, more research is needed so that interventionists can employ a culturally responsive and strengths-based perspective that builds upon family HLE practices already in place and beliefs that families hold. Additionally, factors that influence these beliefs and practices must be also considered.

This study focuses on the home literacy beliefs and practices of low-income racial/ethnic minority families in the United States; specifically, we focused on AA and Latino families because they experience the highest rates of poverty and are also the most prevalent minority ethnic/racial groups (Jiang et al., 2015). Quantitative studies provide critically important information about the associations between the HLE and preschool children's outcomes. Yet, by design, they do not provide rich descriptive accounts of families' beliefs and practices, which are needed to best inform intervention development. Rigorous qualitative studies have provided foundational knowledge about the HLE of low-income AA and Latino families with young school-age children or mixed-age children (Delgado-Gaitan, 1990; Goldenberg et al., 1992; Heath, 1983; Paratore et al., 2003; Purcell-Gates, 1996; Reese and Gallimore, 2000; Reese et al., 1995, 2012). Yet, fewer studies have conducted an in-depth examination exclusively of families of preschool children (cf. Hammer et al., 2005; Perry et al., 2008; Teale, 1986). Given that low-income parents' HLE beliefs and practices may change once children enter the formal educational system (Purcell-Gates, 1996; Reese and Gallimore, 2000), the findings on school-age children may not be generalizable to beliefs and practices vis-à-vis preschool children. More research is needed on the HLE of families with preschool children.

Internationally, researchers have frequently compared the beliefs and practices of racial/ethnic majority families with racial/ethnic minority families (e.g. Brooks-Gunn and Markman, 2005; Bus et al., 2000; Raikes et al., 2006). Because of the unclear nature of low-income and racial/ethnic minority status in the U.S. (Jiang et al., 2015), it is important to also examine whether similarities and differences exist between low-income racial/ethnic minority groups. While some work has been done on this topic, it has focused on practices rather than beliefs or factors that influence the HLE (Hammer et al., 2005; Teale, 1986). Valuable information about the development of culturally sensitive HLE interventions may be gained through a broader investigation. Thus, the aim of this qualitative study was to expand the field's knowledge of the language and literacy beliefs, practices and influencing factors of low-income AA and Latino mothers whose children were enrolled in preschool in the United States.

## **Home language and literacy environment in low-income homes**

The home language and literacy environment promotes children's early language and literacy skills, including children from low-income homes (e.g. Farver et al., 2006; Raikes et al., 2006; Sénéchal and LeFevre, 2002).

For optimal success, interventions to support children's skills through enhancement of the HLE must be culturally responsive and strengths-based (e.g. Carrington and Luke, 2003; Janes and Kermani, 2001). As such, it is important to identify the typical home language and literacy practices of low-income families from diverse backgrounds, their beliefs about literacy development and what influences those beliefs and practices.

### *Home language and literacy practices*

Extant research findings indicate that low-SES families read less frequently, own fewer books, ask fewer questions of their children and talk less with their children than do higher SES families (e.g. Brooks-Gunn and Markman, 2005; Hart and Risley, 1995; Hoff, 2006; Korat et al., 2007). However, findings such as these may lead to misguided assumptions that low-income families are deficient as well as homogeneous in their practices. In reality, Van Kleeck (2013, 2015) provides a compelling argument for researchers and educators to distinguish between casual, everyday talk and academic talk, which is the norm in educational settings. While extant research indicates that low-income families use lower levels of academic talk, it is important not to over-generalize these findings and paint families as less capable. That is, the home language environment of low-income families is sufficiently well adapted to their day-to-day living demands (Lareau, 2011; Van Kleeck, 2013, 2015). Furthermore, the frequency and type of home language and literacy practices in these homes differ (e.g. Hammer et al., 2005; Heath, 1983; Purcell-Gates, 1996; Raikes et al., 2006; Teale, 1986).

Some low-SES homes provide children with numerous literacy experiences, both formal and informal (Paratore et al., 2003; Purcell-Gates, 1996; Reese et al., 2012; Teale, 1986). For instance, in her observational year-long study of 24 low-income racially/ethnically diverse families of mixed-age children (preschool to kindergarten), Purcell-Gates found that as many as four reading and writing events occurred per hour in some homes, although the average for all homes was less than one hourly event. Home literacy experiences may be more prevalent when children are of school age (Purcell-Gates, 1996; Reese and Gallimore, 2000), suggesting that parents believe that children reap more benefit from the HLE when they are older.

Extant research, although limited, indicates that direct literacy teaching may be a priority in low-income homes of preschool children (Paratore et al., 2003; Perry et al., 2008; Teale, 1986). In his racially/ethnically diverse sample (i.e. Caucasian, Latino and AAs) of low-income families, Teale

(1986) found that direct literacy teaching (e.g. teaching letter names, shapes) comprised approximately 20% of the home literacy time. Perry et al. (2008) examined ways in which Hispanic parents modified instructional activity packets that came home from preschool. Among other practices, parents routinely engaged in direct instruction, such as repetitive drilling on the meaning of vocabulary words with their children. Yet, it is not known whether these findings translate beyond school-provided materials to other literacy interactions in the home.

Researchers have also found variations in how low-income mothers read to their preschool children (Boyce et al., 2004; Bus et al., 2000; Hammer et al., 2005; Teale, 1986). For instance, Hammer et al. (2005) found four distinct styles of adult-child shared book-reading: labelling, child-centred, text reading and combinational in their study of AA and Latino families. The combinational style aligned most closely with an interactive reading style that is often used in classrooms and higher SES homes. Yet, both the labelling and the child-centred styles provided opportunities for children to be active participants in reading interactions.

The strategies parents use to promote children's language development are also important to consider. A limited number of studies have examined the language environment of low-income racially/ethnically diverse families with young children (Hammer and Weiss, 2000; Hart and Risley, 1995; Heath, 1983). Overall, the findings suggest that low-income families do not make intentional efforts to promote their children's language development. Rather, parents believe that children learn to talk through observing adults and engaging in conversations (Hammer and Weiss, 2000; Heath, 1983). Given the dearth of research in this area, more information is needed on low-income parents' practices to facilitate the language development of their preschool children.

### *Literacy beliefs*

A few researchers have examined parents' beliefs about how to promote language and literacy development for young children. Perry et al. (2008) found that Hispanic mothers of preschool children believe that literacy activities should be pleasurable, and as such, used movement and acting to add entertainment when reading with their children. When considering the literacy beliefs of families of young school-age children of varying racial/ethnic backgrounds, parents commonly emphasize a decoding or a phonics-based approach to learning to read (DeBaryshe et al., 2000; Evans et al., 2004; Reese and Gallimore, 2000; Reese et al., 2012). Additionally, Reese et al. (1995)

found that low-income Hispanic parents of kindergarteners strongly value their children's education and demonstrated this value by attaining books or educational materials, even though parents may never engage their children in using these resources. However, it is not known whether these foci on phonics and materials are evident among families of preschool children. Further research is needed on the literacy beliefs of parents of preschool children.

### *Influential factors*

In order to develop effective interventions, it is important for researchers to identify what influences families' beliefs and practices. In this way, interventions can be more targeted in their content and delivery. A primary interest of this study is to examine the similarities and differences of the HLE between low-income AA and Latino families, and thus studies that have examined the HLE through this lens will be described. Additionally, empirical work to date on low-income families of young children has identified other possible factors, such as the influence of school, mothers' reading ability, children's reading interest and abilities, other family members and family stressors. Moreover, very few studies have focused specifically on preschool children, and thus these factors should be further investigated within this population.

*Race/ethnicity.* A few researchers have examined similarities/differences in home literacy practices with preschool children between low-income racial/ethnic groups, though the findings have been inconsistent. In a study including low-income Caucasian, AA and Latino families, Teale (1986) found that race did not predict frequency or type of HLE practices. Although Anderson and Stokes (1984) also found no differences in the frequency of storybook reading among low-income racial/ethnic families, the researchers found differences in other domains of literacy, such as the duration of literacy events and the frequency with which children initiated literacy events. More recent research has focused specifically on book-reading styles and found differences between mothers from different racial groups (Bus et al., 2000; Hammer et al., 2005). To the best of our knowledge, no studies have investigated similarities and differences in literacy and language beliefs or factors that are influential on beliefs and practices. To develop culturally responsive interventions, more attention should be paid to whether similarities and differences exist between low-income minority racial groups.

*Influence of school.* Experiences with formal educational systems influence home literacy practices in varied ways. Mothers' own formal schooling experiences are related to literacy practices for young school-age (Reese and Gallimore, 2000; Reese et al., 1995, 2012) and preschool children (Teale, 1986). Specifically, mothers often employ formal literacy strategies, such as an emphasis on repeated practice of phonics skills that are similar to those they experienced as children learning to read themselves. Schools also are also the source of many literacy materials for families (Goldenberg et al., 1992; Paratore et al., 2003; Teale, 1986). Families engage in more literacy activities at home when their children enter and progress through formal schooling (Purcell-Gates, 1996; Reese and Gallimore, 2000).

*Mothers' reading interest and ability.* Mothers' reading interest and ability influence literacy interactions. Parents who personally read more and perceive themselves as more academically competent are more likely to engage their children in more literacy activities, including shared book-reading (Machida et al., 2002; Reese et al., 2012). During shared book-reading, mothers with greater reading proficiency focus more on ensuring that their preschool children understand the story than on reading the text or discussing the pictures (Bus et al., 2000; Neuman, 1996).

*Children's reading interest and ability.* Children can be the primary initiators of home literacy activities, and thus children's interest is an influential factor in the frequency and types of activities that occur in the homes of low-SES kindergarten children (Goldenberg et al., 1992; Reese et al., 1995). Children who are more interested in literacy experiences increase their language and literacy exposure through asking parents to read to them or how to spell words. With regard to children's ability, researchers have found that low-income parents adjust their interactions with toddlers and preschoolers based on the children's perceived understanding (e.g. Hammer et al., 2005; Hammer and Weiss, 2000; Perry et al., 2008). For instance, Perry et al. (2008) found that low-income Latino parents adjusted their teaching interactions according to their perceptions of their preschool children's developmental needs, such as using more demonstration (versus prompting) when their children were less competent in that a particular skill.

*Older siblings and other family members.* Older siblings and other family members may further influence family's literacy activities (Perry et al., 2008; Reese et al., 1995). In some families, siblings were active participants in literacy



activities with preschool or kindergarten children (Perry et al., 2008; Reese et al., 1995). Other family members, such as aunts and uncles, read to kindergarten children or teach academic concepts (Reese et al., 1995).

*Family stressors.* Family stress (e.g. financial insecurity, long working hours, family violence) often negatively relates to home literacy practices (Foster et al., 2005; Machida et al., 2002; Reese et al., 1995). Machida et al. (2002) found that stress may indirectly influence home learning activities through its negative effect on parents' self-efficacy.

## Research aims

The importance of the HLE in supporting children's language and literacy development is well established. Given the growing diversity of the United States, more research is needed to better understand the home language and literacy environment of low-income preschool children from racially diverse backgrounds. Specifically, we sought to answer three research questions with a sample of low-income AA and Latino mothers whose children were enrolled in preschool in the U.S.: (a) What are children's home language and literacy experiences?; (b) what beliefs do mothers have about how children learn to read? and (c) what factors have influenced mothers' beliefs and practices? For each of these questions, we examined similarities and differences between AA and Latino mothers.

## Method

### *Participants*

Twenty mothers of preschool-aged children attending Head Start in an urban area of a northeastern state in the United States participated in this study. Head Start is a programme in the United States that provides free preschool education to children ages 3–6 years of age who live in poverty. The average age of the children in this study was 54 months. All families were low income, given that their families qualified financially for childcare through Head Start. Ten mothers were AA, and 10 were Latino. The Latino mothers were all of Puerto Rican (PR) descent, which was the largest Latino population in the local community. On average, the mothers were 26 years of age (range: 20–37 years) and had 12 years of education (range: 9–16 years). Most (65%) had completed 12th grade. More than half of the mothers (60%) were single parents. The mothers had between one and six children, with two to three children being the most prevalent. In regard to

siblings, 10 families (50%) had at least one school-age child. Half (50%) of the PR mothers, and 70% of the AA mothers were employed outside of the home. The PR mothers all were Spanish-English bilingual. While all mothers spoke some Spanish to their children, nine (of the 10) PR mothers reported English was the primary language used with their children.

### *Procedures*

The mothers participated in individual semi-structured interviews with the fourth author (principal investigator), an expert in ethnographic methods. The interviews were conducted in the homes and lasted between 1 and 3 h, depending on the mother. The interviews were voice recorded and later transcribed verbatim.

Guiding questions were designed to elicit information on the mothers' beliefs and practices regarding language and literacy development. Specifically, questions focused on (a) mothers' roles in promoting language and literacy development (e.g. what did you do to help your child learn to talk?; what are you doing to help your child learn to read?); (b) mothers' beliefs about how children's literacy skills develop (how do you think children learn to read?) and (c) influences on language and literacy practices (e.g. what suggestions, if any, have you gotten from others about helping your child get ready to read?; has your child's teacher or home visitor given you suggestions?; what were your experiences with adults reading books to you?). Follow-up questions were used to gather additional information or to clarify mothers' responses.

### *Analytic plan*

Analysis of the interview transcripts proceeded in several stages using a modified version of the consensual qualitative research method (CQR) developed by Hill et al. (1997). Overall, CQR is an inductive coding approach that involves a primary research team and uses a constant comparison approach (i.e. continuously comparing data to emerging categories) to arrive at consensual coding decisions. The primary research team included three members with expertise in emergent language and literacy development. Qualitative coding was conducted with Dedoose ([www.dedoose.com](http://www.dedoose.com)), a web-based application.

Two members of the research team independently read all 20 of the interviews in their entirety in order to identify an initial list of discrete codes that were applicable to the research aims (see Table 1). A third member of the research team reviewed the initial code list for completeness and clarity.

**Table 1.** Themes and codes.

Theme	Codes
<b>RQ1: Children's home language and literacy experiences</b>	
Provision of educational materials	Educational materials/toys, having books, going to the library
Engagement with books	Engagement with books
Focus on print: letters and writing	Conventional literacy, emergent literacy, writing
Implicit language opportunities <sup>a</sup>	Television, playing with others, conversations, using two languages, <sup>a</sup> participating in chores <sup>a</sup>
Focus on other pre-academic skills	Colouring/drawing, other pre-academic skills
<b>RQ2: Parent beliefs about how children learn to read</b>	
Social interactions with books	Engagement with books
<b>RQ3: Factors that influence parents' beliefs and practices</b>	
Influence of school	Influence of Head Start teachers/personnel, influence of siblings
Influence of other adults	Influence of family, outside supports
Parent reading interest/ability <sup>a</sup>	Parent childhood experiences, parent reading interest, <sup>a</sup> parent temperament/ability <sup>a</sup>
Child reading interest	Child reading interest/temperament
Commitment to child's academic and life success	Parent commitment, parent engagement
Family stressors	Family stressors

<sup>a</sup>Denotes difference found between African-American and Puerto Rican mothers.

All three members of the research team independently coded and discussed four randomly selected transcripts. This process led to the elimination of overlapping codes and the clarification of codes' operational definitions.

The remaining 16 transcripts were randomly divided among the research team for independent coding by one primary coder. Then, a second team member was randomly assigned as an auditor. The auditor's role was to review the transcripts and insure that the data were properly represented. For instance, the auditor would provide feedback on whether the applied codes were accurate and whether additional codes were warranted. The primary coder and auditor then discussed each transcript to come to a consensual decision. If the primary coder and the auditor were unable to come to agreement or if clarification of a code's operational definition came into question, the discussion was opened to include the third coder. Discussion continued until consensus was reached. After consensus coding of the 20 transcripts was achieved, the team then closely

examined the coded excerpts and clustered codes of similar content into themes that addressed the purposes of this study (see Table 1).

*Emergence of similarities and differences.* In the last stage of analysis, the data from AA and PR mothers were compared. Similar to the procedures of Oolbekkink-Marchand et al. (2006), frequency counts of codes for each group were calculated. Codes that were applied at least 50% more frequently in one racial group than the other were considered for further analysis of group differences. For each of the imbalanced codes, all members of the research team individually reviewed and discussed the excerpts associated with those codes in order to reach consensus on the emergence of differences.

## **Results**

Twelve themes emerged for the first three research questions that focused on children's home language and literacy experiences, mothers' language and literacy beliefs, and influential factors. Table 1 presents the research questions, corresponding themes and codes. Similarities and differences between the AA and PR mothers will be detailed for each research question. Differences are indicated by an asterisk in Table 1.

### *Research question 1: Children's home language and literacy experiences*

Five themes emerged about children's home language and literacy experiences. These themes were as follows: provision of educational materials, engagement with books, focus on print, implicit language opportunities and focus on other pre-academic skills.

*Provision of educational materials.* Prior to describing the home language and literacy activities, it is important to note that all mothers discussed the provision of educational materials.

Nineteen mothers (10 AA, 9 PR) indicated owning children's books. For some of these families, children had a large quantity of books. For instance, one AA mother described the number of children's books they have: 'Oh my gosh. He's got over a 100 books. He's got so many books they don't even all fit on the bookshelf'.

Nineteen mothers (9 AA, 10 PR) also described having other educational materials in the home, such as flashcards, puzzles and computer games. Mothers mentioned computers and electronic toys as a way to teach academic

concepts. One PR mother described an electronic toy called Teaching Teddy that taught her son letters and other pre-academic skills:

Each day, I have this, these tapes called Teaching Teddy and um, one of them speaks about the alphabet and it tells them in detail and he can play along with it. His shapes and uh, shapes, alphabet and certain pictures that go along with the alphabet and he's able to pick them out and stuff like that.

In general, when mothers discussed educational materials, more focus was placed on owning the resources than on the parent-child interactions centred on using the materials.

*Engagement with books.* Seventeen mothers (8 AA, 9 PR) identified book-reading as a literacy event that occurred in the home. Fifteen mothers (7 AA, 8 PR) indicated that they read books to their children, with 10 mothers (5 AA, 5 PR) reading at least several times a week to their children. Eight of these mothers (4 AA, 4 PR) described the various styles they used when book-reading. For instance, two mothers (1 AA, 1 PR) described how they focused on the print in the book, such as spelling out words or cueing children to look at print, when they read. One AA mother explained how she used book-reading as an opportunity to practice letter sounds and decoding via physically referencing the printed text for her child:

When we have a book I always take my finger and go across the page and they'll add. Like my little son will say, he knows you know the majority of basic words and stuff, he'll say well, what's this or what's that as we go across the page. And I'll explain it to him and he sits there and spells the letters out and how's it sound.

Four mothers (2 AA, 2 PR) used interactive reading strategies that supported children's comprehension, such as asking questions about the story or elements of the illustrations. For instance, one PR mother said:

I'll pick up the book, and I'll be like... 'What do you see on the picture?'... like if The Three Pigs. I say 'so what happens with the three pigs? Have you ever heard the story of the three pigs?' And they'll [children] be like, 'oh yeah, yeah and the fox tries to eat them'.

Two mothers (1 AA, 1 PR) described singing or acting out the actions in the story as a way to engage their children. One PR mother said: 'I would make

the book like into a song or something, and like take a paragraph at a time. And we'd sing it'. An AA mother stated: 'We sit down and I read it. And if something exciting happens I act, I jump up and the way the book tells it, that's how I act with him'.

Book-reading was not an activity that exclusively occurred during mother-child interactions. Six mothers (2 AA, 4 PR) indicated that other adults, such as fathers/partners and grandparents, read books with the children. Additionally, children had independent access to books. Twelve mothers (6 AA, 6 PR) described how their children looked at books on their own and often re-told the story to their mothers. One PR mother stated, 'He loves looking at books. He makes up his own stories and stuff like that'. Six mothers (4 AA, 2 PR) stated that their children also read books with their school-aged siblings.

*Focus on print: Learning letters and writing.* All mothers described their educational goals for their children as a focus on the alphabet and/or writing their names. Mothers wanted their children to learn letter names and sounds. For instance, one PR mother talked about teaching her child the names of letters: 'Like she has markers with the letters on them. That's another game of hers. Like, I'll stamp it, and I'll be like "What's that letter?"'

They also discussed their children learning letters through writing, such as writing their names. As an example, one PR mother said, 'Yeah, she [daughter] loves letters and she is just starting to recognize them now by writing them'. Another AA mother described how writing her name was a goal for her child: 'She still scribbles, I try, she knows how to spell her name out but she doesn't know how to write it down. That's, I'm trying to get her to learn. She does the N, but she does it like backwards'.

*Implicit language opportunities.* All mothers described many daily experiences that are potentially rich with language learning opportunities for their children, such as adult-child conversations (6 AA, 9 PR), playing with others (7 AA, 9 PR), chores (1 AA, 3 PR), learning two languages (0 AA, 9 PR) and watching television (9 AA, 8 PR). Yet, they rarely mentioned an explicit goal for or attention to developing their children's language skills.

The majority of mothers reported engaging their children in conversations. In descriptions of conversations mothers had with their children, mothers showed evidence of using language facilitation strategies (e.g. asking open-ended questions, following child's lead) but did not explicitly discuss how they support their child's language development. For instance, one AA mother

described a conversation in which she used an open-ended follow-up question to encourage her daughter to elaborate:

She'll sit down and she'll have a conversation with you. She'll say 'Mom. . . I ate French fries and hot dogs and chips and ice cream and I was playing with Brownie and I was watching the movie.' [Mother responds] 'What movie were you watching?' [Child response] 'Uh, we was watching Cartoon Network.'

However, one AA mother did discuss how having conversations with her child facilitated her child's language development. The mother mentioned how she made an intentional effort to teach her child vocabulary, as exemplified by the following quote:

And I'm trying to think, she hears the words, but who's to say that they really remember, not unless you sit down and you tell them, for them to remember. You know, repeating and repeating for them to remember, over and over until you know it by heart.

This same mother also described how her child watched her speak during conversations and mimicked the mother's speech:

'Because you're saying it and she's watching you. . .she was really paying attention to the mouth, how you would say your consonants and vowels and certain words, how they come together and how it comes out you know'.

Another frequently occurring activity that has the potential to build language was children's playtime with others (e.g. siblings, cousins, friends). One illustrative example is a PR mother describing how her daughter engages in imaginative play with her brother: 'And he has the My Buddy doll and she has the female. So they play together, he plays like he's the father and she plays the mother and they play together a lot'. One can infer from this description that a conversation is occurring between the children, but it is not described as a learning opportunity.

For nine of the 10 PR mothers, children's exposure to both Spanish and English was a natural occurrence in the context of their daily lives. This was a home language opportunity unique to the PR families. Mothers generally discussed the benefit of learning two languages, but they also pointed out the challenges in teaching their children two languages. For instance, one mother stated her belief that being bilingual is advantageous for her children

but that her son was not showing an interest in learning Spanish: 'He repeats stuff [in Spanish], but I don't think is really interested in learning it. . .but I'm trying to teach him, because I do want my kids to know both. I think it will be good for them'. Two mothers implied, but did not directly state, that bilingual language experiences may influence children's language development. For instance, one mother said: 'We do speak two languages here and sometimes the kids [that] know a second language they get confused'. Another mother described how her daughter was frustrated when the mother read to her in Spanish: 'And it's hard for her [daughter] cause she's like, like, "What are we looking at?"'

Four mothers (1 AA, 3 PR) also described how they interacted with children during chore time, including cleaning, cooking and helping with younger siblings. For example, one PR mother stated, 'She likes helping me around, she likes to imitate me when I'm moping she wants to mop, if I'm sweeping she wants to sweep, if I'm doing the wash she wants to do the same thing'. It is likely that the mother is providing verbal instruction to her daughter at these times to help sequence and guide her participation. As a result, these types of interactions may be an opportunity for language learning, but mothers do not describe them as such.

Watching television was a frequent activity for the children (9 AA, 8 PR); the majority of mothers reported that their children watched television on a daily basis. Some mothers specifically mentioned television programmes designed to be educational, such as *Blue's Clues*, as part of their children's routines. When adults and children discuss the television shows the child is watching, this can become an opportunity for language development. However, few mothers reported having conversations with children about television shows, and no mothers specifically mentioned these conversations as learning opportunities. One AA mother clearly described an example of teaching her child advanced vocabulary during joint television watching but gave no explicit acknowledgement that this was a language learning experience for her child:

She pretty much, she loves all the educational programs, that I can possibly think of that I can remember. . . And she'll sit there and she'll watch this and go, 'Mommy what's that? That's a Mummy, ain't it, mom?' You know, 'cause I told her what a mummy was, you know, when they had it on before, and they showed a mummified Pharaoh and and uh, pharaoh's son and all that, I showed her when it was on TV I said, 'That's called a mummy.' 'She's like, O.K., you know, and she's looking and she's learning. You know, all these different things.



In this example, the child's interest in television programming prompted a conversation with her mother about pharaohs and mummies, a topic that may not have appeared in their everyday, routine interactions but clearly includes advanced vocabulary.

*Focus on other pre-academic skills.* In addition to focusing on literacy, 17 mothers (8 AA, 9 PR) also explicitly mentioned goals for their children to gain other pre-academic skills, such as knowledge of numbers and shapes. A focus on pre-academic skills supports children's school readiness by teaching concepts as well as promoting academic language. One AA mother described focusing on counting:

She [daughter] be in kindergarten next year. And I'm working on all her skills. She need to learn her name, her numbers, at least I'd say at least one through twenty. Even though I might want to try to go further.

A PR mother described a focus on shapes:

When I sit down with her I try to help her out with the shapes. . .to let her know what a shape is, if I have the time. What a square is, a rectangle, you know, a circle. She knows a couple of those, she knows a heart, she knows a star, stuff like that.

Additionally, 14 mothers (7 AA, 7 PR) endorsed their child's interest in colouring/drawing – an activity that promotes fine motor skills, it is a precursor to writing and encourages creativity. A PR mother talked positively about her child's interest in drawing: 'And she likes to draw a lot. Little things, but we appreciate it, you know. And we [say] "This is nice." And she gets happy, you know. I like that'.

*Similarities and differences for practices.* Similarities were most evident in the practices of AA and PR mothers. The only difference noted between AA and PR mothers emerged for implicit language opportunities. Specifically, PR mothers were the only group to describe children's dual language experiences, and children participating in chores at home was almost unique to PR mothers.

### ***Research question 2: Parental beliefs about how children learn to read***

The second research question focused on parental beliefs about how children learn to read. One theme emerged. Sixteen mothers (7 AA, 9 PR) indicated

that children learn to read through social interactions centred on books. While no mothers described the developmental progression of how children learn to read, some mothers discussed practices that support literacy development. Yet, these practices differed in the degree to which they support developmentally appropriate skills for preschool children.

Eight mothers (3 AA, 5 PR) mentioned how children learn to read through adults or older siblings reading to young children but expressed they did not know how joint book-reading led to later independent reading. For instance, one AA mother stated, 'I guess they learn from, I don't know, seeing others [read]. Or hearing [stories]... I don't know, I guess they just catch on.'

Eight (4 AA, 4 PR) parents responded more specifically by describing or implying the use of strategies to teach children to read during joint book-reading activities. Two mothers described how they support their children's comprehension of stories through focusing on the pictures (two mothers: 1 AA, 1 PR), which is in alignment with early literacy development. For instance, an AA mother explained that children learn to read by looking at pictures in books and creating their own story.

They learn how to read, they learn how to read by picking up the book and it has colorful pictures in there, lot of different things in there and they will picture read instead of actual words... You know, so, she'll pick it up and says, 'Well, the little boy's on the bike and Kathy's over here knocking at the door, look at that house. Mommy, see the bear running in the woods.' She make this all up in her mind. You know, so I call that picture reading. You know, she's picture reading what's actually there but she's adding more characters.

Other mothers described practices that are geared to older children, such as learning sight words (three mothers: 2 AA, 1 PR) and decoding (five mothers: 2 AA, 3 PR). For example, one PR mother's response implied a focus on learning sight words:

I feel, though, that the way to learn how to read is open the book. The book's saying the red fox, you point. 'The red fox.' And you have them sitting there. And have them use their fingers as an index. And they'll learn by themselves. And they'll learn how to read.

*Similarities and differences for reading beliefs.* No differences were noted between AA and PR mothers in their beliefs on how children learn to read.

### *Research question 3: Factors that influence parents' beliefs and practices*

Six themes emerged about factors that influence home language and literacy practices and beliefs. These factors were the influence of school, the influence of other adults, parents' reading interest/ability, children's reading interest, parents' commitment to children's academic and life success, and family stressors.

*Influence of school.* Seventeen mothers (9 AA, 8 PR) discussed how interactions with the educational system shaped their home literacy practices and beliefs. The influence of school was dual-pronged: (a) influence of Head Start personnel (9 AA, 7 PR); and (b) influence of school-age older siblings or cousins (6 AA, 7 PR).

With regard to the influence of their children's Head Start personnel (i.e. teachers and home visitors), mothers indicated that they were given general guidance about the importance of reading as well as specific strategies to use when reading with their children. For example, one PR mother described how her Head Start home visitor provided specific advice on how to do a picture walk when reading to her child:

And they showed me a couple of ways to do it with her, like, when you open the [book], you know what I mean. Ask her what she see on the front of the cover. She'll tell you, 'Oh, a bear and trees'. You understand? So, she knows more than what the story's about. . . And I'll start asking her, I mean, 'What do you see in this picture?' and she'll start explaining to me. And then we'll go through the whole entire book and then we start the reading.

Mothers also described how the literacy activities that their children did in Head Start were incorporated into home activities. For example, one AA mother said:

She [daughter] learns most stuff in school and then I'll just go over it with her at home. . . Like she has a strip with her name on it and the letters from it, she knows how to put the K with the E, she knows how to put them there. You know, I just go over it with her at home.

The influence of school-age siblings or cousins was also routinely discussed. Two main ideas emerged regarding the influence of older children. First, parents described how older children served as a positive model and/or teacher for their younger preschool-aged sibling. As an example to illustrate

how siblings serve as positive models and spark younger siblings' academic interest, one PR mother said,

Her brother is in kindergarten and whenever he brings something from school, she's very interested. As a matter of fact, when he walks in through the door, the first thing she does is grab his bag, because she know he's always bringing stuff from school. She's excited about what he had done.

In addition to mothers describing how older children sometimes read to younger children (as noted in engagement with books), older children also helped them with other literacy tasks. For instance, one AA mother said, 'She [older daughter] trying to teach him [preschool son] how to spell certain things and little things, like "cat" and "dog".' Writing, spelling and decoding were all mentioned as ways in which older children supported the literacy skills of a preschool-aged child.

Second, parents expressed a shift in their home literacy beliefs and practices with their younger children as a result of the experiences they had with their older children moving through the U.S. educational system. For example, one PR mother talked about sending her younger children to Head Start after seeing her older children struggle in kindergarten.

Once they [older children] hit kindergarten, there were so many things that kids knew when they were in Head Start and mine didn't. It didn't take them a long time to learn, because I just kept working with them. But I was, gosh it was a mistake, I should really let them go to Head Start. The teacher would tell me they're participating fine, you know I would go and participate in class, because I had the time and I was like, wow these kids really know a lot. Head Start really helped them out. So as I had my other, my 6 year-old-son and her, and her and the next couple of kids I had, I said they're going to Head Start.

This mother's observation of her older children's academic difficulties as compared to the success achieved by her younger children attending Head Start confirmed her decision to enrol her subsequent children in the preschool programme.

*Influence of other adults.* Sixteen (9 AA, 7 PR) mothers discussed the influence of other adults on their beliefs and practices. The individuals named by mothers as exerting important influences on their beliefs and practices included their husbands/partners, mothers (children's grandmothers), siblings (children's aunts), cousins, friends and paediatricians. The influence was often weighted towards

their provision of materials to families. For instance, one AA mother described how her sister and mother bought books which resulted in increased mother-child shared reading interactions: 'So, my sister used to order books, my mom used to order books. And I couldn't help but to read 'em, you know'.

Some mothers described the advice that others had given them. Typically, this advice centred on the general importance of reading. One AA mother said, 'My cousin was like, you better start reading to that boy. So I've been reading to him for a long time'.

*Parents' reading interest and ability.* Sixteen mothers (7 AA, 9 PR) described how their own reading interest and ability were positively or negatively associated with home literacy practices. Twelve mothers (7 AA, 5 PR) expressed great personal enjoyment in reading books. One AA mother said, 'I would just sit there and I would eat a whole pack of fig newtons and read a book...No music, no TV, no nothing, just me and a book. That's how I am'. Mothers described how their own reading interest was supported in childhood through their schooling experiences as well as by their parents. Based on the interview data, it is not possible to draw any conclusions about whether mothers who personally enjoyed reading engaged in more frequent or higher quality shared book-reading interactions with their children. However, it is noteworthy that mothers who enjoyed reading recognized that an interest in texts is motivating. For instance, one AA mother described how reading interest influenced her home literacy practices with her children: 'It's better for [me] to read...something that interests them. You know what I mean-when I read a lot of times it's because it interests me'.

Yet, mothers' reading interest and ability could also negatively influence their practices (0 AA, 4 PR). For instance, one PR mother's documented limited reading ability resulted in infrequent reading with her children:

And I read them [children's] books once in a while. I'm not a very good reader...So I really try not to go there a lot. I never been good at reading. But sometimes I do read to them. But I don't do it to them a lot

*Children's reading interest.* Seventeen mothers (7 AA, 10 PR) expressed how their preschool child's interest in reading also positively and negatively affected home literacy experiences. For instance, a PR mother described how her child's interest in reading resulted in more frequent reading interactions: 'She brings like, four or five, six different books at a time. I'm like, "You gotta slow down." She's like, "Momma, it's that I like it."'.

With regard to children's lack of reading interest, several mothers indicated a focus on improving their children's interest in order to continue literacy activities. For instance, one AA mother described her challenges with engaging her child in academic activities and how she tried to balance academic with other activities the child enjoyed:

I can only work on actual, like me helping him do things for about a half hour, maybe 20 minutes. We, and we don't do like the same page, he'll flip through it and do like one of the one part and then one of the other part. . . Then he likes to just color, or look at the other stuff or start the craft project. So about an hour total I try and stay on it. But it's hard because he wants to get up and he wants to do other things, but sort of, like, I let him, like, get up and, like, jump and clap in-between things.

Yet, other mothers described their children's lack of interest as a barrier, which led them to decrease their home literacy activities. One AA mother said,

I was doing it [reading] on my own and then, um, he wasn't paying attention and stuff, I thought, why should I sit down, he kept looking at everything. I would turn off the TV and everything and he would be like, ignoring me and stuff, and it's like why should I.

The majority of mothers had more than one child, and mothers expressed that one child may really enjoy reading whereas another child might not. Also, mothers recognized that an individual child's interest would vary depending on the context or the type of books selected.

*Parents' commitment to child's academic and life success.* Eighteen mothers (8 AA, 10 PR) described their commitment to their children's academic as well as life success in terms of short-term and long-term paths. Fifteen mothers (6 AA, 9 PR) discussed their immediate focus on ensuring their children's current academic success through working on homework, investing in academically related materials (as previously mentioned) and involving themselves in Head Start volunteer activities. For example, one African-American mother described the importance she placed on her involvement in Head Start:

Cuz I want to be a dedicated parent with them down at the school, too. I used to love to go to parent meetings and, you know, I'd be right there, in there trying to find out what is our weakness, what is our, you know, our strength.

In the following quote, a PR mother describes her commitment to her children's academic trajectory but also acknowledges the barriers that impede parental engagement by saying:

Well, I just feel that some families don't really have an interest in reading. Maybe they weren't brought up to, I mean maybe they didn't have that in their home, you know, reading. And some parents overwork or they work too hard and they're very tired and they don't have time, you know, for reading. I take an interest in it with my children and I want them to do well in school so I try to read to them and do the best that I can, with what I know, with what I've learned growing up.

Fourteen mothers (6 AA, 8 PR) also described long-term academic and life goals for their children. In the following quote, a PR mother conveyed the value of education to her children by explaining that staying in school would allow them to achieve their career aspirations. She also made important educational milestones, such as high school and college graduation, seem attainable by showing her children her own diplomas:

He [son] is always saying he wants to be a cop, a police officer. So you know, I give him the courage. I be like, 'Yes, you know, but for you to do this you have to go through school. You need an education, that's a must.' I always tell them, I got my graduation. . . I showed them my graduation. I got two diplomas. . . I say 'This really gets you somewhere. You really need a high school diploma and you need an education so you can get to where you want. You really have to try. I'm not going to be always around.'

Approximately one-third of mothers did not attain a high school diploma, a decision that was often related to teenage pregnancy. Even in these circumstances, some mothers wanted to remain in school but described a lack of support (from home and/or school), such that they believed they had no other option than to quit school. As a result, mothers reported struggling with employment and finances. They viewed completing schooling as the fundamental way that their children could avoid facing the same struggles.

**Family stressors.** Thirteen mothers (6 AA, 7 PR) mentioned significant life stressors, such as moving, incarceration, health concerns, and long or challenging work schedules. These stressors impacted on the interactions mothers had

with their children. For instance, one AA mother discussed how her history of physical abuse influenced her parenting:

I don't have patience. You can just work me so much. That's with my kids, anybody's kids, any person, period. I just don't have, I have very low tolerance. I've been through a lot of abuse, for one thing. And I just really can't take a lot. Really really can't take a lot. . . You know, yeah, so it's like I'm just really trying to, I guess heal or get better, or whatever.

Another AA mother described how her work schedule impeded her ability to engage in activities with her children:

It's just that I work 4 to 12, where do I even get a little bit of time to sit with my son. . . when he comes home from school, I'm at work, you know. By the time I come home, he's in bed. So, where's my time to see him, except when I get up in the morning. You know, I'm not focused, I'm still tired from working all week long, you know, and trying to do all this stuff.

Mothers often discussed how living conditions negatively impacted on their home literacy practices. Several mothers mentioned that books and other materials were in storage because their current housing was too cramped for many of the family's belongings. As another example, one PR mother described how an upcoming move prevented her from taking her child to the library: 'They told me I could take him to the library and get a library card for him, I didn't know that until now, but why should I get it now if I'm leaving.'

Given that almost all mothers reported a commitment to their children's success, family stressors acted as a factor limiting their ability to engage in their child's education as fully as they desired.

*Similarities and differences for influential factors.* Similarities between AA and PR mothers were largely evident in the factors influential on parents' beliefs and practices. Only one difference was noted between AA and PR mothers. Specifically, only PR mothers described their limited reading interest/ability as a reason for infrequent literacy activities with their children.

## **Discussion**

Given the growing diversity in the U.S., the purpose of the study was to gain a more nuanced perspective of the home language and literacy environment of



low-income and racially/ethnic minority families in the U.S. Synthesizing the results about practices, beliefs and influences, we highlight three overarching findings that inform intervention development. First, families implement a variety of practices, including both formal and informal language and literacy interactions, to support children's educational success, but mothers showed little explicit understanding of why these practices are important. Second, mothers indicated that their beliefs and practices are influenced by numerous factors. Third, few differences emerged between AA and PR mothers.

### *HLE beliefs and practices*

Mothers reported a commitment to their children's educational success through the provision of educational materials, shared book-reading (i.e. informal HLE dimension) and direct teaching of the alphabet and other pre-academic skills (i.e. formal HLE dimension). Mothers' reported engagement with children to support their school readiness is impressive, given the difficult life circumstances of these mothers living in poverty (for a more detailed discussion of mothers' lives, see Hammer, 2014). It is encouraging to note the regular reporting of these home literacy practices, given their positive contribution to children's language and literacy development (e.g. Aikens and Barbarin, 2008; Aram and Levin, 2002; Farver et al., 2006; PIRLS, 2007; Raikes et al., 2006; Sénéchal and LeFevre, 2002). Our findings align with previous research on the frequency and type of home literacy practices implemented by low-income mothers of preschool and young school-age children (e.g. Goldenberg et al., 1992; Purcell-Gates, 1996; Raikes et al., 2006; Reese and Gallimore, 2000; Reese et al., 1995, 2012). Thus, these mothers seem attuned to the popular message about the importance of early literacy development that is espoused by U.S. schools and media. In fact, mothers reported that Head Start personnel did advise parents to read with their children, which influenced their book-reading practices.

Despite regular engagement in home literacy practices, mothers showed little explicit understanding of early literacy development and how children learn to read, such as understanding that children should have a solid foundation of alphabetic knowledge prior to being able to decode words. Although some mothers were fairly forthright that they were unsure how joint book-reading supports children's learning to read, other mothers described specific strategies that they use to teach children to read. A focus on specific strategies communicates mothers' practical understanding of literacy development. For instance, several mothers described using book-reading strategies found in

print-referencing (i.e. physically pointing out words while reading) and dialogic reading (i.e. actively engaging children in discussing a story) that are associated with preschool children's improved language and literacy skills (e.g. Justice and Ezell, 2000; Whitehurst et al., 1994). Yet, many mothers described strategies that were more appropriate for older children (e.g. decoding, sight words) and not developmentally appropriate for preschool children.

The focus on more advanced skills is probably due to memories of how mothers personally learned to read themselves in formal schooling or due to formal schooling experiences with older children, which has been shown in the literature to be influential on mothers' practices (Paratore et al., 2003; Reese et al., 2012; Teale, 1986). Interventionists working with families should communicate to parents which practices are developmentally appropriate and provide brief simple explanations to parents about why these practices are recommended (e.g. pointing to words while reading supports children's understanding of what a word is). When parents have a better understanding of developmentally appropriate practices, they may be more likely to make these practices a priority during their busy and stressful days. This may be especially true for this sample of mothers, given how committed they were to their children's academic success.

The relation between oral language and children's later reading success is well established (e.g. Catts et al., 2002; NICHD Early Child Care Research Network, 2005). Mothers' responses suggested scant attention to children's language development. For instance, even when mothers' described potentially rich language-learning opportunities of children (e.g. conversations, playing with others), they never revealed an awareness that these activities can support their children's language development. This is consistent with previous research findings, i.e. that low-income families in the U.S. often use language as a practical tool to communicate with one another versus a tool to promote children's language development (Heath, 1983; Lareau, 2011). In sum, our findings indicate that more emphasis should be placed on educating parents about the importance of language development and how to support it. Interventionists can build on parents' commitment to reading by explaining to parents how to promote children's vocabulary development during adult-child shared book-reading. Additionally, parents can be educated on how to facilitate language during their daily interactions, such as purposefully engaging the child in conversation, following the child's lead and using advanced vocabulary (e.g. McDuffie and Yoder, 2010; Mahoney and Powell, 1988). Parents can be taught to use these strategies during the naturally occurring home practices reported by the mothers in this study, including watching

television, playing and completing chores with their children. As such, interventionists are fostering a strengths-based approach to enhancing the HLE.

### *Influential factors*

The findings indicate that mothers' beliefs and practices are influenced by a variety of factors, including school, other adults, parents' personal reading interest and children's reading interest. Identification of these influences aligns with previous research on families with preschool and kindergarten children (Bus et al., 2000; Goldenberg et al., 1992; Hammer et al., 2005; Neuman, 1996; Perry et al., 2008; Reese and Gallimore, 2000; Reese et al., 1995, 2012). Knowing that mothers are receptive to outside influences, especially educators, is encouraging to interventionists. Mothers reported adopting practices that are recommended by educators and other professionals, indicating that mothers are open to learning new information about how to support their children's development.

These findings also provide direction to interventionists about what mothers prioritize and where they need support. As stated previously, mothers' own schooling experiences and their memories of how they learned to read in school influenced the reported practices they were using with their preschool children, often resulting in non-developmentally appropriate practices. As another example, mothers were very attuned to their children's reading interest. Some mothers reported using strategies, such as shortening the length of an activity, to increase their child's engagement. Yet, some mothers indicated that they stopped initiating literacy activities with their children. This suggests that mothers may need support in how to gain and sustain their young children's interest. Such strategies could include selecting materials that are of high interest to the child, embedding movement into activities and mindfully selecting the location (e.g. away from distractions, such as the television) and duration (i.e. developmentally appropriate length of time for the child) for an activity (e.g. Milbourne and Campbell, 2007). Additionally, because older siblings are clearly significant role models, components of interventions could include opportunities for older siblings to motivate and play an active role in promoting younger children's language and literacy development. Engaging older siblings is often viewed as a culturally sensitive strategy for families from backgrounds in which all family members are responsible for caring for younger children.

It is important to also be aware that not all adults have the same level of literacy proficiency or interest, which influences their HLE practices. Other

researchers have documented this relation (Bus et al., 2000; Neuman, 1996; Reese et al., 2012). One mother in this study revealed that she was not 'a good reader' (i.e. difficulty with decoding) and that was why she did not read to her child. In this case, interventionists may limit the degree of reading required, such as having a focus on story telling rather than storybook-reading. For instance, adults and children could tell stories from wordless picture books or have adults and children co-create their own books (Boyce et al., 2004). Alternatively, as stated previously, more literate older siblings could serve as the teacher to younger children. Also, approaches that include a focus on adult literacy may be appropriate.

### *Comparison of AA and PR mothers*

Another aim of the study was to examine the similarities and differences between AA and PR mothers. Overall, similarities were predominant, with minor differences emerging between AA and PR mothers, specifically on the topics of implicit language opportunities (i.e. bilingual language opportunities, participating in chores) and the negative influence of parents' reading ability. Although extant research is limited and inconsistent, the finding that the themes were largely similar for both AA and PR mothers was not totally unexpected. For instance, Teale (1986) found that race did not predict the frequencies or types of practices, and he concluded 'cultural practices are not merely the product of one's race' (195). SES is probably more salient than race. Lareau (2011) found that SES, not race, was associated with parental practices. Other researchers have described differences in the home literacy practices of Latino families that are attributable to higher and lower SES (Paratore et al., 2003; Reese et al., 2012). The difficult circumstances associated with living in or near poverty enact a powerful influence on parenting (e.g. Foster et al., 2005).

A limitation of this sample was that all children participated in the same preschool programme. Foster et al (2005) found significant differences in HLE practices between families whose children were and were not enrolled in early educational programming. Thus, it may be that parents, regardless of ethnic/racial status, who send their children to Head Start are more likely to have similar perspectives on HLE. Also, as indicated in our findings, Head Start educators influenced the HLE. Thus, it may be that the HLE of AA and PR mothers exhibited more differences prior to their children's enrolment in Head Start but, over time, became more similar in their perspectives as a result of Head Start participation.

Although few in number, two differences did emerge which are important for interventionists to consider. First, the most obvious is the language spoken in the home. All but one of the PR mothers in this sample spoke Spanish to their children. Parents should be encouraged to speak their home language during literacy activities with their children. For Spanish-English dual language learners in the U.S., children's exposure to and usage of Spanish are significant predictors of children's language outcomes in both Spanish and English (Hammer et al., 2012). Additionally, children's growth in Spanish skills is associated with later reading ability in school (Davison et al., 2011; Hammer et al., 2009). Second, it is also noteworthy that participation in chores was predominantly identified as a regular mother-child routine by PR mothers. A pivotal recommended practice in family-centred care is working with families to identify typical family routines in order to embed developmentally appropriate practices (DEC, 2014). Thus, interventionists should collaboratively discuss with families what their goals are for their children and determine how practices can be more easily integrated into families' routines.

### *Limitations and future directions*

Several limitations require mention. First, as noted above, all participants had children enrolled in Head Start, and as such, findings may lack generalizability to parents who do not enrol their children in early childhood education (ECE) programmes. Future research should include parents whose children are not enrolled in ECE programmes. Second, interview data (i.e. parent self-report) served as the sole source of data. It may be that mothers were susceptible to social desirability bias, which certainly could influence the findings presented. However, given the qualitative nature of the study, this assumes that mothers had a sufficient understanding of desirable behaviours and beliefs to articulate them when asked open-ended questions. In fact, many mothers described practices, beliefs and factors that paint them in a less than flattering light (e.g. only half of the mothers indicated they read with their children several times a week). Future research should use a variety of additional data sources, including observation, in addition to interviews in order to conduct a comprehensive qualitative examination of the HLE.

Third, we only examined similarities and differences through the lens of race/ethnicity. Race/ethnicity is only one component of culture; culture is a complex construct comprised of race/ethnicity, language, SES, religion, gender, sexual orientation, age and ability (National Association of Multicultural Education, 2014). Future directions for further U.S. and international research

include a broadened lens of cultural influence. Although our mothers differed with regard to race/ethnicity, they were similar in other respects. The PR mothers were all proficient in English. Additionally, PR mothers are U.S. citizens and thus may have many similar educational and other experiences to AA mothers. Future studies should investigate the HLE beliefs and practices of mothers who are less/not proficient in the mainstream language, are more/less acculturated and/or from different countries of origin.

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