Early Childhood Education Centers and Mothers’ Postsecondary Attainment: A New Conceptual Framework for a Dual-Generation Education Intervention

TERESA E. SOMMER
Northwestern University

P. LINDSAY CHASE-LANSDALE
Northwestern University

JEANNE BROOKS-GUNN
Teachers College, Columbia University

MARGO GARDNER
Teachers College, Columbia University

DIANA M. RAUNER
Ounce of Prevention Fund

KAREN FREEL
Ounce of Prevention Fund

Background/Context: Economic, developmental, and sociological theories and research suggest that there are benefits associated with on-time postsecondary credentialing and training.

CHRISTINE WOYSHNER is Professor of Education at Temple University. Her research investigates voluntary organizations and civil society in the history of education. Her most recent book is The National PTA, Race, and Civic Engagement, 1897–1970 (Ohio State University Press, 2009).
for low-income parents even though this often means the management of family, work, and school while children are young. This argument is based on three conclusions drawn from the literature: (1) early childhood is a time when children are uniquely responsive to their environments, and interventions during this developmental period result in greater returns on investments than do later interventions; (2) maternal postsecondary credentials may be more beneficial for younger children than for older school-aged children; and (3) the educational advancement of parents strengthens the economic and social assets of families and are likely to help break the intergenerational cycle of poverty.

**Purpose/Objective/Research Question/Focus of Study:** This study places special emphasis on exploring how an early childhood education center can enhance the educational prospects of parents of young children and poses the following three questions: (1) How do young low-income mothers vary in their readiness for postsecondary success? (2) How does participation in high-quality early childhood education programs support mothers’ educational pursuits? (3) How do mothers, in the context of high-quality early education, connect their educational goals for their children with their own educational goals?

**Research Design:** In-depth qualitative interviews were conducted with 12 intentionally and 39 randomly selected parents whose children were enrolled in urban early childhood centers in Denver, Colorado; Chicago, Illinois; and Miami, Florida. Seventeen focus groups were carried out with program staff and teachers at the three centers. All transcribed interview data were analyzed through the creation of individual profiles to examine variation in mothers’ postsecondary readiness and through a “grounded theory” approach.

**Findings/Results:** Results indicate that (a) low-income mothers vary in their potential for postsecondary success and can be classified in three clusters; (b) all mothers are concerned for their children’s education, and most believe that a college education is economically essential; (c) participation in high-quality early education may make a difference in mothers’ views of their potential; and (d) those who observe their children thriving in an early childhood program may be more motivated to pursue their own education.

**Conclusions/Recommendations:** Together, these results suggest a new framework for addressing the postsecondary and career needs of low-income families with young children: High-quality early childhood education centers may be a promising platform for adult education and training. Gains in educational attainment made through participation in such programming may cultivate skills and knowledge among parents that will not only improve their financial stability but also promote the educational and social development of their children.

The goal of this article is to explore the potential for linking early childhood education centers with programs to promote the postsecondary enrollment and attainment and workforce success of low-income parents. We present (a) theory and empirical evidence that underscores the critical importance of on-time parental postsecondary education and training during children’s preschool years; (b) an exploratory study that examines the educational motivation, goals, supports, and obstacles of low-income mothers of young children at three high-quality early childhood centers; and (c) a new conceptual framework that outlines a dual-generation intervention that could simultaneously promote the education of young, low-income children and their parents.

**OVERVIEW**

A conceptual framework for a dual-generation approach to promoting education and reducing poverty argues for combining educational programs for parents, specifically workforce training and career education, and children, in this case high-quality early education, in the same family and at the same time. Most policies aimed directly at helping children escape the ravages of poverty through education have developed in separate silos from welfare, employment, and training programs for adults (Chase-Lansdale & Votruba-Drzal, 2004). These child-centered policies have produced an array of early childhood education programs, such as Head Start (e.g., Zigler & Styfco, 2010) and Early Head Start (e.g., Love et al., 2005), universal prekindergarten (e.g., Gormley & Gayer, 2005; Wong, Cook, Barnett, & Jung, 2008), and, most recently, the early elementary school reform known as PreK-to-Third Grade (e.g., Reynolds, Magnuson, & Ou, 2010; Takanishi & Bogard, 2007). These policies and programs have increased access to quality early education for low-income children and have drawn attention to the importance of supporting parents. However, their focus has traditionally been on improving parenting skills, providing emotional and instrumental aid, and promoting General Education Development (GED) and English as a second language (ESL).
attainment, not on intensive postsecondary workforce training and career education.

Although antipoverty policies in the United States have been extensive (Danziger & Haveman, 2002), a specific focus on the postsecondary and career education and training of young low-income parents is uncommon. Instead, most antipoverty policies for low-income adults in recent decades have been dominated by a work-first orientation (Goldrick-Rab & Sorensen, 2010; Shaw, Goldrick-Rab, Mazzeo, & Jacobs, 2006), as exemplified by welfare reform and the expansion of the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) in the 1990s and 2000s. These policies are driven by strong political beliefs, societal values, and research evidence that higher income among the poor will improve families’ lives and their children’s opportunities (Chase-Lansdale et al., 2003; Duncan & Brooks-Gunn, 1997). The welfare reform legislation from 1996 has been a key factor in mothers leaving the rolls and finding employment, but job training programs per se in the past several decades have met with only limited success in promoting economic stability (Duncan & Magnuson, 2004; Haskins & Sawhill, 2009). Such programs might be more effective if they included an explicit focus on adult education and career development, not just job attainment, and may hold greater promise for parents when linked with early childhood education programs.

THEORY AND RELEVANT EMPIRICAL KNOWLEDGE

Considerable theoretical and empirical evidence has accrued regarding the importance of early childhood education and the benefits of on-time postsecondary credentialing for parents, underscoring the potentially life-changing impact and synergistic effects of dual-generation programs. Parents’ and children’s educational trajectories are intertwined and are informed by similar theories. Sociological life course theory emphasizes the interdependence of linked lives and points to the bidirectional influence of children on parents, and parents on children. Numerous studies indicate a strong, positive association between mothers’ education and children’s development (e.g., Currie & Moretti, 2003; Gennetian, Magnuson, & Morris, 2008; Magnuson, 2003, 2007; Magnuson, Sexton, Davis-Kean, & Huston, 2009), especially for families with limited income. For example, Magnuson’s most recent study (2009) found that increases in maternal education are linked to improvements in young children’s language development and the quality of their home environments for low-income families but not for higher income families. Tests of causal links are infrequent, however (Gardner et al., 2010). More stringent methodologies such as random assignment studies are needed to make conclusive determinations about the direction of the association between maternal education and child well-being.

Significant advances have been made in overcoming the risks faced by young children growing up in resource-depleted environments. Early childhood education programs constitute one of the most promising ways to combat poverty by fostering learning and social competence in the short term and by reducing social problems such as adolescent pregnancy, school dropout, joblessness, and criminal behavior in the long term (Brooks-Gunn, McCormick, Shapiro, Benasich, & Black, 1994; Heckman, 2006; Reynolds et al., 2007). Numerous related fields also document that early childhood is a time when children are particularly responsive to their environments (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). Investing early in a child’s life when he or she is particularly sensitive to environmental input is especially effective for children experiencing economic hardship (Duncan & Magnuson, 2004; Heckman & Masterov, 2007) and maximizes the rate of returns (Heckman, 2006).

Human capital and biocultural theories also provide perspectives on the importance of dual-generation education programs that target parents and children. These theories suggest that successful learning, social development, and current or future earning power depend on monetary and nonmonetary resources in the environment, the individuals’ genetic predispositions, and the interplay between the two (Becker, 1991, 1993; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998; Foster, 2002; Foster, Dodge, & Jones, 2003). Such resources and transactions result in greater social capital, social interaction, cognitive stimulation, and life opportunities. Low-income children have parents with fewer monetary resources and lower levels of education and thus less to invest. Households with greater monetary resources are likely to invest more in their children (Becker, 1991; Mayer, 1997), both in the home, through reading, educational materials, stimulating activities, and the setting of high expectations, and outside the home, through quality childcare settings, high-performing schools, afterschool activities, and safe neighborhoods. Children and young adults in these households are more likely to achieve educational success than their disadvantaged counterparts.

While children with greater economic resources are at an advantage, so too are parents with higher levels of education. Without postsecondary credentials earned through education and training programs after high school, young adults in the United States are likely to achieve lower rates of financial and career advancement (Haskins, 2008; Haskins, Holzer, & Lerman, 2009). Students who attend college, whether at two-year or four-year institutions and with or without degree attainment, receive higher earnings than high school graduates without postsecondary credits.
improved economic standing over their lifetimes and are likely to transfer positive benefits across generations (Attewell & Lavin, 2007).

A DUAL-GENERATION FRAMEWORK

Despite theory and evidence supporting linkages among parental education, social mobility, and children's successful development, we have yet to identify the most effective strategies to help young low-income parents enroll and persist in postsecondary education and workforce training. Many programs have attempted—with varying degrees of success—to increase rates of postsecondary enrollment and completion among low-income youth and young adults, but not young parents specifically (see Gardner et al., 2010; Goldrick-Rab & Sorensen, 2010, for reviews). Broader self-sufficiency interventions that target low-income parents have had few positive impacts on mothers' educational outcomes. Notably, evaluations of welfare-to-work programs, such as National Evaluation of Welfare-to-Work Strategies (NEWWS), California's Greater Avenues for Independence Program (GAIN), and New Hope, suggest that program-related gains in education are limited primarily to GED receipt and basic skills, rather than postsecondary attainment (Freedman et al., 2000). In recent years, a few innovative pilot programs for young parents have been developed (e.g., CareerAdvance in Tulsa, Oklahoma; Glover, Smith, King, & Coffey, 2010; King et al., 2009) that offer parents of children enrolled in high-quality early learning centers sector-based education and training along a specific career pathway (e.g., nursing) while concurrently offering contextualized adult basic education, work readiness and life skills training, contacts with local employers, and, in some instances, performance-based conditional cash transfers or non-cash incentives. These programs have not been rigorously evaluated to date, but they hold promise as models of dual-generation interventions and suggest essential elements for success.

We propose that high-quality early childhood education programs should serve as a point of access for advancing low-income mothers' postsecondary achievement. High-quality early education by definition offers children (a) safe and healthful care; (b) a developmentally appropriate curriculum that promotes educational, physical, and emotional development; (c) positive interactions with adults they trust, enjoy, and learn from; (d) and positive interactions with peers (Cryer, 1999). Moreover, center-based quality early education programs designed specifically to support low-income families also recognize that the well-being of children and that of their families are inextricably linked and that parents need additional support in achieving personal, educational, and career
goals, often through trained family support staff. As such, they offer a solid foundation from which to add new components to promote parental postsecondary education.

We hypothesize that participation in high-quality early childhood education can make a difference in low-income parents' views of what is possible for their children and themselves (Mendoza, 2003). Watching their children develop and thrive in early education settings may serve as a source of educational motivation for mothers. Moreover, mothers involved in early childhood programs may view themselves as part of a supportive community comprising other parents, teachers, support staff, and administrators. They also may perceive the center as a source of information and guidance regarding child development and parenting, and such center resources could be expanded to include resources on postsecondary education in tandem with existing postsecondary programs in the community. A dual-generation education program would build on the trust, sense of connection, and resources of early childhood education settings.

QUALITATIVE STUDY

To inform the development of a new conceptual framework for a dual-generation education intervention, we undertook a qualitative study to examine the postsecondary experiences of young low-income mothers whose children were enrolled in high-quality early education centers. We placed special emphasis on exploring how an early childhood education center could enhance the educational prospects of parents of young children, and we posed the following three questions: (1) How do young low-income mothers vary in their readiness for postsecondary success? (2) In what ways does and should participation in high-quality early childhood education programs support mothers' educational pursuits? (3) How do mothers, in the context of high-quality early education, connect their educational goals for their children with their own educational goals?

METHOD

Sample

We selected three urban early childhood education centers—one each in Denver, Colorado; Chicago, Illinois; and Miami, Florida—that serve low-income children and meet standard definitions for quality early childhood education. Quality criteria include low teacher-to-child ratios (1:3 for infants and 1:10 for preschoolers); master teachers with four-year degrees and specific training in early childhood education; a developmentally appropriate and evidence-based curriculum with a special emphasis on children's social-emotional development and language and literacy; and comprehensive services (health, mental health, and family support services). The centers all provide full-day, full-year programs, and parents who meet income requirements (not more than 200% of Federal Poverty Guidelines) and child age limits (6 months to 5 years of age) are eligible to enroll.

From these centers, we drew a sample of mothers for participation in our exploratory study. A limitation of the design is that we could not interview fathers. In our interview with mothers, we created psychological space for fathers, husbands, and partners by incorporating them in questions about mothers' daily lives and their systems of support. The sample of mothers is racially diverse (55% African American, 37% Hispanic, and 8% White and other), low income (household income of less than or equal to two times the federal poverty level), young (18–35 years; = 26 years), female headed (61% single, 24% cohabiting, and 14% married), raising two children on average, and largely without postsecondary credentials (73% with a high school degree, GED or less, and 26% with a certificate, AA, or BA; see Table 1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1. Comparison of the Study Sample (N = 51) With the Program Population at the Three Centers</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(N = 362)</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Demographic Characteristics</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less than HS</td>
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<tr>
<td>GED/HS diploma</td>
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<tr>
<td>Vocational/certificate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BA</td>
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<tr>
<td>Employment</td>
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<tr>
<td>Full-time</td>
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<tr>
<td>Part-time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not working</td>
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<tr>
<td>Health Insurance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mothers with insurance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children with insurance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race/Ethnicity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other/Biracial</td>
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two academic consultants, and the research team. In the first phase of data collection, while testing the feasibility of the study, interviews were conducted with 4 mothers at each site \((n = 12)\) who were selected by staff as exemplars of mothers’ varying educational experiences. These mothers either (a) had completed a postsecondary program; (b) were currently enrolled; (c) had enrolled in the past and dropped out before completion; or (d) had never enrolled. The objective of this purposeful sampling was to ensure that all types of educational backgrounds were represented. In the second phase, we randomly selected participants from the population of low-income mothers aged 35 and younger at each center \((n = 98)\). The intention of sampling in this manner was to focus on our target population—young mothers who had sufficient years to invest in additional education—and to limit staff bias in selecting active, engaged, longtime center participants.

Interviews lasted 60–90 minutes, and mothers responded to questions about their (a) postsecondary educational experiences; (b) educational motivation and goals; (c) employment and financial resources; (d) life circumstances and risks; and (e) social and familial supports. Additionally, mothers were interviewed for their perspectives on (f) the effects of quality child care on their families; (g) their educational dreams and goals for their children and themselves, and the relationship between the two; (h) the quality of their own elementary and secondary education experiences; and (i) ideas for an adult intervention to support their educational and career pursuits in an early childhood education setting. Questions across these domains were expected to facilitate semi-structured discussions of myriad influences on mothers’ postsecondary plans and achievements while also allowing flexibility for unexpected exchanges.

Program staff at each center explained the study in person or over the phone with selected participants and offered $50 compensation (in the form of a gift card). The majority of interviews were conducted in private rooms at each center, with only the respondent and one researcher present, and were taped and transcribed verbatim. Researchers also collected personal field notes, and all participants responded to a short demographic survey. In addition, 17 focus groups were conducted separately with leadership, family support staff, and teachers with 6–8 individuals in each; these were conducted and taped, and transcribed verbatim as well. Teachers and family support staff at these centers reflect the ethnic and racial composition of the enrolled mothers, and many described similar experiences and attitudes as the mothers interviewed, including several who had been center participants themselves. Teacher and staff focus groups centered on the following: (a) how and when they interact

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**Data Collection**

The design and implementation of the study was guided by a steering committee comprising leadership staff at the early childhood centers,
with parents; (b) their perceptions of parental motivation and goals; (c) if and how they support parents in postsecondary education and workforce training; (d) observed parental barriers to postsecondary enrollment and persistence; and (e) their views on the potential for and effectiveness of adding parental postsecondary and career training to their center.

Coding and analytic strategies. All transcribed mother interviews and staff focus groups, interview and field notes, and demographic surveys were examined using the qualitative analysis program NVivo. Data were analyzed in two ways: (a) by the creation of individual mother profiles or case studies to examine variation in mothers’ readiness for potential postsecondary success; and (b) through a data-driven, “grounded theory” approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) in which one inductively builds a theory from a body of data by discovering key concepts and categories and their interrelationships.

Mother Profiles

All stored data for each mother were reviewed by at least two researchers, and the team as a whole identified five data-generated dimensions along which mothers’ postsecondary readiness varied. These dimensions, described in detail next, are: postsecondary educational experience; educational motivation and desire; employment and financial supports; life risks; and social and familial supports. Individual mother profiles were then created with the data compiled for each mother, including interview summaries and illustrative quotes for each dimension, as well as tables of key descriptive data (e.g., mother’s education, employment, age at first birth). Each mother received a ranking from 1 to 3 on each of the five dimensions. For all but one of the dimensions (i.e., life circumstances and risks), a score of 3 reflects a high level of readiness, and a score of 1 reflects a low level of readiness (see Table 2).

In describing their postsecondary educational experiences, mothers who reported uninterrupted enrollment in a postsecondary educational program received a score of 3, mothers who reported discontinuous or delayed postsecondary education received a 2, and mothers with no postsecondary experience to date received a 1. For educational motivation and desire, mothers who could specify an educational goal (e.g., to become an elementary school teacher) and identify logical steps to achieve it (e.g., to attend general education classes at a community college and transfer to a 4-year college) scored a 3. Mothers who explicitly expressed no desire to pursue further studies in the near future received a 1. Those with a vague desire for more education (e.g., “to go into

| Table 2. Coding Scheme for Postsecondary Readiness |
|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
|                  | Dimensions      | 1 Low           | 2 Medium        | 3 High          |
| Postsecondary education experience | None | Discontinuous schooling | Uninterrupted enrollment |
| Enrollment in an educational program after high school (certificate, vocational, or degree program) | Little or none | Vague desire | Specific plans |
| Educational motivation and desire | Mostly public assistance (TANF or SSI) | Part-time work and/or food stamps | Adult with steady, full-time employment |
| Employment and financial supports | More than one | Only one | None |
| Primary source of household income | None or just one person | Limited or inconsistent | Regular support |
| Life risks | Has any of the following risk factors: family health, housing instability, legal status, trauma, or loss, language barrier | | |
| Support system | | | |
| Regular emotional support and daily support | | | |
language barriers (whether the mother was not fluent in English). Mothers who reported two or more risks received a 1; mothers who reported only one risk scored a 2; and mothers with no reported risks received a 3. Mothers who described consistent emotional and personal support in their lives from two or more persons scored a 3 for social and familial supports. Mothers who described no one or only one person in their lives to assist in their daily routines and child care received a score of 1. Mothers who discussed two or more individuals who supported them inconsistently, such as an on-and-off partner relationship, were given a score of 2.

To check for accuracy and consistency, all scores were reviewed by at least three members of the research team. Scores across the 5 dimensions were added, resulting in a total individual score of mothers' likelihood for success in postsecondary degree attainment. In examining the distribution of scores, we identified three clusters—low (scores of 6–8), medium (9–12), and high (13–15)—and identified key characteristics in common for members within each group.

*Grounded theory.* Our second analytic approach first led to open coding all interview, focus group, and field note data to identify, name, categorize, and describe phenomena found in the text. With an extensive list of codes generated from the data, axial coding then led to relating these codes to one another through a process of inductive and deductive reasoning. Larger codes or themes arose from this process. Mother interviews were the primary data source, and focus groups were used to corroborate or refute findings. Two themes arose from our research questions, and one was generated spontaneously through open coding. Within each of these themes, data were selectively coded to identify key subthemes. These coded data were then reanalyzed at the individual level to ascertain the frequency with which the subthemes appeared in the data.

**RESULTS FROM MOTHER PROFILES**

*Mothers Vary in Their Readiness for Postsecondary Success*

Our analysis identified three clusters of parents along a continuum of preparedness, with 29% defined as those with high preparedness; 53% defined as those with medium preparedness; and 15% defined as those with low preparedness (see Figure 1 and Table 3).

![Figure 1. Distribution of postsecondary readiness](image)

**Table 3. Mothers Vary in Their Postsecondary Readiness**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Frequency (N=51)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td>• All received high school degree or a GED, 4/5 on-time high school diploma</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• I'm going for it; nothing will stop me.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• 2/3 enrolled in PSE program; 1/2 completed certificate or degree to date</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Highly motivated with specific goals</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Strong support network</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>• Highly motivated but lack emotional or financial support or stable life circumstances</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Regular supports and some financial stability, but not highly motivated</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Doubt PSE is the right choice in their current circumstances for reasons that may make sense</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Low</td>
<td>• Over half dropped out of high school and had never received GED</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Variety of learning issues and poor school environments</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Few with positive high school learning experiences</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• None enrolled in PSE, only one attempted earlier</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Not pursuing postsecondary education, training, and/or coursework beyond high school to receive a degree (associate's or bachelor's) or certificate of value in the marketplace.</td>
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</table>

Note. PSE = postsecondary education, training, and/or coursework beyond high school to receive a degree (associate's or bachelor's) or certificate of value in the marketplace.
High. All mothers at the high end of readiness for postsecondary success received either a high school degree or GED, and four fifths received an on-time high school diploma. Three quarters reported positive learning experiences in high school (e.g., liking most classes, enjoying their teachers, and describing themselves as good students). Two thirds were currently enrolled in a postsecondary education program, and almost half had completed a certificate or two-year degree at the time of their interview. These high potential mothers were strongly motivated to pursue more education for themselves and their children. One mother, who had received her bachelor’s degree, said that “death” was the only circumstance that would lead her to abandon her education. When asked what persuaded her to go back to school after her son was born, she simply said, “I am determined to finish.” Another mother described her drive in the following way: “I can’t stop... my motivation... what you do today, you don’t leave for tomorrow. I’m doing everything... The faster I get over this, the more time I get to spend with my girls... In life, you can take your degrees with you everywhere... I can’t stop.”

These mothers also described a close circle of relatives, and sometimes friends, in their lives who helped them to manage the daily stress of work, family, and school. For a select few, their motivation derived from seeing their own child learning and growing at the center: “I guess... seeing that they’re taking care of my child, how they are teaching her. It makes me a little bit more motivated to keep on and continue education because I’ll be a role model to her.”

The intensity of motivation among these mothers was also reflected in their ability to articulate specific, achievable steps toward their educational goals. Not all of these highly motivated mothers, though, felt that they had received the appropriate guidance and information to make the most efficient or cost-effective choices. Some believed that more information earlier in their decision-making process would have led them to make better choices about the degree program or institution that they selected or could have reduced their time toward completion. One mother commented that she “was listening to a lot of misguided people” when she chose to leave her job that provided tuition reimbursement to attend school full time. Several others discussed their lack of understanding of the financial aid process and the use of loans. Other mothers seemed to have limited information about how to achieve their long-run career goal of entering a profession such as a law, medicine, or interior design.

These results suggest that low-income parents at the highest levels of readiness for postsecondary education and training could benefit from individualized career counseling and support, preferably early in the development of their postsecondary plans. Such support could take shape in the role of a career coach, an additional center staff member who functions as an extension of the program’s family support team but with specialized expertise in adult basic education and postsecondary training, local community college and workforce development systems, and information about financial aid and loan options. A multi-tiered approach would allow the coach to support parents according to their personal preparedness and likelihood for success. Additionally, the center could provide other learning supports in the form of tutors, study space, and access to computers that would help promote and secure the educational attainment and career success of parents, especially for those at the high end of readiness. Intentional partnerships between early education centers and key organizations serving the educational and training needs of low-income adults (e.g., community colleges, workforce development agencies, and basic education experts) will be necessary given that early childhood programs cannot be expected to offer the full complement of services needed to support postsecondary advancement.

Medium. The cluster of mothers in the middle was heterogeneous enough that they were not readily classified as one group, but there are some general distinguishing characteristics of subgroups. One subgroup of medium readiness mothers were highly motivated to pursue further schooling but believed that they lacked the current emotional or financial support or stable life circumstances to make that possible and thus further delayed schooling. Another subgroup had a regular support system and some financial stability but were not as highly motivated to persist in their postsecondary education and tended to start and stop school. A third subgroup decided to delay or forgo their postsecondary pursuits for reasons that seemed to make sense for them and their life circumstances. Crystal (note that all names cited are pseudonyms) exemplifies the latter subgroup. She worked in customer service at a local supermarket in a job that she found satisfying. She had two children (aged 5 years and 9 months) and lived with her father. She relied on the children’s father and both of her children’s grandmothers for the daily care of her children, and she shared household expenses with the children’s father, who had regular, steady income from his job as a tattoo artist. Crystal dropped out of high school at age 16 and never received a GED. She had her first child at 18 and says that having her child made her “wake up and take things more seriously.” She began her GED studies after her second child but dropped to focus on work. When asked about pursuing school, she was emphatic: “I just want to work.” Although she was well-supported emotionally and financially, she believed strongly that she could not manage school in addition to a full-time job and caring for her two young
children. Even so, she had high hopes for her children, saying, "I hope that they're better, do something better than I'm doing now, have a really good job, have a good education," but did not connect her own educational pursuits with her children's educational success.

The experiences and viewpoints of mothers in the middle suggest that some parents may be ready to consider workforce and career training in the near term, whereas others may need to attend to motivational, material, or relationship concerns first. For parents like Crystal, a center-based career coach could help her to better understand how increasing her skills, knowledge, and financial resources through postsecondary training is likely to foster her children's educational success and sustain the gains they have made in early education. Center-based life skills training also could prepare those parents who already have interest in postsecondary education but less motivation, confidence, or resources for further educational pursuits. Such training could include workshops and support groups that address personal and relationship concerns such as self-esteem and healthy relationships; financial tools like asset development, managing a family budget, and accessing and evaluating financial aid and loan options; employment skills, including keyboarding and basic computer expertise, resume writing, and job application and interview techniques; and context-specific information about postsecondary education and training opportunities and how to access them.

The perspectives of Crystal and this small but illustrative group who believe firmly that now is not the time to pursue postsecondary education also raise central questions about the balance between an educational program for mothers with very young children and their responsibilities as primary caretakers and breadwinners for their families. Can a young mother with preschool-aged children successfully manage family, work, and school? How much work and schooling are possible while raising a young family with limited economic resources? If schooling is part time, can mothers with young children stay committed and motivated over a longer time frame? Should an intervention focus only on parents who can attend school full time? Some similar program models suggest that full-time enrollment is necessary for degree attainment among low-income adults, especially parents, (i.e., Capital IDEA in Austin, Texas; Capital IDEA, 2010), whereas others do not (i.e., CareerAdvance in Tulsa, Oklahoma; Glover, Smith, King, & Coffey, 2010; King et al., 2009). Alternatively, program models are needed that acknowledge that some mothers may take longer to reach their education goals. Although completion may not occur while their children are very young, mothers' educational advancement can benefit their children's progress in the elementary and secondary system and possibly enhance their children's likelihood of postsecondary educational attainment.

Low. Only 9 mothers met the criteria for low likelihood for postsecondary success, and 5 of them had dropped out of high school and never received a GED. These mothers described a variety of learning issues, among them dyslexia, lack of focus, and learning disabilities, in addition to other difficult school environments, including violence, racism, and negative peer influences. One mother's early school departure (she dropped out of school in Mexico in the sixth grade to work to support her family and later emigrated to the United States as a nanny) clearly suggests multiple barriers to enrolling in a postsecondary program. Additionally, mothers with a low level readiness for postsecondary success often lacked confidence about schooling and thus showed little educational motivation or ability to persist. For example, one mother discussed how every time she took a step toward furthering her education, there was a voice in her head telling her she could not do it and that she would fail. Although these mothers had high educational goals for their children, some seemed to have concluded that hopes and dreams for their own education had passed.

Having low expectations for their educational future is not surprising given many of these mothers' poor early learning experiences and environments and low educational attainment to date. Even those who had a vague goal of college someday lacked the knowledge or experience to identify specific steps toward how they might achieve such a goal. These mothers also described very few social supports in their lives. One mother explained the isolation she felt with limited English skills and neither extended family support nor access to transportation (her husband used the family car for work). She spoke of feeling "trapped" at home and how she sometimes locked herself in her room from "despair" and the stress of caring for three young children alone all day. Others described that they had virtually no family support or friends in their daily lives.

Mothers at low levels of readiness for postsecondary education are likely to benefit from expanded personal and emotional assistance from family support staff, as well as from the coach-directed skill-building programs described earlier. Additionally, parents at this level will need foundational educational supports, including Adult Basic Education (ABE), GED diploma, and ESL classes in partnership with local educational institutions. These classes would not be an end in and of themselves, but rather a necessary prerequisite to further training and career development through community colleges and workforce development programs.

In sum, this sample of mothers varied in their life circumstances, back-
ground, experience with education, and motivation for further education, all of which likely affect their potential for postsecondary success. Parents at the two ends of the readiness continuum—high and low—were largely homogeneous in their educational experiences, motivation, and barriers and supports. The middle group showed more variability. The overall variation in postsecondary readiness indicates the likely need for different approaches to different subpopulations when addressing the problem of low postsecondary credentialing among low-income mothers, although additional educational guidance and career coaching appear beneficial at all levels. Our second qualitative analysis—grounded theory—led us to themes that cut across the varying levels of postsecondary readiness discussed earlier.

RESULTS FROM GROUNDLED THEORY

Mothers View College as Essential

All 51 mothers noted the critical importance of their children's education and degree attainment, most often college (or more), and its importance for one's economic future.

You can't make it today without an education. You need a degree—that's how I feel.

I think it should be, actually should be, a requirement because it's like right now, in this world, you really, really need an education beyond high school.

When asked about their educational goals for their children, mothers responded in the following ways: “If you want anything in life, you need an education”; “What could be better than an education?”, and “I hope they realize that school is everything.” More than three quarters (99) specifically stated that their educational goal for their young children incorporated college, including 3 mothers who wanted their children to earn master's degrees, and one mother who hoped her child would pursue a doctoral degree. Some mothers discussed college broadly without any specific indication of how their child might achieve this goal. For example, these mothers described that they wanted their children to “dream big, succeed in life, and understand the importance of education”; “to not fall behind in school”; and “to be a well-rounded student with a diverse group of friends and try to avoid bad stuff.” Others discussed highly specific markers they planned for their children to achieve. For example, when asked about her goals and dreams for her child's education, one mother explained:

For the baby, I want him to graduate from high school by the age of 17. I want him to be graduated from a four-year university by the age of 21. I really don't care what the major is. I just want him to be out of a university by age 21... I want to give him more options.

These mothers seemed to have a broader knowledge base and understood the often direct connection between educational success in college and future job success, particularly in a professional career. Some mothers focused only on their children's educational future rather than their own, implying that they had passed their hopes and dreams onto the next generation. A few were passionate that the best way to help their child was to succeed in college themselves. Despite differences in their abilities to articulate educational goals for their children, as a whole, mothers identified the importance of a quality education for their children—most often college—and, as will be seen in the discussion of the last theme, understood that they could play a role in helping their children achieve educational success.

Participation in High-Quality Early Education Can Make a Difference in Parents' Views of What Is Possible

The data support our hypotheses that participation in high-quality early childhood education can alter low-income mothers' views of what is possible for their children and themselves (see Table 4). Within this theme, we identified four subthemes, each of which reflects a collective point of view for a subgroup of mothers: (1) My child is learning and growing here. (2) I don't have to worry. I can focus on school or work. (3) I get support at the center. (4) I find helpful information and resources here.

My child is learning and growing here. When asked how the center helped their child, 50 out of 51 of these mothers passionately discussed their young child's growth and development during the program. For example, Donna, a young mother of two, was surprised by the knowledge that her daughter had acquired since she entered the program:
Table 4. Theme: Participation in High-Quality Early Education Can Make a Difference in Parents' Views of What Is Possible

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subtheme</th>
<th>Evidence</th>
<th>Frequency (N=51)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>My child is learning and growing here.</td>
<td>When I came here it was like, it really looks like a school! Like I like it so much because . . . it's just a place, somewhere for the kids to just come and play. It is not like a daycare where they just go and play, all day they are learning and interacting with other kids and that's what I want them to do. I don't want them to be sheltered from the real world, I want them to be able to interact with kids and get an early start, you know.</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother identifies how her child is growing and learning at the center.</td>
<td>. . . like right now, per se, I don't worry. You know when you're trying to focus on school, you need to try and weed out all the problems, everything that's going to take away from your education. Like, if you don't have no one to watch your children, you can't go to school. . . . If you think your child is somewhere that is not safe, you can't read and understand what you're reading. . . . 38, when asked how the program helps them, responded in terms of the peace of mind it gave them to focus beyond their child.</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I don't have to worry. I can focus on school or work.</td>
<td>1 responded only in terms of how the program helped their child learn and grow.</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother identifies how having her child in a safe, high-quality learning environment allows her to attend to work/school.</td>
<td>Well like Ms. D, I love Ms. D because she's like your mother that stays on you. . . . And if you— if something's wrong she wants you to be able to talk to her— because then they can help you and keep you moving. . . . They just like another set of people that you can have in your corner. They always, you know, they just want to know what's going on with you, not just with your son, but with you as well. . . . So they really care about you just as well as they care about your child.</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I get support at the center.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Mother identifies various center staff who support and build a relationship with her.</td>
<td>Anything I need help with she'll (family support specialist) help me find it. When my son was very young, I asked her about public assistance and she gave me a file of staff I could apply for and explained it to me. . . . She goes out of her way to help me.</td>
<td>40</td>
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But I see that she's learning these things that I never learned as a kid. (Interviewer: Like what?) I don't know how to explain it, just all these little things that you would never think to teach a child, but for her to already know . . . it's impressive . . . little things, like she came up to me and held out a book and told me that "Mommy, this is the cover, and this is the back, and this is the spine." And as a kid, I wouldn't have thought about that.

Donna believed that her child was receiving an education that was both better than what she received as a child and that surpassed her expectations. Other mothers described their children's growth and development at the center as a significant contrast with the poor care that their children had received in the past. A mother who worked as an auto technician while pursuing a bachelor's in criminal justice explained:

I was looking for more of a preschool setting than a day care, and he was in one school for a short amount of time, and I took him out of there. I just didn't feel like they were teaching him anything, just kind of felt like they were sticking the kids in a room and just watching 'em.

This mother felt that her son's participation in the current high-quality center would properly prepare him for kindergarten. Another mother succinctly summarized the views of the majority of the sample:

When I came here it was like, it really looks like a school! Like I like it so much because . . . it's not just a place, somewhere for the kids to just come and play. It is not like a daycare where they just go and play . . . all day they are learning and interacting with other kids and that's what I want them to do. I don't want them to be sheltered from the real world, I want them to be able to interact with kids and get an early start, you know.

In other words, all but one of the 51 sample mothers believed that participation in the center provided their young children with an early start in development and learning. Thus, participation in the center fulfills an essential need for mothers—reliable, affordable, accessible child care—and surpasses their expectations for their child's center-based learning and growth.

I don't have to worry. I can focus on school/work. When questioned about how the center supported them as mothers, the most common response was to discuss the ways in which the program supported their children's
learning and development. When pushed further on the question of how the program helped them specifically, 38 of the 51 mothers discussed ways in which having their child in a safe, high-quality learning environment provided them with "the peace of mind" and freedom from worry that allowed them to focus on work or school. One mother derived enormous psychological benefits from her child's participation in a high-quality education program, and, like three quarters of the mothers in the study, she described a burden that had been lifted:

It changed my life. I feel happy, peaceful. When you have children, first, you want to take care of them all the time, but you can't. Now, just imagine how you feel when you leave them in a place where you feel they don't treat them well, where there are lots of restrictions on the things he can play with. . . . It is depressing. You can't even work. You are always thinking. You can barely wait for the time to take them out. It should be exactly the opposite. I come here and drop him off. . . . When he is here, I feel good about leaving him in a place where he receives food, he sleeps, plays. I just saw him playing in the park. . . . He can paint . . . he has everything he needs: blocks, play dough, color pens, books, a teacher who is attentive to his needs.

Another mother, currently pursuing her associate's degree in nursing at a local community college, described how her 2-year-old son's program enrollment specifically affected her ability to concentrate on her studies:

Like right now, per se, I don't worry. You know when you're trying to focus on school, you need to try to weed out all the problems, everything that's going to take away from your education. Like childcare, if you don't have no one to watch your children, you can't go to school. . . . If you think your child is somewhere that is not safe, you can't read and understand what you're reading.

In managing work, school, and children simultaneously, these mothers benefited from the daily and yearly consistency of the program and its extended hours that allowed them to focus on other important priorities: "Having her here at the center is amazing because if I get off work early, I have time to study before I have to pick her up. And just knowing that she's at a daycare that can be trusted makes a big difference." Like this mother, the majority of parents in this study recognized that consistent child care alone was insufficient; participating in a high-quality education center was what made the significant difference in their lives, logistically and psychosocially. Knowing their children are thriving may influence their own ability to focus on and persist in school.

Relational support: I get support at the center. I have relationships with the staff. Beyond meeting the developmental needs of their children, 33 mothers appreciated the significance of the adult relationships that they developed at the center. They discussed the personal attention, advice, and information that staff provided to guide them in raising children while living on often insufficient economic resources:

Well, they stay on you. Like asking you how often do you sit and read to your kids? How much love and support . . . are you telling them you love them? Ask them if everyone around them is treating them nice. And they try to help you make sure you have clothes, transportation to get you and your kids to school, in the wintertime, if they have coats, boots, if you need somebody to talk to, you can come talk to anybody at [the center] that you feel comfortable talking to.

In some cases, this kind of support extended to familial-like relationships that provided unconditional support in many aspects of life:

Well like Ms. D, I love Ms. D because she's like your mother that stays on you. . . . And if you—if something's wrong she wants you to be able to talk to her—because then they can help you and keep you moving . . . they're just like another set of people that you can have in your corner. They always, you know, they just want to know what's going on with you, not just with your son, but with you as well. . . . So they really care about you just as well as they care about your child.

Another mother described her daughters' teachers like "godparents":

Oh wow . . . what I can say in a lump sum is that they're the family away from home. If my kids had godparents, these girls here would be that . . . I like it here. I wouldn't trust anyone else. Even if I lived in Ft. Lauderdale, I would still bring them here. They've developed so much, especially with love. Kids need a lot of love, and care, and attention, and that's here. And that's helped them develop confidence.
Program staff extended themselves to help parents achieve not only goals for their children but also larger goals for themselves:

Ms. D here... She gets on me about my goals. She does. That's my girl. She just like, look, "Remember your goals. It's time." She got me going back to church. Cause that was my goal. Years had went by. ... You know, making excuses. And she did it one day. She called me one Saturday night. She said get them kids' clothes out. So I did it.

In some cases, these larger goals included a mother's desire to persist in her schooling: "She always asks me how school's going... when they ask me that and they seem like they're interested, it kinda helps me see that somebody's helping me through that." Some mothers discussed these relational supports from staff as fundamental to their ability to cope and manage the stresses in their lives, allowing them to take steps toward larger goals they had set for themselves.

Information support: I find helpful information and resources here. Instrumental in helping these mothers achieve larger goals for themselves was information they received from accessible center staff. Forty mothers specifically discussed the resources and information these centers provided, ranging from how to apply for public assistance, to job leads, to detailed information on local kindergarten and enrichment programs and on local postsecondary institutions. For example, as three mothers explained:

Very helpful whenever I had a problem or anything. Knowing more about a different school or anything... They never say no. They have answers to all of my questions.

My son's CFE (family support worker)... helped me out, talked to me, told me about GED schools, if we needed clothes, but I never needed clothes or food or anything, but she would ask us, and we would just sit and talk, and she would tell me things about kids cause I was a first-time mom back then. And I would just talk to her if I had questions and stuff.

Anything I need help with she'll [family support specialist] help me find it. When my son was very young, I asked her about public assistance and she gave me a pile of stuff thigh-high I could apply for and explained it to me... She goes out of her way to help me.

Information, in combination with attention and relationships, gave many mothers the support and resources needed to pursue next steps in their lives, whether toward more time with their children, a better-paying job, or involvement in a needed support or education program.

These findings demonstrate ways in which early childhood education centers are well-suited for adding adult education and training components to the existing array of parental, child, and informational supports already provided. Parents with children enrolled in high-quality early education are well supported and thus may have the time and emotional space available to pursue their own goals. Building from a foundation of support at the center, they are more likely to take on the challenges of enrolling and persisting in school while raising and financially supporting their children, especially when encouraged by peers facing similar challenges.

 Parenthood, When Combined With Participation in High-Quality Early Education, Can Be a Powerful Educational Motivator

We identified three subthemes that collectively support this theme (Table 5): (1) I want to give my child more than I had. (2) I want to be an (educational) role model for my child. (3) I know that my child's school success is linked to my own educational success. Together, these findings suggest that mothers who observe their children thriving in an early childhood program may be more strongly motivated to pursue their own education and to promote their children's learning.

I want to give my child more than I had. The majority of mothers (26) sought more for their children than they had in their own childhoods, including a better education, more financial security and stability, and/or more time and attention. The negative experiences in their own lives seemed to be a powerful motivator to raise their children differently:

I want to give him what I didn't have as a child—the best education—that is very important.

I want them to be somebody, so they don't have to go through with the same experiences we had to go through. We couldn't do it; nobody could help us with our studies. God willing, we can give them an education.

I hope that they're better; do something better than I'm doing now; have a really good job; have a good education.
Table 5. Theme: Parenthood, When Combined With Participation in High-Quality Early Education, Can Be a Powerful Educational Motivator

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subtheme</th>
<th>Evidence</th>
<th>Frequency (N=51)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I want to give my child more than I had.</td>
<td>I do want them to go above, beyond. Definitely when you are a parent, you always want your children to do more than what you did.</td>
<td>26 mothers identified that they wanted more for their children than they had when asked about their dreams and goals for their children’s educational future.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother identifies how she wants her child to have more than she had, including a better education, more financial security and stability, and/or more time and attention.</td>
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<tr>
<td>I want to be a good educational role model for my child.</td>
<td>Interviewer: What are your dreams and goals for your boys?</td>
<td>35 mothers spontaneously discussed their desire to be a role model for their child when asked about their dreams and goals for their child’s educational future.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mother identifies her desire to set a positive example for her child, often through education, and for the child not to follow her example of young motherhood and, in some cases, delayed education.</td>
<td>Respondent: Well, I want them to of course finish high school and get into college. I want to be able to show them I went to college, and I was a person that I would have never seen myself in college. I know that if I can do it, they can do it.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>I know that my child’s school success is linked to my own educational success.</td>
<td>I put myself as an example because I think it’s a bit about the educational future of my daughter and mine too. The first thing that comes to mind is if I study, she is going to live better. And, as she was my example, she is going to prepare herself mentally, as she grows, to focus in her studies, because that is what she is going to see. I focus on her education because without an education, you are nothing. What are you going to do? That is the best legacy you can give to your children.</td>
<td>2 mothers were able to make some connections between discussions of their educational goals for their child and their educational goals for themselves; focus group data with teachers and staff strongly supported the importance of mothers making a connection between their child’s educational success and their own.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother is able to identify a link between her own pursuit of postsecondary education and her child’s current and/or future school success.</td>
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Moreover, many parents wanted to involve themselves in their child’s educational pursuits in ways that were lacking in their upbringing. For example, when asked about their dreams and goals for their children’s education, mothers explained:

I just want to be the most motivating parent that I can be. Like anything that they want to do, I’m behind them. I’m supportive as far as education. Like I didn’t have that when I was young, I didn’t have that support system. I think that was one of the reasons I didn’t go to college right after school is because I didn’t have that support system. I think that’s what I’m going to be, I’m going to be that extra push—"You must go."

And:

My mother did not push me... she was very supportive but she did not push me. She did not motivate me. And I want my boys to have a understanding that as long as you’re educated and as long as you have a positive outlook on whatever your goals are, you can achieve them. And that there are so many support systems that are here to assist you, including mamma, your teacher, your coach. And I want them to have a sense of pride; I want them to feel good about going to school. Because when I was coming up, it was like I hated school. You know like coming to school to see my friends, but I never saw the bigger picture of it, if I go to school and do this, then that means I can do this.

Some of these mothers also recognized that supporting their child’s education was only one part of a larger picture of the time and attention their children needed. One mother described her desire not to replicate her husband’s life circumstances with her own child:

And when I look at their father’s situation with his mother and their relationship, he had to raise himself because she had to work two jobs to provide for them, and she wasn’t there; and she wasn’t active in his education and she wasn’t active in his extracurricular activities. And I don’t want to do that. I’ve always had my parents there for me, and I think that played a big part in how I turned out. And I want to be there for my kids. I can’t see it any other way.

I want to be an (educational) role model for my child. Two thirds of the mothers (35) spontaneously discussed their desire to be a positive role model for their child, most often an educational role model:

I want to be able to show them I went to college, and I was a person that would never have seen myself in college. I know that if I can do it, they can do it.

I know education is important because it’s instilled, but when I saw my children, I wanted them to see a hero. So I wanted them
to have something to go by, so I had to walk more narrow, buckle down more, and strive hard. Because when they look back, they will be able to say, "She showed me how to strategize in life."

Moreover, again and again we heard how a child powerfully motivates a parent to better their lives, especially through education:

I can’t see my life without her or the other one. They’re the ones that push me forward. They’re the ones that . . . I am here today because of them. I try to better myself every day before them. I mean I brought them to this world to give them nothing but the best, so everything I do is for them.

Mothers asked themselves, "How can I ask my child to go to college if I haven’t gone myself?" As several mothers explained, "When you have a child, you have to think beyond . . . You can’t just have a child and be, ‘Well, I’m not going back to school.’ Well, what kind of future is your child going to have?" Additionally, mothers did not want their children to repeat the mistakes of their past, including young motherhood and, in many instances, delayed education. One mother who had not enrolled in postsecondary program worried about her young children’s questions about her own lack of studying or school success. Another mother specifically described her child as the source of her motivation to stay in school:

Interviewer: What keeps you motivated to be in school?

Respondent: My son. That’s the best thing I’ve ever had. I want him to have everything I had and more. To show him he can do it, with or without a child. He still has to go to school.

A strong desire to model for their children contributed to some mothers’ educational persistence over many years.

I know that my child’s success is linked to my own educational success. In just two cases, mothers were able to articulate connections between their own success in postsecondary education and their child’s performance in school. Even so, teachers and family support staff were able to provide evidence for such associations, describing how mothers’ educational experiences influenced their child’s behavior at the center, as well as how children’s success at the center inspired and motivated mothers to return to their educational goals. For example, as a family support worker explained, a mother who enrolled in an auto technician program began

to share her knowledge about cars with her son, and teachers in the boy’s classroom noticed an increase in this child’s classroom vocabulary and expression:

We have a mom who’s a mechanic, and she just graduated from school. His vocabulary is through the roof, it’s so rich. She talks about working on cars, different kinds of cars, colors of cars, what’s in a car . . . I mean he [her son] knows more about cars than we do, what a carburetor is, how it works . . .

Teachers and staff also discussed the effects of mothers observing their children’s development on their desire to return to school. As one teacher reflected, some mothers sought to be prepared to keep up with their child’s learning:

I: What do you as teachers think they’re seeing that gives them that extra push?

R: The children’s vocabulary changes; the language changes. They say, “I want to go to school to keep up with my child!”

I: So you think they see that connection between their child’s education and their own?

R2: Yes.

As more staff explained, others gained interest in their own educational goals as a byproduct of their enthusiasm for their child’s education and the investment they were making in their child’s success:

R: I think the parents who were really excited about their own child’s education were the ones that then said, “Okay, I’m gonna do something about my education.”

R: Part of the success for families here is that their investment here leads them to figure out ways to make themselves successful.

I: What about the ones you can reach, what are their personal characteristics?
R: I think kind of excited about their child’s schooling. For example, I think we had a couple in our classroom that were very interested—they were researching kindergarten classrooms. And I think they were so excited—all the pamphlets, they were seeing which one they were going to invest in. ... I think the parents who were really excited about their own child’s education were the ones that then said, “Okay, I'm gonna do something about my education.”

A teacher’s aide with a child previously enrolled in the center articulately described her experience of eventually understanding the connection between her own educational success and her daughter’s:

Now, the first thing that comes to mind is if I study, she is going to live better. And, as she sees my example, she is going to prepare herself mentally, as she grows, to focus in her studies because that is what she is going to see. ... I focus on her education because without an education you are nothing. What are you going to do? That is the best legacy you can give your children.

As these staff have suggested, parents who observe their children’s success in an early education setting may be more motivated to persist educationally, and these benefits may be bidirectional. Not only is returning to school a way to model for their children, but mothers’ educational pursuits may provide tangible social, cognitive, and educational benefits for their children.

**DISCUSSION**

Economic, developmental, and sociological theories and research suggest that there are benefits associated with on-time postsecondary credentialing for low-income mothers, even though this means taking on the challenges of schooling while their children are still young. This argument is based on six conclusions drawn from the literature: (1) parents are a significant source of influence in the lives of their children (Brooks-Gunn, 2004; Brooks-Gunn & Markman, 2005; Chase-Lansdale & Pittman, 2002); (2) early childhood may be a time when children are uniquely responsive to their environments (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000); (3) low-income children benefit even more than affluent children from improvements in their environments and increases in their parents’ education and income (Votruba-Drzal, 2006); (4) maternal postsecondary credentials may be more beneficial for younger children than for older school-aged children (Furstenberg, Brooks-Gunn, & Morgan, 1987; Magnuson, 2007); (5) interventions during early childhood produce greater returns on investments than do later interventions (Heckman, 2006); and (6) the educational advancements of parents strengthen the economic and social assets of families and are likely to help break the intergenerational cycle of poverty (e.g., Attewell & Lavin, 2007). However, the field has yet to identify the most effective way to boost rates of postsecondary enrollment and credentialing among low-income parents of young children.

Early childhood education centers may offer a variety of potential two-generation benefits: (a) a community of parents, teachers, and staff who provide relational supports that create trust and connection; (b) information about parenting that helps parents view center staff as knowledgeable resources; and (c) comfort and security to mothers about their children’s development, thus freeing up time and psychological energy to focus on their own classes and studies. The study further suggests that a mother’s concern for the long-term well-being and educational success of her children may motivate postsecondary entry (Deutsch & Schnertz, 2008).

As such, high-quality early childhood education programs may offer an innovative foundation for adding new parent-oriented program components that would promote the postsecondary and career success of low-income mothers of young children, ultimately lifting families out of poverty. These components could incorporate (a) individualized support and educational readiness assessments by a career coach, such as career counseling and detailed advising on the steps in postsecondary training and education; (b) a learning community comprising supportive student learning cohorts, access to computers, and quiet study spaces; and (c) financial supports, such as hands-on assistance with accessing and evaluating financial aid and loan options, conditional cash transfers, and aid in managing a family budget.

Additionally, this study indicates that low-income mothers’ aspirations for college may be similar to the aspirations of most young adults. Studies of nationally representative samples, for example, have shown that more than 90% of ninth-grade students entering high school expect to attend college (Schneider & Stevenson, 1999), and most young adults today believe that they will continue education beyond high school (Rosenbaum, Deil-Amen, & Person, 2006). However, despite increases in educational aspiration, there still exists an “ambition paradox” (Schneider & Stevenson), or mismatch between goals and successful pursuits for all young adults. Possibly unrealistic expectations about post-
secondary achievement may have negative consequences, especially for the disadvantaged for whom economic and structural barriers to goal attainment are highest (Baird, Burge, & Reynolds, 2008). Unmarried parents are no exception, and the gap between ambitions and achievement for this population is especially concerning. Some reasons cited for the low levels of achievement among students attending community colleges include limited guidance and knowledge about what to expect from college, lack of academic success in high school, and insufficient financial resources (Goldrick-Rab & Sorenson, 2010). Dual-generation programs that increase parents' understanding of postsecondary options and develop skills for and connections to bridge training programs appropriate to parents' goals and background are likely to lead to higher rates of educational attainment and career success.

LIMITATIONS

This study has several important limitations. First, the small sample size prevents generalizations to the larger population of young low-income parents. Our findings are illustrative of the viewpoints and experiences of this group of mothers whose children are enrolled in these particular early childhood education programs. Second, the sample is biased toward mothers who are motivated and organized on behalf of their children, given that they have succeeded in enrolling their children in high-quality early childcare centers where daily attendance and parent involvement are required. Third, mothers must be employed or in school to be eligible for the childcare subsidy necessary for attending the centers. Fourth, most mothers were interviewed only once, and thus the quantity and depth of information gathered are limited, especially for more sensitive topics such as life risks factors and interpersonal relationships. Moreover, mothers may have been inclined to report what they believed to be the desired response, for example, the expectation for their children to attend college, rather than their true expectations. Finally, we were unable to include fathers, although their roles in supporting mothers' educational goals were pursued. Despite these data and sample selection limitations, this research highlights the opportunities, challenges, and postsecondary successes of young low-income mothers with children enrolled in high-quality early education centers.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Together, these results suggest a new framework for addressing the post-secondary and career needs of low-income families with young children:

High-quality early childhood education centers may be a promising platform for adult education. No longer should adult workforce education and training remain in separate silos from early education. An adult educational intervention may be especially effective in an environment in which the benefits of parents' education for children are recognized and supported. Gains in educational attainment made through participation in such programming may cultivate skills and knowledge among parents that will not only improve their financial stability but also promote the educational and social development of their children (Kalil & Crosnoe, 2010), thus breaking the cycle of poverty. Further research is necessary to pilot and test these proposed dual-generation intervention ideas.

References


**TERESA F. SOMMER** is a research scientist at the Institute for Policy Research, Northwestern University. Her work focuses on the intersection of policy and practice for economically disadvantaged families and their children. She specializes in how social and educational institutions influence the life course of families, especially through investments in human and social capital (including basic life skills, education, and social networks). Her current research focuses on dual-generation educational investments for parents and children.

P. LINDSAY CHASE-LANSDALE is a professor of human development and social policy in the School of Education and Social Policy and director, Cells to Society (C2S): The Center on Social Disparities and Health at the Institute for Policy Research, Northwestern University. She specializes in multidisciplinary, policy-relevant research on social issues and how they affect families and the development of children, youth, and families. Much of her work addresses children's social and educational outcomes in the context of family economic hardship. Specific topics include early childhood education, postsecondary education, immigration, welfare reform, maternal employment, marriage and cohabitation, and parent-child relationships. She has coedited three books and has authored more than 80 publications.

JEANNE BROOKS-GUNN is the Virginia and Leonard Marx Professor of Child Development and Education at Teachers College and the College of Physicians and Surgeons at Columbia University, and she directs the National Center for Children and Families (www.policyforchildren.org). She is interested in factors that contribute to both positive and negative outcomes across childhood, adolescence, and adulthood, with a particular focus on key social and biological transitions over the life course. She designs and evaluates intervention programs for children and parents (Early Head Start, Infant Health and Development Program, Head Start Quality Program). Other large-scale longitudinal studies include the Fragile Families and Child Well-Being Study and the Project on Human Development in Chicago Neighborhoods (co-PI of both). She is the author of four books and more than 350 publications.

MARGO GARDNER is a research scientist at the National Center for Children and Families at Teachers College, Columbia University. Currently, she research focuses on exploring the interactive contributions of families, institutions, and neighborhoods to adolescent and young adult development. Recent publications include a study identifying neighborhood-level moderation of the link between parental affect and adolescents' sexual behavior (Gardner, Martin, & Brooks-Gunn, 2011, *Exploring the Link Between Caregiver Affect and Adolescent Sexual*...
How Context Matters in High-Need Schools: The Effects of Teachers’ Working Conditions on Their Professional Satisfaction and Their Students’ Achievement

SUSAN M. JOHNSON
Harvard University

MATTHEW A. KRAFT
Harvard University

JOHN P. PAPAY
Brown University

Background/Context: Educational policy makers have begun to recognize the challenges posed by teacher turnover. Schools and students pay a price when new teachers leave the profession after only 2 or 3 years, just when they have acquired valuable teaching experience. Persistent turnover also disrupts efforts to build a strong organizational culture and to sustain coordinated instructional programs throughout the school. Retaining effective teachers is a particular challenge for schools that serve high proportions of low-income and minority students. Although some interpret these turnover patterns as evidence of teachers’ discontent with their students, recent large-scale quantitative studies provide evidence that teachers choose to leave schools with poor work environments and that these conditions are most common in schools that minority and low-income students typically attend. Thus, mounting evidence suggests that the seeming relationship between student demographics and teacher turnover is driven not by teachers’ responses to their students, but by the conditions in which they must teach and their students are obliged to learn.