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Making It Work: Low-Income Working Mothers' Involvement in Their Children's Education

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This article explores the complex relation between employment and family involvement in children's elementary education for low-income women. Mixed-method analyses showed work as both an obstacle to and opportunity for involvement. Mothers who worked or attended school full time were less involved in their children's schooling than other mothers, and mothers who worked or attended school part time were more involved than other mothers. Yet subtle and positive associations between maternal work and educational involvement also emerged. Working mothers described several strategies for educational involvement. The findings reframe current ecological conceptions of family involvement and call for policy and research consideration of the dilemma of work and family involvement.

KEYWORDS: family educational involvement, low-income population, maternal employment, mixed method.

Contemporary families face multiple demands from family and work. The prevalence of two-parent households in which both parents work (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2001), the long hours that parents spend at work, and the increasing number of low-income single-parent families transitioning from welfare to work, may explain why the majority of working women report worry over how to make ends meet while still spending time with their families (Center for Policy Alternatives, 2000).

Researchers are devoting more attention to the multiple responsibilities that working parents face. Over time, research has shown that work matters

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for families and family matters for work (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Galinksy, 1999; Galinsky & Hughes, 1987), primarily revealing a negative or complicating impact of multiple work and family demands for both work and family life (Bond, Galinsky, & Swanberg, 1998; Hughes & Galinsky, 1989; VandenHeuvel, 1997; Weiss & Liss, 1988). Research has further shown that women are most affected, as they continue to bear primary responsibility for negotiating the demands of work and family (Bailyn, Rapoport, Kolb, & Fletcher, 1996; Brett & Yogev, 1988; Hughes & Galinsky). Also, partly because of welfare reform (Scott, Edin, London, & Mazelis, 2002), many working families are now headed by single mothers, a circumstance that may further complicate the family lives of workers (Lamphere, 1999).

The involvement of mothers in their children's education is one of the family demands that could be adversely affected by increased maternal employment. Substantial research has definitively established the positive

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influence that mothers' involvement in their children's education has on the children's achievement (Chavkin, 1993; Eccles & Harold, 1993; Epstein, 1991; Henderson & Berla, 1994; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997; Nord & West, 2001). Traditionally, mothers have assumed much of the responsibility for raising children and being involved in their education (Lamb, 1997; Parke, 1995; Becker, 1981). It is thus surprising that neither work–family research nor family involvement research has systematically examined the connections between maternal work and mothers' involvement in their children's education. For example, work and family research has focused on educational issues such as after-school child care (Benin & Chong, 1993; Brayfield, 1992), income effects on children's well-being and educational attainment (Kalmijn, 1994; Hoffman & Youngblade, 1999), and employment effects on children's school achievement (Gottfried, Gottfried, & Bathurst, 1989; Horwood & Fergusson, 1999; Kalmijn, 1994; Milne, Myers, Rosenthal, & Ginsburg, 1986), but not on family educational involvement. Yet the ecological approach of Bronfenbrenner (1979) suggests that mesosystems such as maternal work may be important in understanding relations between key environments for child learning and development, namely home and school.

Studies that examine links between family educational involvement and maternal employment find mostly negative associations. Most generally, parental work has been shown to have a negative impact on parenting, especially for mothers (Hughes & Galinsky, 1989; Voydanoff, 1988; Weiss & Liss, 1988). More specifically, the extent and conditions of maternal work have been shown to have a negative impact on family educational involvement. One study found that lack of parental work leave and inflexible work schedules limited low-income mothers' opportunities to help their academically at-risk children (Heymann & Earle, 2000). Another study found that full-time working mothers of adolescents had lower levels of volunteering at school, knew fewer parents of their children's friends, had fewer television restrictions, and checked homework less frequently than part-time working mothers or mothers not in the labor force (Muller, 1995).

Research suggests that work may be particularly challenging for educational involvement among low-income families. In one study, twice as many low-income parents as middle-income parents believed that their work prohibited school participation. Also, 63% of low-income parents, as compared with 42% of middle-income parents, believed that they did not have time to both work and be involved in school activities (Chavkin & Williams, 1989, 1990). Time appears to be a central aspect of employment that creates a barrier to educational involvement for low-income mothers. One study documented the time poverty (meaning the lack of adequate time to meet the needs of work and the demands of family life, including educational involvement) experienced by mothers moving from welfare to jobs with long hours (Chin & Newman, 2002).

A few studies, however, suggest positive effects of maternal employment on family educational involvement for mothers from a range of income backgrounds. Controlling for income, for example, Gottfried and colleagues found

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that employed mothers engaged in more educational activities with their children than non-working mothers (Gottfried et al., 1989). Furthermore, while mothers transitioning to work from welfare expected the change to limit their supervision of homework and quality time spent on educational activities, they also expected the transition to benefit their children through increased incomes and the modeling of achievement (Scott et al., 2002). Research suggests structural supports that facilitate educational involvement among working mothers, such as schools scheduling convenient times for family-related school activities (Chavkin & Williams, 1989, 1990; Hanson-Harding, 2000) and having school staff visit parent job sites (Evans & Hines, 1997), as well as workplaces offering scheduling flexibility (Goldberg, Strauss, & East, 1998) and on-site workplace elementary schools (Smrekar, 2000).

Given the prevalence and demands of maternal work, especially among low-income mothers, and the benefits of family involvement in children's education, the study of associations between maternal work and educational involvement can have critical implications for educational policy and practice that supports the involvement of working parents in their children's learning. This paper addresses the role of maternal work in educational involvement, specifically exploring the relation between low-income mothers'[1] work and their family educational involvement practices on behalf of elementary-age children using quantitative and qualitative data. We define family educational involvement broadly, as participation in any activities that support children's education, whether those activities occur at home, in school, or in the community. Analyses uncover the degree to which participating in the work force is associated with maternal involvement in children's school, and at the same time reveal some of the strategies these low-income working mothers use to negotiate the multiple demands of employment and parenting. More specifically, the present study addresses two central questions:

1. Is maternal work associated with low-income mothers' involvement in their children's education?
2. How do low-income working mothers become or stay involved in their children's education?

Methods

Participants

Data for this study were drawn from the School Transition Study (STS), a longitudinal follow-up investigation to the experimental impact evaluation of the Comprehensive Child Development Program (CCDP). The CCDP was a federally funded early intervention program for low-income children and their families from birth to kindergarten. Children in the STS ($n = 390$) came from 3 of the 21 original CCDP sites across the United States, a Western city with a primarily Latino-American population (Site 1, $n = 125$), a Northeastern city with a primarily African-American population (Site 2, $n = 175$), and a rural

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New England town with an almost entirely European-American population (Site 3, $n = 90$). These three sites were selected for the STS because they constituted a culturally and geographically diverse set of children and families. At the time of the first STS assessment in 1995, children were either in preschool (Cohort 1), kindergarten (Cohort 2), or first grade (Cohort 3). Children in each of these three cohorts, based on child grade, were represented at the three geographic sites such that there were preschoolers, kindergarteners, and first graders at each site.

The study sample of 390 children was multi-ethnic, with African-American (37%), European-American (36%), and Latino-American (24%) children, as well as a small numbers of biracial children (1%) and children of other ethnic backgrounds (2%). More than half of the children (63%) lived in two-parent households. Fifty-seven percent of mothers had at least a high school education. None of the mothers reported total family incomes in excess of $40,000, and the average annual income (pre-transfer) was $1,986 per person. Note that there were no significant demographic differences across child cohorts.

Additional rich qualitative data were collected as part of the STS for 23 children in the study sample during their first- and second-grade years. A diverse group of children was selected within a limited number of schools to facilitate intensive ethnographic study of the schools, school effects, school climate, and structure variations. From 70 study sample schools, 7 schools were thus selected. Twenty-three children within these schools were selected on the basis of dispersion across gender, special education status, report of behavioral problems, parent marital status, and quality of parents' marital or partner relationship. Ethnographers who went on to collect the qualitative data had prior knowledge about some of the families and the communities in which they resided, and were consulted for suggestions of mothers based on the extent of their cooperativeness, ability to participate, reflectiveness, and verbal capacity. Although these criteria may introduce some selection bias, these 23 children are otherwise representative of the study sample in gender, ethnicity, maternal education, income, and marital status. For the present investigation, we then selected the 20 children whose mothers were employed, attending school, and/or receiving vocational training during the child's first- or second-grade year. These 20 children are referred to hereafter as the ethnographic sample.

Procedure

Face-to-face interviews with mothers in the study sample took place in children's homes in the spring of their kindergarten year. Interviews were conducted by trained interviewers and lasted on average from 1 to 1.5 hours. They are referred to hereinafter as the *study sample interviews*. In addition, experienced ethnographers conducted three in-depth interviews with mothers in the ethnographic sample—one each at the end of a child's first- and second-grade years and one during the winter of second grade. One mother moved out of the area and did not participate in the final interview, leaving a total

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of 59 interviews. These interviews, too, lasted on average from 1 to 1.5 hours and were conducted face-to-face in children's homes, except for a few final interviews that were conducted over the telephone because of scheduling constraints. These are referred to hereinafter as the *ethnographic interviews*. The ethnographic and study sample interviews were audiotaped and transcribed by professional transcribers. The mothers were paid for their participation in all of the interviews. Although interviewing was the primary means of ethnographic data collection, the ethnographers also investigated, to a limited extent, the mothers' involvement opportunities, contexts, and strategies through field observations in the home, school, and neighborhood and recorded those observations in field notes. For example, ethnographers observed meetings and special events with parent participants at the school.

Measures

Maternal Work/School Status

As part of the study sample interview, mothers reported the average number of hours they worked per week, as well as whether they attended school full time or part time. Consistent with research suggesting that time may be a central element of maternal work that creates a barrier to educational involvement (Chin & Newman, 2002), we collapsed maternal work with maternal school status (mother's pursuit of her own schooling or vocational training), another possible source of time demands on mothers. A composite variable representing mothers' work/school status was created by grouping mothers into three categories: (a) full-time work/school (i.e., worked full time, attended school full time, or worked part time and attended school part time); (b) part-time work/school (i.e., worked part time or attended school part time); and (c) not working or attending school. For the work portion of this composite, we classified 1 to 29 hours of work per week as part-time and 30 or more hours of work per week as full-time. Grouped according to these categories, 35% of mothers in the sample were working and/or in school full time, 23% of mothers were working or in school part time, and 42% were not working or in school. Mothers also reported their age, level of education, and partner status. Table 1 displays descriptive statistics for these demographic characteristics for each of the three work status groups.

Maternal School Involvement

As part of the study sample interview, mothers reported on whether they were involved in their kindergarten children's school activities. More specifically, mothers reported whether they had attended a parent–teacher conference, open house, school meeting, classroom in session, curriculum event, performance, social event, or field trip during the past year. Mothers also reported whether they had volunteered at the school during the past year or talked with the child's teacher before the start of kindergarten.

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Table 1
Sample Descriptive Statistics by Work/School Group

Maternal characteristics	No work/school	Part-time work/ school	Full-time work/ school
	Group means *(SD)*		
Age	32.59 (9.33)	32.04 (5.90)	30.84 (6.03)
Years of education	10.75 (3.30)	10.79 (4.14)	12.49 (2.12)
	Percentage partnered		
Partner status	56%	64%	71%

Note. Figures in parentheses are *SD*s.

Table 2 presents the results of a principle-components factor analysis of the maternal reports of involvement. The report items loaded on a single factor that explained nearly 28% of the item variance; the loading values ranged from .45 to .65. We formed a composite variable representing maternal school involvement by using the mean of the 10 items. This composite was moderately reliable ($\alpha = .72$).

Maternal Involvement Strategies

Over the course of the three ethnographic interviews, conducted at different times to explore process and change over the first and second grades, the mothers in our ethnographic sample were asked a variety of open-ended

Table 2
Factor Loadings for Maternal School-Involvement Composite

Eigenvalue	2.76
Variance explained	27.62%
Item	**Loading**
Parent–teacher conference	.52
Open house	.63
School meeting	.49
Classroom visit	.55
Curriculum event	.57
Performance	.37
Social event	.54
Field trip	.57
Volunteering	.55
Talk with teacher	.42

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questions about family life, the school and community, family educational involvement, and the child. The protocol for the first interview consisted of a small number of general guiding questions for ethnographers; the protocols for the second and third interviews were progressively more structured. Specifically, mothers were asked about family practices, such as household routines, family management, and child rules. Family educational involvement practices were explored in depth, including formal and informal home–school communication, parent–teacher conferences, and effective involvement examples. Mothers' perspectives on their participating children were also elicited, including general assessments of the children's strengths and weaknesses, their behavioral or learning problems and successes, and the supports and barriers to their successful development. Mothers' beliefs were also elicited, including views about their role constructions for educational involvement, about home–school communication, and about supports for their child's learning. Mothers were not asked questions about maternal work in relation to educational involvement; rather, their references to work surfaced as they answered questions about educational involvement. Fieldnotes from ethnographic observations in the school, home, and neighborhood were also used as data for analysis.

Analysis

For this study we employed a mixed-method approach, using both quantitative and qualitative analyses. The added value of mixed-method analysis has been well documented in the literature, allowing, for example, better data triangulation (Greene & Caracelli, 1997) and expansion of findings (Greene, Caracelli, & Graham, 1989). We conducted the quantitative analyses in two phases: (a) We estimated the associations between demographic characteristics of mothers and their work/school statuses; and (b) we estimated the associations between mothers' work/school statuses and their levels of school involvement.

Qualitative techniques supporting description and interpretation included reviewing ethnographic field notes, writing analytic memos, and systematically coding interviews. Ethnographers and manuscript authors wrote analytic memos to document surprising findings and to conceptualize educational involvement constructs during and after data collection. Also, a taxonomy of codes, including work setting and work-related actions, was developed through open coding of all ethnographic interview transcripts. A computer-assisted qualitative data analysis program (QSR NUD*IST, Qualitative Solutions and Research Pty Ltd., 1997) aided the coding process. Qualitative analyses progressed from within-case portraits of the educational involvement strategies of working mothers to cross-case analysis resulting in a typology of positive maternal strategies (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Collaborative, team-based coding processes, such as collective code generation and continuous discussions of code development and definitions, generated extensive and deep common understandings of the meanings of codes among the four authors who conducted the qualitative analysis, leading to meaningful coding

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decisions relevant to each case. We triangulated our analysis by using multiple sources of data, including ethnographic interview transcripts and ethnographer field notes, as well as transcripts from the study sample interviews for our 20 ethnographic sample mothers, to rule out alternative hypotheses and strengthen our interpretations.

Presented separately in the results below, these quantitative and qualitative analyses occurred in part on "parallel tracks." However, we also employed a "cross-over tracks" approach—an iterative mixed-method process, such that emergent findings from one method helped to shape subsequent analyses performed by another method (Li, Marquart, & Zercher, 2000). For example, an exploratory reading of the ethnographic interview transcripts uncovered the salience of work for mothers' educational involvement. This discovery led us to examine the relationship between mothers' work and family educational involvement quantitatively in the study sample. However, as quantitative data for the kindergarten year had already been collected without an intentional focus on maternal work, we had to rely solely on available basic work demographic information, such as numbers of hours worked. Information on type of job and job satisfaction, for example, was not collected. In another iterative example, quantitative variables constructed through factor analysis, such as school involvement, were conceptually understood and verified on the basis of our knowledge of the ethnographic sample data. Using the ethnographic data, we then went on to conceptualize involvement more broadly, by including involvement activities connected with the workplace (data that had not been collected in the study sample measures but were available in the ethnographic data). This iterative mixed-method approach yielded interesting contradictory and explanatory findings.

Results

The results from our quantitative analyses revealed a nonlinear association between maternal work and involvement in children's schooling for low-income mothers, such that mothers who worked or attended school part time were more involved than other mothers, and mothers who worked or attended school full time were less involved than other mothers. However, the results from our qualitative analyses of the ethnographic data highlighted a number of subtle and positive associations between maternal work and involvement in children's learning that were not captured by the quantitative analyses.

Results on Research Question 1

Our first research question was whether maternal work was associated with low-income mothers' involvement in their children's education. We estimated the associations between work/school status and school involvement by means of ordinary least squares regression. We examined the relation between work/school status and school involvement by using two effect-coded variables: (a) part-time work/school, and (b) full-time work/school.

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When used in regression analysis, an effect-coded predictor estimates the difference between the corresponding group mean and the sample grand mean for the outcome of interest. In our analysis, therefore, the part-time work/school predictor compared the average level of school involvement of mothers working or in school part time with the sample average for involvement. Similarly, the full-time work/school predictor compared the average level of school involvement of mothers working or in school full time with the sample average for involvement. Maternal age, education, ethnicity (indicated by three effect-coded predictors: European American, African American, and Latino American), and partner status, as well as study cohort (two effect-coded predictors: Cohort 1 and Cohort 2) and site (two effect-coded predictors: Site 1 and Site 2) were estimated as covariates in the model. Table 3 provides the partial correlation coefficients estimated in this analysis.

Part-time work/school status was positively associated with school involvement (partial correlation [*pr*] = .13); that is, mothers who worked and/or attended school part time were more involved in their children's schooling than were other mothers. In addition, full-time work/school was negatively associated with school involvement (*pr* = −.13); that is, mothers who worked and/or attended school full time were less involved in their children's schooling than were other mothers. Thus the relation between maternal work/school status and involvement in children's schooling appeared nonlinear: Mothers working or attending school part time were the most

Table 3

Effect Size Estimates (Partial Correlations) from OLS Regression Model Predicting Maternal Involvement in Child's Education

Predictor	Effect size[a]
Maternal age	.11^{+}
Maternal years of education	.17**
Maternal partner status	.06
Site 1	.02
Site 2	−.14*
Cohort 1	.01
Cohort 2	.08
European American	−.01
African American	−.02
Latino American	−.01
Part-time work/school	.13*
Full-time work/school	−.13*

Note. OLS = ordinary least squares. Work/school, ethnicity, and site groups were analyzed by means of effect-coded variables. Thus partial correlations represented comparisons between group means (e.g., mothers who were working or in school part time) and the sample grand mean (i.e., all mothers regardless of work/school status).
[a] Partial correlation coefficients.
*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$.

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involved in their children's education. This nonlinear pattern is illustrated in Figure 1, which displays school involvement means (adjusted for the model covariates) for the three work/school status groups.

Results on Research Question 2

Our second research question was how low-income working mothers become or stay involved in their children's education. An examination of the ethnographic interviews with our 20 low-income working mothers revealed four strategies used for involvement in their children's education: promoting a support network, using the workplace as a home base, garnering resources through work, and conquering time and space challenges. Table 4 presents practices associated with the four strategies that were variously used by part-time and full-time mothers in our ethnographic sample to generate and/or maintain direct or indirect involvement in their children's first- and second-grade education. These strategies were used to overcome barriers to involvement posed by work or to create opportunities out of work.

Promoting a Support Network

Working mothers engaged in a variety of activities to develop networks that supported involvement in their child's learning. Overseeing and managing a complex support system was a central feature of this maternal strategy, which involved relying on friends and family, building household partnerships, and creating a culture of learning in the home.

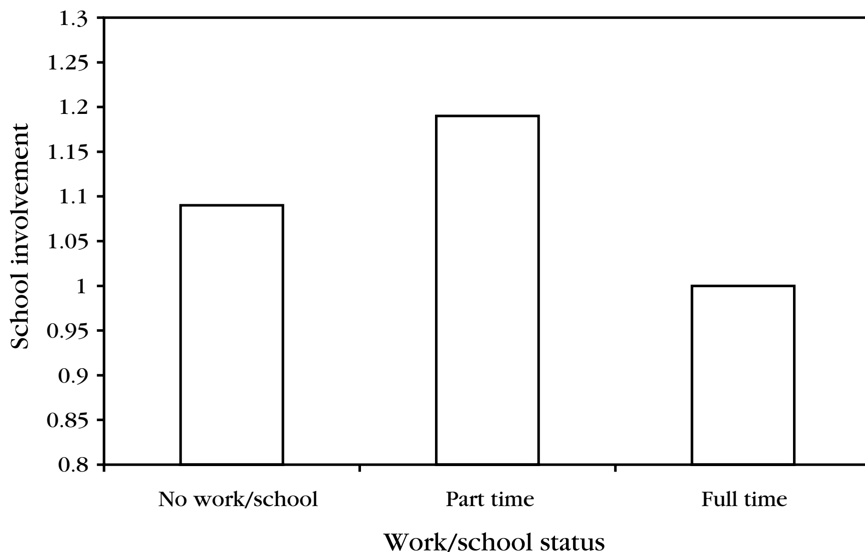

Figure 1. **Adjusted school involvement means by work/school group.**

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Table 4
Maternal Strategies for Negotiating Employment and Involvement in Children's Education

Strategy	Practices
Promoting a support network	• Relying on family and friends for involvement support • Building household partnerships • Constructing a participatory family culture of learning
Using the workplace as a home base	• Using work as a setting for child care and child enrichment • Communicating with child and school staff from work • Meetings with teacher while at work
Garnering resources through work	• Drawing from a range of material, informational, and instructional resources • Viewing work as a parenting resource to guide children's learning
Conquering time and space challenges	• Managing one's own time and space demands creatively • Requesting accommodations from employer and school staff

Some mothers deployed friends and/or family in a coordinated effort, relying on others for help with transportation to school, behavioral monitoring at school, homework assistance for the child, home–school communication, and other activities. Involvement helpers included extended family members, neighbors, children's older siblings, mothers' partners, babysitters, and coworkers. One mother, employed as an office clerk, relied on her child's grandmother, who worked at the school as a custodian, to report back to her on any troublesome behavior on the part of the child. A mother who worked in a family day-care home and cleaned homes sought out a neighbor who was a former teacher for advice on homework. One mother who worked as an office manager during the day sent her father on a couple of her child's school field trips.

Some mothers built strong household partnerships, distributing involvement activities among household members and coordinating those activities with various family members' work situations. One mother, who worked in a school resource center for families, often grew frustrated and impatient in trying to explain math homework to her daughter. So she regularly turned the task over to her more patient boyfriend when he arrived at the house later in the evening.

Finally, some mothers constructed and encouraged a family learning culture, emphasizing the value of education and learning, and marshaling others in the family to participate in it. One mother who worked as a secre-

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tary and was taking college classes arranged for joint daily learning experiences. After work and school, she sat alongside her daughters to do her own homework while they did theirs. Sometimes mothers arranged for special learning outings; for example, one factory worker shared her love of history with her children by taking them on field trips to cemeteries, where they traced their family genealogy.

Using the Workplace as a Home Base

Mothers described using their workplace as the locus for a variety of educational involvement activities that are typically performed in other settings, such as home, school, or community. They used their workplaces for child care and child enrichment, for communicating with children and teachers, and even for face-to-face teacher meetings.

A surprising number of mothers used their workplace for child care and enrichment functions. Several mothers, working in child-safe and sometimes even child-centered environments, usually in social service jobs, arranged for their children to come to the workplace for routine after-school care or occasional summer care. These workplaces included a school resource center for families, an organization that provided services for single mothers, and a community center serving the elderly and others. At the community center, a grandmother caregiver allowed her grandson to explore center activities. On Tuesdays he watched a dentist at work on other children's teeth; on Thursdays he sat and chatted with the center's social worker and later joined the homework group that she led for children. A few mothers deliberately brought their children to work for enrichment purposes when other acceptable child care was available.

In some cases the workplace was used as a way station or intermediate stop for the child between principal child-care locations, such as between school and home, or day camp and home. One mother had her children walk after school to the hair salon where she worked, to wait until their father left work and could pick them up there. The grandmother caregiver who worked at the community center had her grandson come to her job after school. That way, during her last forty-five minutes on the job, he could start his homework before he grew too tired. Once home, he could change into his play clothes and go outside. Sometimes mothers took care of their children at the workplace as a stop-gap measure when other child-care options were unavailable or unacceptable. For example, one mother temporarily brought her daughter along to her job at a dry-cleaning business because she was dissatisfied with her family day-care arrangement.

Mothers also used the workplace as a hub for communicating with children and school staff. The mothers made and received calls at work to monitor their children when they arrived home after school or in the evenings; monitoring often focused on children's safety and the status of homework. For example, the mother who worked as an office manager had her children call her at work every day when they returned home from their after-school program. While at work mothers also communicated with school personnel

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by telephone or fax, often for emergency or problem-focused reasons but also for routine matters such as scheduling meetings. The mother who worked as an office clerk took calls on the job from her son's teacher, who telephoned when the child was misbehaving in class and then put the child on the line to talk with his mother. In some cases, families did not have telephone service at home and accomplished much of their parent-to-teacher communication from the workplace, by telephone or fax.

In a couple of instances, informal parent–teacher conferences actually occurred at the workplace. The mother who worked at the dry-cleaning business was able to discuss her daughter's progress when the teacher came by to pick up her dry cleaning.

Garnering Resources Through Work

Working mothers described garnering resources from work as direct educational opportunities for their children or as indirect supports for their own involvement. Perhaps the most obvious resource presented through work was economic, but mothers discovered and capitalized on other less obvious work resources helpful to educational involvement, such as materials, instructional advice, and social supports.

Mothers described accessing recreational supplies, food, books, computers, and summer camp fees through their workplaces. They also accessed nonmaterial resources from work of an instructional and informational nature. These included educational advice, tutoring or homework help, and child-focused activities in the workplace. The workplace often afforded mothers the opportunity to access information and advice across class lines. The mother who worked as a hairdresser talked to her clients in professional occupations about their assessment of the school her children attended. One Spanish-speaking mother occasionally brought her daughter with her to work cleaning a house, where the child could practice her English language skills by chatting with her mother's employer. Several mothers had co-workers who helped their children with homework at the workplace.

Several mothers also viewed work, more broadly, as a source for parenting support and child development. These less direct, but equally valuable, workplace opportunities might be described as ethical and social resources. The mother who cleaned houses was divorced from and not amicable with her child's father. So she was pleased that her daughter could hear polite conversation between the married couple who owned the house she cleaned. She viewed them as models and wanted her child to learn to converse the way they did. Finally, mothers also interacted with supportive colleagues, many of whom were also parents, gaining valued social resources for parenting and educational involvement.

Conquering Time and Space Challenges

Working mothers described encountering and conquering time and space challenges, such as scheduling conflicts and distance between mothers'

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work and children's school. Working mothers managed and negotiated transitions and made the time to be involved in their children's education and present with their child.

Mothers described creatively negotiating the demands of time and space in home, work, and school settings. Negotiations of time included multitasking, doing things at odd times, arranging their own work or school attendance to coincide with their children's school schedule, and taking advantage of the weekend for time with their children. One mother who waited on table volunteered in her son's classroom between shifts as a way to spend time with him. When she was unable to attend a training session at school to work as a classroom volunteer, she borrowed a video of the session to view later at home. Another mother worked in her daughter's school as a parent aide in the family center, using this proximity to occasionally peek into her daughter's classroom and to chat frequently with the teacher in the halls.

One mother in an urban setting used both time and space creatively by taking her lunch hour in mid-afternoon so that she could escort her children safely home from the bus stop, which was near the deli where she worked. A number of mothers deliberately sought jobs that would allow them after-school time with their children. The mother who worked in a family day-care home and cleaned homes worked a day-care shift that allowed her to pick up her daughter at school, which was near the day care. The mother who worked afternoons at a dry-cleaning business later secured a job at a nursing home so that she could spend afternoons with her daughter.

Mothers also requested accommodations from employers and from staff at their children's schools to facilitate involvement in the children's education. For example, the mother who worked in a factory had a son with school problems and had received a concerned letter from the school guidance counselor. She gave the letter to her employer to leverage a change in work shift. This allowed her to spend evenings at home with her son and to help him with homework. While still on her evening shift, she had also asked her son's teacher for a daytime parent–teacher conference. Similarly, the hairdresser who worked occasional nights on a rotating schedule asked the school to announce school meetings with longernotice so that she could rearrange her work schedule to attend.

These four strategies—promoting a support network, using the workplace as a home base, garnering resources through work, and conquering time and space challenges—are illustrated in context in the case of Angela below. This case suggests some of the ecological interrelationships that can support low-income working mothers' educational involvement.

Case Study: Angela Lines It All Up

During her daughter's first- and second-grade years, Angela[2] worked full time during the day in the receiving department of a small department store in a well-to-do section of a large Western city. Of her first-generation Latina-

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American daughter, Diane, she said: "I want her to be all into school. . . . I want her to be someone in life . . . a teacher, . . . a secretary, nurse, somebody big, you know? . . . [I want her to] finish school, go to college, . . . make her own money. . . . And I'm teaching her how to get all that. I mean I have her lined up. . . ." (ethnographic interview, end of first grade). Angela intervened with school personnel on Diane's behalf when necessary, for example, when Diane had trouble with difficult homework, a challenging new math unit, and a teasing schoolmate. Angela generally felt satisfied with the results. The first-grade teacher lauded Angela for her "assertiveness."

On the basis of the individual needs of her daughter and son, Angela arranged a family system of after-school care whereby each child went to the home of a different relative. Because her husband, Pablo, also had a job (as a maintenance worker for an office management company), the parents were unable to routinely transport their daughter to and from school. For that reason, Angela selected a school for Diane where her cousins were enrolled, relying on the aunt to provide the needed transportation. Angela described a household division of labor for involvement activities based on work situations. She explained that Pablo's part-time work allowed him more flexibility to occasionally drop off or pick up his daughter at school and more free time to attend PTA and other school meetings. Angela on the other hand, with a full-time job and housework responsibilities, felt she must restrict herself to the "special" evening events, such as open house.

Because Angela worked late one day a week, occasionally with little notice, and was not home until dinnertime, she felt that she lacked adequate time to be involved with her daughter's learning at home. Nevertheless, she stuck to a planned regimen of extra help with homework three times a week; sharply curtailed television viewing, which she felt diminished academic engagement; and deliberately promoted a family learning culture by encouraging the practice of Spanish at home because she felt that being bilingual would help Diane's future job prospects.

Angela brought her daughter to work once a week after school; in summertime she brought her more frequently. During the summer after second grade, Diane's camp bus dropped her off directly at the store each afternoon instead of at home. After this atypical transition, Angela often ordered a take-out dinner for Diane to be delivered to her at the store. While Diane ate an early dinner in the store, Angela could keep her company and continue to work.

With her daughter at her side, Angela modeled hard work and occupational commitment. "I show her what I do at work. . . . I show her step by step . . . and I tell her, 'Look, this is what I do every day,' so that she knows how I do work" (ethnographic interview, end of first grade). Diane also helped out her mother and co-workers, assisting with tasks such as putting on price tags and straightening the clothes hangers. At one point, Diane was paid by her mother for her help and was able to purchase a toy she coveted.

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Angela brought her daughter to work to help keep her on a good path. Angela felt that this practice promoted a strong mother–child relationship and more communication. It also protected Diane from the dangers of the local community, such as gang activity and drug dealing, and exposed her to new social networks. Diane befriended the daughter of a regular customer and was invited to their house in an upper-income section of the city. Angela also created a high-quality child-care experience. This helped to keep Diane from watching too much television after school, which frequently occurred when Angela sent her daughter to relatives for child care.

Diane's time at Angela's workplace also supported her learning. Angela's boss, Martha, reportedly felt that Diane could "learn a lot of things" there. Although the family could not afford a computer at home, Diane could use the computer at Angela's workplace, which Angela felt was "really helping [Diane] a lot" (ethnographic interview, end of second grade).

Martha took a personal interest in Angela and Diane, providing instrumental and social support. Reflecting back on the kindergarten year, Angela noted that Martha had permitted her to take Wednesday mornings off to spend at the school to be more involved in her daughter's education. Martha also allowed Angela the flexibility to leave the store once a week in mid-afternoon to bring Diane back to work. Her boss was also the source of several direct educational resources. For example, she purchased an educational toy to help Diane with spelling and math at home and paid for a quality summer camp experience for Diane.

While at work, Angela stayed in close contact with Diane and Diane's teachers. The family had disconnected their home telephone because of the expense, and Pablo did not have easy access to a telephone at his job, but Angela made full use of the phone at her workplace. She gave Diane all her work numbers and her pager number. Angela exchanged faxes with Diane's second-grade teacher at school when she needed to change a meeting time. "When I want to talk to [the teacher], I just fax him something, from my job, or I call him." The teacher, in turn, was supportive. "He's always available. He's . . . never said no" (ethnographic interview, end of second grade).

Discussion

Our study suggests that full-time maternal work and schooling may impose barriers to family educational involvement. We found that mothers who were employed or in school full time were less likely to be involved in their children's education than mothers who were employed or in school part time. This result was evident even when we controlled for differences in maternal age, education level, and partner status across groups. It is consistent with other research indicating that full-time employment for low-income mothers can limit the amount of time available to meet family and child needs, a phenomenon referred to as "time poverty" (Chin & Newman, 2002).

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Surprisingly, however, we found that mothers who were employed part time or in school part time were also more involved than mothers who were not employed or in school at all, and that there were no differences in the involvement levels of mothers who were employed or in school full time and those who were not employed or in school. These findings suggest that factors associated with employment and schooling other than time constraints may influence levels of family involvement in school. Low-income mothers who were not employed or in school, for example, may have experienced mental health problems that impeded educational involvement. There is, in fact, substantial evidence that unemployment is associated with high rates of depressive symptoms, which in turn interfere with parenting and parent–child relationships (Conger, Wallace, Sun, Simons, McLoyd, & Brody, 2002; Dooley, Prause, & Ham-Rowbottom, 2000). What may make part-time working mothers unique, therefore, is that they are less likely to experience the time constraints associated with full-time work and the mental health risks associated with unemployment.

Nevertheless, qualitative analyses of our ethnographic sample unearthed a variety of ways in which all working mothers overcame involvement barriers posed by work and created involvement opportunities from work and workplaces. Several general observations from an ecological perspective can be made about these maternal involvement strategies. First, the mothers' own initiative and efficacy appeared to be central in their negotiation of work and family educational involvement, a finding consistent with the theoretical work of Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1997). For example, Angela felt no hesitation in raising concerns with her daughter's teacher, and knew she would get results. By employing these strategies to resolve the work–family involvement dilemma, working mothers in our investigation may be exerting what Davis-Kean and Eccles (1999) call external executive control of their children's interactions with the worlds in which they live and learn. By bringing Diane to her workplace, Angela carefully minimized Diane's time in front of the television at relatives' homes. It should be noted, however, that our selection process for the ethnographic sample sought cooperative mothers with reflective and verbal capacities, potentially limiting the conclusions we can draw about maternal strategies to those mothers who possessed such qualities.

Second, strategies appear to depend highly on affordances or contextual opportunities provided by work and school. Our qualitative analyses suggest that structural features of work, such as flexible schedules, communication resources, accessibility, and a workplace environment safe for children and even child-centered, may facilitate educational involvement. For example, service jobs involving contact with the public may offer occasions for informal meetings with teachers at the workplace; social service jobs may offer child-friendly work environments. On the school side, factors such as flexibility in scheduling family involvement opportunities, resources such as fax machines and classroom telephones, and willingness to engage in work-directed communications may facilitate work–family

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involvement strategies. Diane's second-grade teacher happily rescheduled a meeting after receiving a request on the school's fax machine that Angela had sent from work.

Finally, informal and relational factors appear to influence maternal strategies. The strategies used by the women we studied were often the result of personal, informal accommodations and adaptations made by mothers. For example, several mothers worked in small workplaces, and the involvement supports they received depended on relational ties to their bosses. Angela was fortunate to have a close relationship with a boss who was extremely sympathetic to her dilemmas of work and family involvement in education.

Research and Policy Implications

This exploratory inquiry has begun to reframe our understanding of family involvement in children's education, by expanding consideration of the ecological domains and relationships that shape involvement activities. Our broader understanding comes from the inclusion of maternal work as an ecological mesosystem. This study is just a beginning, focusing mainly on positive maternal adaptations and maternal self-reports, with limited data on the work system. Our future analyses will draw on subsequent School Transition Study data on the extent to which mothers' workplaces possess family-friendly structural features and practices. Later investigations will also consider a broader range of perspectives from different actors, such as teachers and principals, and the various school affordances for working parents' family involvement in their children's education. In general, future research in both the work–family and family involvement arenas would be strengthened by greater consideration of the dilemma of maternal work and family educational involvement.

Likewise, it is important to consider how public policies can be developed to help parents and schools better address the work–family involvement dilemma. Larger percentages of mothers are entering the work force, and new cohorts of low-income mothers are making welfare-to-work transitions. These changes are coupled with the high social value placed on family educational involvement and its demonstrated achievement benefits for children. Employment policies need to be extended to low-income women who work in smaller settings, such as many of the mothers who participated in our ethnographic interviews. These settings are not covered by the current Family Medical Leave Act (FMLA), a federal law that allows employees in larger work settings to take leave to care for a new baby or sick spouse, child, or parent (National Partnership for Women and Families, 2002b). And only eight states currently go beyond federal standards under the FMLA to require employers to allow family leave to participate in children's educational activities at school, such as parent–teacher conferences (National Partnership for Women and Families, 2002a). It is also important to explore school policies and practices that consider mothers, and fathers, too, as

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workers—for example, by altering patterns of communication with some working parents in recognition of their use of the workplace as a hub. Our analysis is a first step in understanding these ecological factors of family, school, and work that support the involvement of working mothers in their children's education.

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[1] For clarity's sake, when reporting on the study sample, we refer to children's primary caregivers as "mothers" because the vast majority of the 390 primary caregivers interviewed were in fact mothers. When reporting on the ethnographic sample, which consisted of 19 mothers and 1 grandmother caregiver, we do specifically identify the grandmother caregiver.

[2] Names and identifying information have been disguised or omitted to protect the confidentiality of participants.

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