HEAD START FATHERS’ PERCEPTIONS OF FATHER ENGAGEMENT

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ABSTRACT

Meredith Jones: Head Start fathers’ perceptions of father engagement
(Under the direction of Harriet Able)

A core component in the field of early childhood and family development is the importance of focusing on the family as a unit of service rather than the individual child. Many early childhood programs (ECPs) aim at providing support to parents and increasing parent engagement as it has positive influences on children’s developmental outcomes. Despite the growing body of research on father engagement in the early childhood years, little is known about fathers’ perceptions of their engagement with their children and their children’s ECP.

The purpose of this study was to explore fathers’ engagement with their young children and their experiences in Head Start programs. Interviews were conducted with twelve fathers of children enrolled in Head Start programs. Qualitative data were analyzed using descriptive and thematic coding. Findings suggest fathers engage with their children in a variety of ways at home and in the community. Participants also reported several ways they participate in their child’s ECP. Primarily, fathers communicated with teachers during pick up and drop off times, attended conferences and Individualized Educational Program (IEP) meetings, and attended events the fathers felt were important. Factors influencing their engagement included work schedules and availability, the mother-father relationship, and personal beliefs. Participants also offered suggestions for ways ECPs can increase father engagement. ECPs that value fathers, accommodate fathers work schedules, and treat them equal to mothers may increase father engagement in programs.
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Over the past few decades, social scientists, policy makers, and educators have noted the important role fathers have in the lives of their children. Increased attention was primarily ushered by the societal shift of women entering the workforce leading to new expectations in fathers’ caretaking responsibilities for their children (Cabrera, Fitzgerald, Bradley, & Roggman, 2014). With new expectations, researchers began investigating the effects of “deadbeat dads” or absent fathers in the 1980’s (Cabrera et al., 2014; Fagan, 2007). Unfortunately, these studies did not highlight the benefits of having an engaged father. Recently, researchers have moved away from negative portrayals of fathers, shifting focus to the unique benefits fathers have on their children. This shift is critical to children’s learning and development. A core component in the field of child and family development is the importance of focusing on the family as a unit of service rather than only serving the individual child (Solomon-Fears, 2016). Many early childhood programs (ECPs) aim at providing support to parents and increasing parent engagement (Holcomb et al., 2015). Evidence indicates that parental engagement in ECPs has positive influences on children’s developmental outcomes (McWayne, Downer, Campos, & Harris, 2013). However, parental engagement is typically associated with mothers’ participation (Cabrera et al., 2014).

Despite the growing body of research illustrating the benefits of father engagement on young children’s development, father participation in ECPs is limited and often overlooked (Fagan, 2007). This has led to the investigation of attracting fathers to ECPs and exploring
factors that influence their engagement (Fagan, 2007; Holcomb et al., 2015; McAllister et al., 2004). Most research on the preschool population has focused on Head Start children and families, as parent engagement in this federally funded preschool program continues to be a focal point (Dropkin & Jauregui, 2015; Fagan, 1999; Fagan & Iglesias, 1999). When Head Start was launched in 1965, its core belief was that families and communities were integral to supporting children’s early learning and development (Office of Head Start, 2013). Presently, Head Start continues to lead in two-generational approaches, always emphasizing that parents are their child’s first teachers and are a program’s most important partner (Dropkin & Jauregui, 2015). Each year, every Head Start and Early Head Start family works with a family advocate to complete a needs assessment to create a family partnership agreement (Office of Head Start, 2013). Head Start’s federal-to-local funding structure enables each community to create a Head Start program that best incorporates local resources and addresses families’ cultures, strengths, and needs (Dropkin & Jauregui, 2015).

Particularly, for Head Start programs to be effective at promoting and meeting the needs of fathers, they must have a deep understanding of fathers’ experiences and perceptions of their interactions with their children. Understanding how fathers’ view their engagement with their young children, programs and staff can reflect on how to best meet the needs of the families they serve. Furthermore, because Head Start is a two-generational program, children and fathers will benefit from more services tailored to meet the needs of fathers. For example, fathers may gain knowledge on child development and ways to engage with their child at home but also receive information on job trainings or job opportunities.

Although the body of research on father engagement is growing, the majority of studies are quantitative with emphasis on secondary data analyses or surveys completed by mothers and
teachers. Researchers argue for more in-depth qualitative studies to capture fathers’ experiences and perceptions about their engagement with their young children and in their child’s ECP (Cabrera et al., 2015). Because so many factors impact the quality and quantity of father engagement, it is valuable to capture fathers’ perceptions of their engagement. For example, fathers may hold traditional beliefs and values about childrearing and feel it is the mother’s job to focus on issues related to preschool and their child’s development. Or, a father may want to participate in his child’s classroom but he does not know how to do so, or he may express he does not feel comfortable being there. Understanding various perceptions on a father’s engagement with his child at home and his perceptions of participating in ECPs is not only valuable to researchers and professionals, but also to the family. Once professionals have a better understanding of fathers’ perceptions, they then can make adjustments to their programs by creating a more inviting environment for fathers, teaching fathers how to engage in developmentally appropriate practices with their child at home, or connect the father with community resources that meet the family’s needs.

The purpose of this study was to capture Head Start fathers’ perceptions of their engagement with their child at home, in the community, and participation in Head Start programs. Furthermore, this study brings to light the barriers and challenges fathers face related to their engagement. Specific research questions guiding this study were:

1. How do fathers describe their engagement in their young child’s development?
2. What are fathers’ perceived experiences related to engagement in their children’s Head Start programs?
3. What are fathers’ perceived barriers and challenges preventing their engagement?

Findings from this study suggest fathers engage in activities with their children at home and in the community. Fathers reported participating in daily routine activities by assisting with
caregiving activities and being present for meal times. They also described engaging in a variety of pre-academic and play activities at home. Participants shared utilizing various community resources, like parks and recreation centers, and enjoying various entertainment opportunities with their children in their community. Furthermore, participants reported on their engagement in their child’s Head Start programs. Engagement ranged from communicating with teachers at pick up and drop off times to attending conferences and Individualized Education Program (IEP) meetings and other events fathers felt were important. Findings also highlight the challenges fathers face to their engagement at home and in programs. The primary factor impacting fathers was the demand of their work schedule, which was considered a challenge to engagement at home and in programs. Other factors influencing engagement in programs were the mother-father relationship and the father’s beliefs. Finally, participants offered suggestions to programs to increase father engagement. These suggestions included treating fathers equal to mothers in their child’s education, provide activities on the weekends, and provide information on activities to do at home with their child.

Based on findings from this study, program practice and policy implications are provided. Programs can increase father engagement by valuing fathers and their opinions, offer weekend activities that are father friendly, and consider communicating with fathers via online platforms like social media or email. Finally, future research should include more qualitative studies across diverse groups of fathers and family structures, explore fathers’ perceptions of their fatherhood role in relation to their engagement, and conduct mixed method studies to explore perceived engagement and actual engagement.
Since 1965, fathers have nearly tripled the amount of time spent with their children (Parker & Wang, 2013). This time has been spent in leisurely activities, helping with basic needs and care of children, and activities related to children’s education (Parker & Wang, 2013). Although fathers’ time spent in their children’s education related activities is significantly less than mothers, the past ten years have illustrated increases in father engagement in various school related activities for kindergarten through twelfth grade (Fatherhood Institute, 2013). For example, the percentage of fathers taking their child to school has risen from 38% to 54%; attending class events from 28% to 35%; visiting their child’s classroom from 30% to 41% and volunteering at their child’s school from 20% to 28% (Fatherhood Institute, 2013). Additionally, attending parent-teacher conferences is up from 69% to 77%; attending school meetings from 28% to 35%; and attending school-based parents meetings from 47% to 59% (Fatherhood Institute, 2013).

Although parent engagement, including fathers, is important in middle and late childhood, engagement in the early childhood years is critical to children’s overall development and later trajectories in life (McWayne, Downer, Campos, & Harris, 2013). This notion has led researchers to explore father engagement in the early childhood years (birth through age eight) and more recently, the impact of father engagement in early childhood programs (ECPs). Early childhood policymakers, particularly within the Office of Head Start, have increased their efforts to encourage programs to strengthen father engagement in ECPs. The current research base
indicates promising findings of father engagement on young children’s development and has led to the push of increasing father engagement in ECPs. As the literature base grows, researchers have found certain factors impact father engagement, like work schedule and availability to participate. Unfortunately, few of these studies collect data directly from fathers.

This chapter provides a review of the impact of father engagement on young children’s development, factors that impact father engagement, and father engagement in ECPs. First, definitions of key terms used in this study will be defined followed by an exploration of the positive impact engaged fathers have on their young child’s development and the theoretical base for this study. Then father engagement in ECPs and factors impacting their engagement is highlighted. Finally, Head Start’s focus on father engagement is discussed.

Definition of Terms

Father. In order to understand father engagement it is necessary to define ‘father,’ as the definition has grown increasingly complex over the years (Fagan & Palm, 2008; Office of Head Start, 2013; Osborne, 2014). Many definitions of ‘father’ include men who have biological, social, and legal connections to a child (Palm & Fagan, 2008). Much of the previous work on fathers focused on the biological father living in a two-parent family and, more often than not, focused on White families (Cabrera et al., 2002; Fagan, 2008; Osborne, 2014). However, current research stresses the importance of exploring non-married fathers, fathers who do not live with their children, culturally diverse fathers, and incarcerated fathers (Cabrera, et al., 2002; Fagan et al., 2014; Osborne, 2014). Moving beyond biological fathers, the Office of Head Start expanded their definition of ‘father’ to include any male family member and father figure who positively influences a child’s life including grandfathers, uncles, or close male friends of the family (Office of Head Start, 2013). This study will use the above Office of Head Start’s definition of
Engagement. Prior to the 1980’s, research on fathers primarily focused on how fathers were *not* engaged in the lives of their children (Lamb, Pleck, & Levine, 1985). As the research lens shifted to a positive view, Lamb and colleagues (1985) argued father engagement meant men participated in hands on activities with children, were physically available and able to monitor children’s activities even when not directly interacting with the child, and took ownership in the responsibilities of making decisions related to childrearing (Lamb et al., 1985). More recently in 2013, The Office of Head Start provided a definition of what father engagement is within their programs and services. This study will use Head Start’s 2013 definition of father engagement, which includes fathers and staff working as partners to promote the child’s best interest, to exchange knowledge about the child, and to share in program governance. (Head Start Father Engagement, 2013).

Father Engagement in Young Children’s Development

Like mothers, fathers who are engaged with their child have positive impacts on child well-being and family functioning (Lamb, 2010; Lamb & Lewis, 2013; Pleck, 2010). Fathers and mothers have both been found to encourage exploration during play with their infants (Roopnarine, Fouts, Lamb, & Lewis-Elligan, 2005), use shorter phrases and speak slowly when interacting with their babies (Pancsofar & Vernon-Feagans, 2006), and adjust their behaviors to accommodate their child’s developmental status (Roopnarine et al., 2005). Although there are similarities between mothering and fathering, studies suggest engaged fathers also have significant influences on children’s social, cognitive, behavioral, and psychological outcomes throughout the lifespan (Panter-Brick et al., 2014). Short- and long-term positive outcomes include those pertaining to mental health, self-regulation, less substance abuse, reduced criminal
activity, greater capacity for empathy, stronger peer relationships, greater self-esteem and life-satisfaction (Bronte-Tinkew, Horowitz, & Kinukawa, 2008; Buckelew, Pierre, & Chabra, 2008; Cabrera et al., 2000; Cabrera, West, Shannon, & Brooks-Gunn, 2006; Fagan, Day, Lamb, & Cabrera, 2014; Pancsofar & Vernon-Feagans, 2006). This discovery is helping change the view of fathers as simply “helpers” or “substitutes” into equal contributors to child development (Lamb & Lewis, 2013).

The following section will begin with findings on fathers’ participation in daily caregiving responsibilities of their children then highlight research findings supporting the unique contributions fathers make to young children’s social – emotional and cognitive development. Further, researchers are beginning to particularly stress the importance of father engagement in families with children with disabilities. Albeit limited, these studies will also be discussed in this section.

**Caregiving Responsibilities.** Fathers’ participation in caregiving responsibilities has gained attention as more women have entered the workforce (Yogman & Garfield, 2016). Caregiving responsibilities include feeding, bathing, and dressing their children. Jones and Mosher (2013) analyzed data from the 2006-2010 National Survey of Family Growth to measure father’s involvement with their children. This nationally representative sample included 2,200 fathers of children under age five including 1,790 residential fathers and 410 nonresidential (Jones & Mosher, 2013). Of this sample, 72% of residential fathers ate meals or fed their children compared to 7.9% of nonresidential fathers (Jones & Mosher, 2013). Additionally, nine out of ten residential fathers bathed, diapered, or dressed their children, or helped the child bathe or get dressed (Jones & Mosher, 2013). In 2016, Guerrero and colleagues analyzed a sample (N=2441) from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study Birth Cohort (ECLS-B) to examine the
associations of father-child feeding and dietary practices. Logistic multivariable regression analyses were adjusted for child, father, mother, and socio-demographic characteristics (Guerrero et al., 2016). Results suggest approximately 40% of fathers reported having notable influence on their preschool child’s nutrition, and about 50% reported daily involvement in preparing food for their child (Guerrero et al., 2016). Although these findings are promising, the sample was limited to primarily White, married fathers living with their children with the majority being employed and having a minimum of a 4-year college degree. Additionally, only eleven percent of this sample was living under the federal poverty level (Guerrero et al., 2016).

Given the societal shifts and more women in the workforce, fathers are expected to assume responsibility for the caretaking responsibilities of their children. Large national survey data is useful in gaining a national snapshot of fathers’ engagement in caretaking responsibilities, but it is important to consider residential status as well as various socioeconomic demographics.

**Social-Emotional Development.** Beginning in infancy, father engagement has been shown to have a positive impact on children’s development. Like mothers, fathers help their infants form secure attachment bonds by responding promptly and appropriately to the child’s signals and needs (Fathers and Attachment, 2014; Volling & Belsky, 1992). Specifically related to fathers, Pruett (2000) reported that infants who have engaged fathers in their lives for the first 18-24 months of life are more secure and more likely to explore the world around them with increased enthusiasm and curiosity than children without engaged fathers. Dubowitz et al. (2001) echoed these findings and added that when children have secure relationships with their fathers they have higher self-esteem and are less likely to be depressed later in life. Fisher et al. (2006) indicated greater father engagement in infant care is linked with lower parenting stress and depression in mothers, and is likely to enhance the mother-infant attachment security.
Further, Brown et al. (2007) postulated when fathers engage in high quality parenting behavior, a secure attachment may develop even when the father spends relatively little time with the child. As the child grows older the father-child relationship typically becomes more playful and researchers have found interesting benefits from this relationship.

*Playful Interactions.* Research has established that playful interactions are a common feature of the father-child relationship (Forbes et al., 2004; John et al., 2013; Lamb & Lewis, 2013). Father’s play behaviors have been found to be more physical (Lindsey & Mize, 2000), challenging (Grossman et al., 2002) and more peer-like than mother’s play behaviors (John et al., 2013). Each of these components, in turn, is uniquely related to the development of children’s social and emotional skills.

Physical play is one characteristic often found in many father-child interactions. This type of play can range from hands on activities to the more rigorous rough-and-tumble play (Flanders, Leo, Plquette, Pihl, & Seguin, 2009; Lindsey & Mize, 2000). Although the benefits of physical father-child play have often been overlooked or poorly understood (Lamb, 2010), recent studies reveal this type of play actually contributes to children’s social and emotional competence in significant ways (Flanders, 2010; Flanders et al., 2009; Lindsey & Mize, 2000). One way that physical play contributes to children’s social and emotional development is it allows children to practice reading other people’s cues. For example, during physical play children must learn to be conscientious of facial expressions, body language, and moods (Cabrera & Tamis-LeMonda, 2013). This type of physical play requires continual interaction and mutuality between the individuals. Examples of this have been reported by teachers as they noted stronger emotional regulation and higher social understanding in children whose fathers engaged them in more physical play (Roggman, Boyce, Cook, Christiansen, & Jones, 2004).
Physical play with fathers also provides children with the opportunity to interact with a more knowledgeable social play partner. Flanders et al. (2009) found when fathers acted as a dominant play partner, children displayed better aggression regulation. This scenario is especially prevalent during physical play because this type of interaction tends to elicit a variety of intense emotions more so than in other interactions (Cabrera & Tamis-LeMonda, 2013). Thus, physical play provides children with unique opportunities to practice crucial social and emotional skills.

Another characteristic of father-child play is complex and challenging interactions. This type of interaction involves situations in which the father prompts the child to explore (Grossman et al., 2002) or play with toys in unconventional ways (Roggman et al., 2004). These types of interactions have been shown to increase children’s willingness to explore in a social context, allowing more opportunities to develop social and emotional competencies. For instance, in the study by Roggman et al. (2004), father-child complex social toy play, characterized by sequences of back-and-forth responses and reactions, was associated with better emotional regulation skills in toddlerhood. This result indicates complex interactions may promote sophisticated social understanding and emotional regulation skills, as early as toddlerhood. The research regarding complex and challenging father-child interactions highlights the significance of understanding and promoting such play interactions in order to support the development of children’s social and emotional competencies.

Lastly, father-child play is also characterized by its peer-like quality. This refers to the father’s willingness to comply with the child’s requests and contributes to the interactions in a playful way (John et al., 2013). This type of interaction involves a mutual process in which the parent and child each make initiations and compliances. During these interactions, children have
the opportunity to explore new options when their fathers contribute to the play interaction in a playful way. They also have the opportunity to assert their own ideas when fathers comply with their initiations, similar to an experience a child may have with a peer (John et al., 2013). Thus, play interactions with the father gives the child the opportunity to practice peer interactions even before they may have access to many peers, such as in infancy and toddlerhood (Lindsey et al., 1997). Lindsey et al. (1997) observed this phenomenon when examining the links between mutuality in parent-child play and preschoolers’ social competence through a videotaped dyadic play session. Researchers found that children who initiated play with their fathers were more liked by their peers (Lindsey et al., 1997). In addition, children whose fathers complied often with their children’s play initiations were perceived as more competent by their teacher (Lindsey et al., 1997).

In sum, these father-child interaction studies suggest that the link between fathers play interactions and children’s social and emotional development exists because of the physical, complex, and reciprocal nature of the interactions that occur between the individuals (Cabrera & Tamis-LeMonda, 2013; John et al., 2013; Lindsey & Mize, 2000). These processes provide many opportunities for children to gain crucial social and emotional skills that aid in social interactions outside the family unit. This body of literature emphasizes the significant implications quality play interactions between father and child have for children’s social competence and emotional regulation.

Cognitive Development. Studies also postulate engaged fathers make valuable, and unique, contributions to their children’s cognitive development. Studies have been conducted across all developmental stages and suggest fathers play a particularly important role in children’s language development. This section will highlight studies examining fathers’ impact
on their child’s cognitive development across infancy, toddlerhood, and preschool ages.

*Infancy and Toddlerhood.* Researchers suggest infants with highly engaged fathers are more cognitively competent (Bronte-Tinkew et al., 2008; Yogman et al., 1995). In 1995, Yogman, Kindlon, and Earls examined the role fathering plays in overcoming the effects of prematurity of infants in Latino, African-American, and other inner city populations. Following these children for three years, Yogman et al. (1995) found that babies with highly engaged fathers had substantially higher cognitive skills than those premature babies who did not have engaged fathers. Yogman et al. (1995) also reported high quality (described as sensitive and supportive) and substantial father engagement was connected with a range of positive outcomes in babies and toddlers including better language development and higher IQs at 12 months and 3 years.

In Bronte-Tinkew et al.’s (2008) study, researchers explored the impact of father engagement on infant’s cognitive outcomes among families from the ECLS-B. Father engagement was assessed within five domains: cognitively stimulating activities, physical care, paternal warmth, nurturing activities, and caregiving activities (Bronte-Tinkew et al., 2008). Results suggested four domains of father engagement (cognitively stimulating activities, warmth, physical care, and caregiving activities) were consistently associated with a lower likelihood of negative cognitive outcomes while controlling for various demographic variables.

Several studies have investigated the impact of father engagement during the toddler years and impacts on toddler’s language development. For example, Rowe et al. (2004) compared low-income fathers’ and mothers’ talk to their toddlers during semi-structured free play at home. Findings from this study suggest fathers’ and mothers’ talk to children did not differ in amount, diversity of vocabulary, or complexity (Rowe, Coker, & Pan, 2004). However,
fathers produced more “wh” questions (where, what, who) and explicit clarification requests, which presented more conversational challenges to children (Rowe et al., 2004). Later, in 2006, Pancsofar and Vernon-Feagans examined the differences in mother and father talk to their 24 month-old children (Pancsofar & Vernon-Feagans, 2006). In this study, researchers took into consideration parents’ education, childcare quality, and parents’ language contributions (vocabulary, complexity, questions, and pragmatics) to children’s expressive language development at 36 months (Pancsofar & Vernon-Feagans, 2006). An unexpected finding from this study indicated the vocabulary fathers used with children at 24 months made unique contributions to their later language development, after controlling for parental level of education and quality of child care (Pancsofar & Vernon-Feagans, 2006).

In 2008, Pancsofar and Vernon-Feagans conducted a similar study as their 2006 study but with a more diverse sample. Using the data on low-income families residing in North Carolina and Pennsylvania, this study explored parental language use during a picture book task. After controlling for family demographic factors, child characteristics, maternal education, and maternal language input during infancy, results from this study found father education and vocabulary use during the picture book task were significantly related to children’s communication at 15 months and children’s language development at 36 months (Pancsofar & Vernon-Feagans, 2008).

In another study exploring fathers’ bookreading with toddlers, Duursman, Pan, and Raikes (2008) investigated how often low-income fathers reported reading to their children. Researchers were also interested in the predictors and effects of fathers reading books to their children. Using families from Early Head Start, results from this study found wide variety in the frequency of bookreading among participating fathers. Fathers were more likely to read to their
children if fathers spoke English at home, and if they had a high school education (Duursman et al., 2008).

Taken together, fathers who engage in reading books and talking to their toddlers support their children’s cognitive development including ability to communicate and stronger language development later (Bronte-Tinkew et al., 2008; Duursman et al., 2008; Pancsofar & Vernon-Feagans, 2008). While Pancsofar and Vernon-Feagans (2008) and Duursman et al. (2008) found father’s education level to be a strong predictor to bookreading and language development. In an earlier study, Pancsofar and Vernon-Feagans (2006) did not find this to be a predictor. Differences in these findings illustrate the need for more studies examining fathers’ impact on toddler’s literacy and language development. It is also suggested studies should examine more culturally and linguistically diverse families (Pancsofar & Vernon-Feagans, 2006). Not only have researchers started exploring cognitive effects of father engagement during the toddler years, studies are also occurring during the preschool years.

The Preschool Years. The preschool years are an important developmental time in young children’s lives especially as they gain cognitive skills necessary for later school success. Downer and Mendez (2005) explored the relationship between father engagement and children’s school readiness (receptive language, peer play competence, and emotion regulation). Researchers surveyed 85 fathers and father figures about their engagement in childcare, home-based and school-based educational activities (Downer & Mendez, 2005). Additionally, children’s school readiness competencies were evaluated by teacher report and direct assessment (Downer & Mendez, 2005). Interestingly, fathers’ engagement in school-based educational activities was unrelated to all measures of children’s school readiness. No significant correlations between receptive language development and the different measures of father
engagement in early learning experiences were found (Downer & Mendez, 2005). This finding was especially perplexing because studies investigating the influence of fathers on children’s development have most consistently found an association between paternal engagement and cognitive or educational outcomes (Coley, 2001). For future research, Downer and Mendez (2005) suggest the use of different measures of cognitive and language outcomes, and most notably the emphasis on emergent literacy and expressive language skills.

In 2013, McWayne, Downer, Campos, and Harris conducted a meta-analysis of 21 studies examining direct father engagement (frequency of positive engagement activities and aspects of parenting ability) and five dimensions of children’s early learning (representing social and cognitive domains). Findings from this study suggest that both quality and quantity of direct father engagement matter (McWayne et al., 2013). More specifically, aspects of parenting quality (e.g. warmth, nurturance, and responsiveness) and frequency of positive engagement activities (e.g. playing or reading to the child) are important in predicting children’s social and academic success (McWayne et al., 2013).

Baker (2014) explored the impact of father engagement on preschool children’s cognitive outcomes among a sample of African American fathers. Conducting a secondary data analysis, data from 750 families from the ECLS-B were examined to discover the contributions of fathers’ engagement on children’s reading and math achievement in preschool (Baker, 2014). Fathers reported their frequency of participation in home literacy activities (e.g. parent-child reading, singing songs, telling stories, and the number of children’s books in the home), play, and caregiving activities with their children (Baker, 2014). Findings from this study suggest the father’s home literacy activities positively predicted children’s reading and math achievement whereas play and caregiving activities did not predict academic achievement (Baker, 2014).
Recently, Baker et al., (2015) used data from the Family Life Project to examine predictive relations between fathers’ and mothers’ language input during a wordless picture book task in the home before kindergarten entry and children’s letter-word identification, picture vocabulary, and applied problem solving. The key finding in this study was that fathers’ language input predicted children’s receptive vocabulary and applied problem scores above and beyond mothers’ language input (Baker et al., 2015). These findings were evident even after controlling for demographics and maternal language input (Baker et al., 2015).

The unique impact fathers have on children’s cognitive development is gaining much attention, especially since researchers are finding that fathers make different contributions to their child’s language and literacy development than mothers do. It is critical to transition this research into practice. By making ECP professionals aware of the valuable impact fathers can have on their child’s cognitive development, ECP professionals may be better attuned and equipped to actively engage fathers in children’s early childhood programs. The field of early childhood education is now at a point where we must make fathers aware of the impact they have on their children and help them continue to make valuable contributions throughout their child’s schooling.

**Children with Special Needs.** Father engagement related to families with children with special needs may be one of the most important avenues for future fatherhood research. Families who have children with disabilities or childhood illnesses experience a greater amount of stress than other families. This stress can come from navigating the system after a new diagnosis, receiving and processing new information from multiple outlets about their child’s disability and development; basic daily tasks and planning; and characteristics of the child’s diagnosis or disability (Flippin & Crais, 2011; Noggle, 2012). Unfortunately, most research on the family’s
coping and adjustment is often through reports from the mother (Cabrera & Peters, 2000; Flippin & Crais, 2011; Noggle, 2012).

In 2004, McNeill conducted 22 interviews with fathers who had a child with juvenile rheumatoid arthritis to learn about their experiences. Results from this study found fathers perceived their child’s condition as a catalyst for engagement, experienced many emotions, and adopted a positive approach to making sense of their child’s condition (McNeill, 2004). However, fathers also reported an overreliance on self-support strategies in an attempt to be “strong for others” during times of high stress (McNeill, 2004). Fathers relied on self-support strategies like prayer, exercise, and distraction rather than relying on support from extended family and friends (McNeill, 2004). Although studies are limited, understanding fathers’ perspectives while they navigate their child’s disability or diagnosis is needed to understand how programs can support them.

In 2011, Flippin and Crais conducted a systematic literature review to (1) identify the extent of father engagement in parent training programs for children with autism (ASD), (2) identify the contributions of parents to the symbolic play outcomes of their children with ASD and other disabilities, and (3) examine differences in stress and coping experienced by mothers and fathers of children with ASD. Results indicated that the majority of parent training programs had greater mother participation (Flippin & Crais, 2011). However, consistent with research on fathers’ language use and typically developing children, these researchers also suggest fathers have language models unique from mothers which may also uniquely influence the nature of the training programs targeting fathers of children with ASD. Flippin and Crais (2011) call for more parent training programs to target fathers of children with ASD. Research examining fathers’ play with typically developing children suggests children learn valuable self-regulation and
social-emotional skills. These contributions may be especially important for children with ASD, given the pervasive deficits in play associated with ASD and the link between early play ability and later communicative outcomes (Flippin & Crais, 2011). Flippin and Crais (2011) concluded that directly involving fathers in their child’s intervention may relieve some of the pressure and stress mothers experience and thus positively affecting the entire family.

Noggle (2012) explored father engagement among fathers of children with disabilities enrolled in public ECPs (including state funded centers and Head Start programs). Noggle aimed to explore if fathers of children with disabilities were more or less engaged than fathers of children without disabilities. An adapted version of the Family Involvement Questionnaire was administered to 52 fathers. Noggle hypothesized that fathers of children with disabilities would be less engaged than fathers of children without disabilities. Results showed that fathers of children with disabilities were actually more engaged in their child’s ECP (Noggle, 2012). Of the types of programs included in this study, Noggle found Head Start and state funded Pre-K had much stronger parent engagement programs and initiatives, which may impact the higher levels of father engagement in these programs.

The recent surge in interest on father engagement in the lives of their young children clearly illustrates fathers can make a meaningful impact at each stage of children’s development (Cabrera et al., 2000; Cabrera et al., 2015; Downer et al., 2008; Lamb & Tamis-LeMonda, 2004; Osborne et al., 2014). This research base is growing to look at how different personal characteristics come into play with fathers’ engagement; such as residential fathers versus nonresidential fathers; married or single fathers; and father characteristics like age, education, employment, and race/ethnicity (Cabrera et al., 2000; Cabrera et al., 2015). Despite the recent interest in fathers, researchers have paid less attention to fathers of children with disabilities
(MacDonald & Hastings, 2010). Fathers of children with disabilities and their children may benefit greatly from intensive father/family interventions that are tailored to their child’s disability.

In sum, promising findings indicate engaged fathers can greatly impact their young children’s social-emotional and cognitive development. Fathers positively impact child development due to their unique play experiences which strengthen young children’s social-emotional skills to home based activities which strengthen young children’s literacy and language development. Findings from the current research base are beginning to be acknowledged by early childhood program directors, staff, and policymakers. This has led to a push for greater father engagement in ECPs and making sure fathers know how to engage in developmentally appropriate activities with their children. The following section will highlight the limited studies on father engagement in ECPs.

**Father Engagement in Early Childhood Programs**

The growing body of research indicating fathers make valuable contributions to children’s cognitive and social development suggests it is necessary to explore the benefits of father engagement in early childhood programs (Lamb & Tamis-LeMonda, 2004; McWayne, Downer, Campos, & Harris, 2013). Meaningful family engagement in children’s early learning supports school readiness and later academic success. Parental engagement is a critical element of high-quality early care and education. Parent engagement has been mandated by Head Start since its inception, built into model programs like the Abecedarian Project, and included in the Developmentally Appropriate Practices outlined by National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC; Snow, 2013). Unfortunately, parent engagement is often synonymous with the mothers’ engagement. With such studies as mentioned before specifically
examining fathers’ impact on young children’s development, studies are needed to understand how to encourage father engagement and what, if any, benefits come from their engagement. Several researchers have examined father engagement in ECPs and will be discussed below.

In their seminal study, Fagan and Iglesias (1999) conducted a quasi-experimental study to examine the effects of father engagement on Head Start children’s school readiness. Researchers introduced a father engagement intervention and conducted pre and post intervention assessments on father engagement at home, children’s academic outcomes, and children’s social behaviors (Fagan & Iglesias, 1999). The engagement intervention included: scheduled father volunteer opportunities in the classroom, weekly ‘Father Day’ programs, father sensitivity training for staff members, father support groups, and father-child recreational activities.

Results from this study indicated a positive correlation between father engagement and change in their children’s math readiness scores and a correlation between low father engagement and increased behavioral difficulties (Fagan & Iglesias, 1999). The intervention group of fathers who were highly involved at school showed the greatest gains at home in terms of interaction, accessibility and support for learning; however, these fathers did not show gains in positive child-rearing behaviors at home (Fagan & Iglesias, 1999). Finally, results did not indicate that child’s gender or father’s residential status had a significant effect on engagement.

Following Fagan and Iglesias’s (1999) study, Fagan (1999) further explored the predictors of father, or father figure, engagement in Head Start classrooms. Using the same intervention from the Fagan and Iglesias (1999) study, Fagan hypothesized the following: fathers would be more engaged in Head Start if they had a son as opposed to a daughter; engagement would be positively associated with father’s unemployment, level of education, and nurturing characteristics; biological fathers would be more involved than non-biological fathers; and father
engagement would vary by the presence of a formal program aimed at increasing engagement. Results indicated fathers with less education were not less engaged than fathers with higher levels of education (Fagan, 1999). As expected, fathers in the intervention group spent more time at Head Start sites than fathers in the comparison group and, as hypothesized, fathers were more engaged with their sons than daughters (Fagan, 1999). Contrary to Fagan’s hypothesis, results indicated unemployed fathers were not more involved in Head Start. Furthermore, neither the biological or residential status of the father or father figure was related to the level of engagement in Head Start (Fagan, 1999).

In 2005, Downer and Mendez used the Family Involvement Questionnaire (FIQ; Fantuzzo, Tighe, & Childs, 2000) to assess the engagement of 85 African American Head Start fathers in childcare activities at home, home-based educational activities, and school-based educational activities. Downer and Mendez (2005) explored the relationship between father engagement components, child and family characteristics, and children’s school readiness. Downer and Mendez (2005) found that high rates of father engagement in the home were positively correlated with children’s emotional regulation; however, the school engagement factor of the FIQ was not significantly associated with emotional regulation, increased peer interaction or better receptive language. Not surprisingly, fathers who lived with their children reported more childcare engagement. Fathers reported engagement in a number of activities inside and outside of the home, such as doing chores together and attending church events together. However, Downer and Mendez (2005) stated that fathers ‘rarely’ reported engagement in direct-school based activities such as volunteering in the classroom or going on field trips.

Based on the studies reviewed on father engagement in ECPs, father engagement has positive influences on children, but those influences seem to be inconsistent. Fagan and Iglesias
(1999) found higher levels of father engagement in Head Start are associated with higher math scores and few behavioral issues in children. Conversely, Downer and Mendez (2005) did not find any associations between engagement in preschool and child outcomes. However, it is critical to highlight that Fagan and Iglesias’ design was quasi-experimental because they piloted a father engagement program at the Head Start sites in which fathers were trained to become more involved with the children. Fathers in the Downer and Mendez (2005) study did not have the opportunity to participate in a father engagement program that may have increased their engagement in preschools. Downer and Mendez (2005) did find that higher levels of engagement in the home were associated with better emotional regulation in children, but they found no correlation between father engagement in school and emotional regulation, peer interaction or receptive language.

Clearly, more research is needed examining father engagement in ECPs to determine if father engagement has benefits to children’s outcomes and development during the preschool years. However, of critical importance is the need to understand various factors that impact fathers’ engagement in their child’s ECP. The following section will emphasize studies that have delved into programmatic and personal factors impacting fathers’ engagement in ECPs.

**Factors Impacting Father Engagement in Early Childhood Programs**

Although there are numerous factors impacting father engagement, this section will focus on program characteristics, family structure, mother’s perceptions, and father’s perceptions of engagement. All of these factors can impact both the father’s engagement with their child and their engagement in their child’s early childhood program (Fagan & Palm, 2004; McBride & Rane, 1997; McBride, Rane, & Bae, 2001).

**Program Characteristics.** Program characteristics can have an impact on father
participation in programs and classrooms. Factors impacting father engagement include the physical atmosphere of the program, program goals, opportunities provided for father engagement, staff characteristics, and staff perceptions.

The physical atmosphere of an ECP is typically child-centered including child-sized furniture, a variety of play and educational materials, walls decorated with children’s art, and singing and movement. The nature of many toys may have a feminine feel (e.g. baby dolls, dress up clothes, books, writing materials), which may not attract men (Fagan & Palm, 2004; Green, 2003; Palm & Fagan, 2008). On the other hand, certain interest areas like blocks and small motor activities (e.g. toy cars and trains), school gyms, and outdoor play areas may be more welcoming and familiar to men (Green, 2003; Palm & Fagan, 2008). Even more, the overall feel of an ECP is a public space, meaning it is shared among other families, children, and professionals (Turbiville et al., 2000) influences father engagement. Turbiville et al. (2000) found this made fathers feel less comfortable; instead, fathers were most interested in participating in family activities.

Program Goals and Engagement Opportunities. Programs that include father engagement in their overall goals are more likely to have father engagement when the desire for father engagement is encouraged throughout every level of the program. Additionally, when ECPs encourage father engagement through a variety of opportunities they are more likely to increase participation. These opportunities include volunteering in their child’s classroom, attending field trips, special events for fathers and their children (i.e. Daddy-Daughter dance), parenting classes or skill development, and taking leadership positions by being on policy boards (Fagan & Palm, 2004). Programs which make specific attempts to encourage fathers by personally inviting them, and including both the mother and father’s name on materials sent
home are likely to have great father engagement (Turbiville et al., 2000).

**Staff Characteristics.** Additionally, characteristics of staff members also influence father engagement. Characteristics like gender of the staff, responsibility of staff to promote father engagement, and attitudes of staff members can all impact father engagement in ECPs (Green, 2003; McAllister et al., 2004). In McAllister, Wilson, and Burton’s (2004) study, staff members reported they were unsure who held the responsibility of encouraging fathers. Some ECPs have a specific staff member responsible for encouraging and promoting father engagement, while some programs assumed it was the responsibility of male staff members or the responsibility of the parent engagement coordinator (McAllister et al., 2004). Staff members also are influenced by their personal experiences with their own fathers and other men in their personal lives (Fagan, 2004; Green, 2003; McAllister et al., 2004). McAllister and colleagues (2004) found some female staff members felt intimidated by male family members during home visits, which led them to avoid encouraging father engagement. This challenge is not surprising but deserves special attention as staff members are working in programs that typically aim to foster and promote strong family and program relationships; including relationships with fathers (Green, 2003; McAllister et al., 2005).

**Staff Perceptions.** Several researchers have explored early childhood staff perceptions about father engagement and findings from these studies have been quite different. In McBride, Rane, and Bae’s (2001) exploratory study designed to implement an intervention with staff focused on increasing father/male engagement found there was no significant difference between staff of the implementation group and the comparison group. Staff from each group rated the importance of father engagement high on the Attitudes Toward Father Involvement scale even though there were differences in actually increasing father/male engagement in the
implementation group (McBride et al., 2001). McBride and colleagues argued that the reason for
no difference in attitudes was based on the “band wagon” phenomenon meaning staff members
were aware of the purpose of the study, thus encouraging father engagement even if this was
different than typical practices. Based on these findings, researchers hypothesize staff may have
positive attitudes about increasing father engagement but may need professional development
and support on how to do so (McBride et al., 2001). On the other hand, in an evaluation of a
Head Start Parent and Child Center, Fagan (1994) found staff members expressed negative
attitudes about paternal participation in their classrooms and programs. Responses from staff
included beliefs that fathers were not interested in their child’s ECP, men did not like to work
with young children, and extra attention needed to be given to fathers when they were in the
classroom (Fagan & Palm, 2007; McWayne et al., 2013; Sandstrom et al., 2015).

Family Structure. Family structure also has been shown to affect fathers’ participation
in ECPs as nonresidential fathers may have difficulty staying involved in the program if program
information is only distributed to mothers (McBride et al., 2001). If mothers do not
communicate to nonresidential fathers about program events it is less likely fathers will be
attending (McBride et al., 2001). Additionally, fatherhood programs in Early Head Start have
been shown to be more successful in their efforts to involve residential fathers in programs
compared with nonresidential fathers (Raikes & Belotti, 2006). On the other hand, survey data
has not shown significant differences between residential and nonresidential father engagement
in Head Start (Fagan et al., 2000; Palm & Fagan, 2008). It has been proposed that an
examination of a father’s residential status and engagement in ECPs may be influenced by
factors like the quality of the mother-father relationship and frequency of father interaction with
his child (Palm & Fagan, 2008; Raikes & Belotti, 2006).
**Mother-father relationship.** The relationship between a child’s parents is one of the most influential factors impacting the father-child relationship and father engagement (Lu et al., 2010). Fathers are more likely to be engaged when they have a positive relationship with the child’s mother; the father or the mother has higher levels of education; and the father is involved in the early years of the child’s life (Downer & Mendez, 2005; Glenn & Whitehead, 2009). Additionally, when the mother perceives the father to be a motivated and competent parent, fathers tend to be more engaged with their children (Lu et al., 2010). This suggests the stronger the mother-father relationship the more likely the father-child relationship will also be strong (Downer & Mendez, 2005; Glenn & Whitehead, 2009; Lu et al., 2010).

**Mothers’ Perceptions.** Mothers play a pivotal role in facilitating the father-child relationship in the home environment and their attitudes may also directly and indirectly impact fathers’ engagement in ECPs. Mothers may ask for help and encourage fathers to be engaged with their children or they may criticize fathers and exclude them from parenting or being involved in the ECP (Fagan & Palm, 2004; Green, 2003; Roggman et al., 2002). Few research studies have actually examined mothers’ roles in encouraging father participation in ECPs with the exception of one study (Fagan, 2007). In a study of 59 Head Start families living in urban, suburban, and rural settings, researchers explored mothers’ attitudes toward father and father-figure participation in Head Start and at home (Fagan, Newash, & Schloesser, 2000). The sample of families included 54 percent African American, 15 percent Latino, and 31 percent White mothers (Fagan et al., 2000). Mothers reported fathers were very engaged with their children at home, however their participation in their child’s HS program was limited. Although fathers’ engagement was limited in Head Start programs it did not seem to be an issue with the mothers interviewed in this study (Fagan et al., 2000). Researchers argued father engagement in
Head Start programs might increase if mothers encouraged fathers’ participation in programs but they caution more research is needed (Fagan et al., 2000).

**Fathers’ Perceptions.** Fathers’ perceptions about their engagement in ECPs, and in the development of their young child, are important for programs to understand and take into consideration as they encourage father participation. For researchers, understanding fathers’ perceptions is valuable because so few studies have explored this phenomenon. Perceptions can refer to fathers’ interest in being involved in their child’s development, the ECP their child attends, preferences for different types of participation, needs for various types of services, and beliefs about their responsibilities within the ECP (Fagan, 2008; Green, 2003; Palm & Fagan, 2004). This phenomenon was explored in the current study, as fathers were interviewed to explore their perceptions on a variety of activities related to engagement. Currently there is a dearth of studies that specifically collect data from fathers and even fewer that utilize qualitative methodology to gain a deeper understanding of fathers’ perceptions. This section will feature the few qualitative studies that have been conducted on fathers’ perceptions of engagement in ECPs and on the development of their young child.

In 2004, Fagan and Palm conducted in-depth qualitative study with 33 fathers with children in various ECPs to discover their perceptions towards participation in programs. Findings revealed Head Start fathers’ participation differed in quantity and quality from fathers in other types of ECPs (Fagan & Palm, 2004). Head Start fathers who became actively engaged in the program appeared to value their participation for its generative contribution to their child and the larger community (Fagan & Palm, 2004). This perception was reflected in the fathers’ ideas about changing negative perceptions of fathers in the community, and they also spoke to their commitment to support and form bonds with other children in the program who seemed to
need such relationships (Fagan & Palm, 2004). In this study, there was no instance in other ECPs where fathers became engaged with other people’s children (Fagan & Palm, 2004).

In 2006, Summers, Boller, Schiffman, and Raikes conducted a qualitative study aimed to get a better understanding of how low-income fathers of young children think about their role as fathers. Researchers conducted a qualitative inquiry into the beliefs of fathers of 24-month-old children about what “good fatherhood” meant to them (Summers, Boller, Schiffman, & Raikes, 2006). Data collection for this study included 575 open-ended interviews across 14 Early Head Start sites that were then coded to explore the various roles fathers identified as important to them and their children (Summers et al., 2006). Fathers identified four broad types of parenting roles. First, fathers stressed the importance of providing a stable environment including “being there” emotionally and physically. Second, participants reported teaching was important and this role included giving their child guidance and exposing their child to the world. Third, fathers suggested physical interaction was important via playing with their child and caregiving activities. Finally, fathers noted emotional support was important by providing love to their child and building their child’s self-esteem.

In 2010, Bauman and Wasserman conducted a qualitative evaluation on the effects of a project designed to empower fathers to take a more active role in their child’s academic literacy development. Data collection for this study included interviewing five fathers from Early Head Start and Head Start, facilitator’s journal, and field notes. Through this evaluation, findings included the fathers became increasingly committed to the literacy development of their children; while learning about a variety of literacy activities that they could engage in with their children. In addition, fathers gained confidence in their roles as agents of change in their children’s lives (Bauman & Wasserman, 2010).
Jethwani, Mincy, and Klempin (2014) conducted a qualitative study to explore nonresident fathers’ perceptions of their role in their children’s education and the ways in which they are actively engaged in their children’s educational lives. Findings revealed that nonresident fathers with diverse racial, educational, and occupational backgrounds experienced regret over not meeting their own educational goals and they attributed their inability to consistently support their children financially to their educational failures (Jethwani, Mincy, & Klempin, 2014). Participants from this study reported they hoped to prevent their children from experiencing the same disappointments and financial hardships that they experienced and emphasized the importance of education to their children (Jethwani et al., 2014). Fathers reported being present in their children’s educational lives as advisors, teachers, and investors. As advisors, fathers encouraged their children to stay in school and to not make mistakes that might derail them from their educational goals (Jethwani et al., 2014). As teachers, fathers reported they provided cognitive support to their children and their goals to invest in their children’s education by saving money for their educational future (Jethwani et al., 2014).

Also in 2014, Roberts et al. conducted a qualitative study to explore residential and nonresidential fathers’ perspectives about factors facilitating or inhibiting their engagement with their child. Through semi-structured interviews, researchers found that both groups of fathers were committed to maintaining a relationship with their child, helped children emotionally and financially, acted like a role model, and shared parenting responsibilities with their child’s mother (Roberts et al., 2014). Factors that facilitated engagement for both groups included guidance given to men about fathering, having a positive relationship with the child’s mother, and having support from their family and religious institutions (Roberts et al., 2014). Not surprising, factors inhibiting engagement were much more prevalent among nonresidential
fathers (Roberts et al., 2014). Inhibiting factors included the mothers obstructing the father-child relationship, mothers’ negative views or remarks about fathers’ ability to parent, father-child visitation that was contingent upon child support, and fathers’ financial difficulties (Roberts et al., 2014).

In 2015, the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation in the Administration for Children and Families, US Department of Health and Human Services funded a study to understand how home visiting programs serving at-risk families engaged fathers, experiences fathers had in those programs, and what the perceived benefits were of fathers’ participation. Findings directly relating to fathers’ perceptions included fathers’ initial motivations for participation and included wanting to (1) be a better father; (2) learn parenting skills and their children’s developmental needs; and (3) break the intergenerational cycle of absent fathers because they grew up without involved fathers (Sandstrom et al., 2015). Fathers reported gaining important knowledge about child development, basic caregiving, and effective strategies, specifically discipline techniques (Sandstrom et al., 2015). Fathers reported learning how to better manage their stress and anger and to communicate more effectively with their partners and children (Sandstrom et al., 2015).

Findings from these qualitative studies suggest fathers view their engagement as making contributions to the larger community and being father-figures to other Head Start children (Fagan & Palm, 2004); providing physical, cognitive, and emotional support to their children (Bauman & Wasserman, 2010; Jethwani et al., 2014; Summers et al., 2006); and being agents of change for their children (Bauman & Wasserman, 2010). Fathers also eluded to challenges and barriers to their engagement such as mother’s gatekeeping, financial difficulties, and residential status (Roberts et al., 2014). The current study adds to the body of qualitative research on father
engagement as similarities and differences are noted on fathers’ perceptions of engagement and challenges and barriers they face to engagement.

**Head Start’s Focus on Family Engagement**

Since its inception in 1965, Head Start has partnered with families and encouraged them to be their child’s first teacher and advocate (Office of Head Start, 2013). Head Start is dedicated to helping fathers, mothers, and other family members become lifelong educators and supporters for their children (Office of Head Start, 2013). Head Start has an inherent belief that soliciting advice from parents, respecting their culture, and involving them in all aspects of service provision could enhance the quality of care provided to their children. This section will discuss efforts taken by the Office of Head Start (OHS) to promote family and father engagement in Head Start programs.

**Father Engagement in Head Start.** Head Start policy recognizes fathers can help programs become more effective in achieving positive outcomes for children. In 2013, the OHS released the *Head Start Father Engagement Birth to Five Programming Guide* to assist programs increase father participation. This programing guide aligns with OHS’s parent engagement framework; the Parent, Family, and Community Engagement (PFCE) Framework. This programming guide states, “it is intended to support work with mothers as well as fathers because children benefit from positive, strong, and cooperative relationships between their caregivers” (Head Start Father Engagement, 2013, p.1). The Head Start policy believes father engagement should not be a stand-alone initiative but rather a vital and integrated aspect of parent, family, and community work in Head Start programs (Head Start Father Engagement, 2013). This belief is consistent with Bronfrenbrenner’s ecological theory that posits when both the mother and father, school, and community work together child and family outcomes can be
achieved (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The programming guide spotlights how father engagement can have positive effects for children, families, and communities. Furthermore, the programming guide strongly argues that having a uniform picture of how fathers should be interact with children or play their roles in families does not reflect the diversity of families served by Head Start. OHS reminds programs of the cultural differences in father-child relationships, as well as individual differences that must be respected and valued in order for children, families, and communities to benefit.

**Head Start Family Voices Pilot Study.** The Head Start Family Voices (HSFV) Pilot Study was launched in 2014 to develop instruments to help the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) better understand family engagement in Head Start and Early Head Start (Aikens, Bandel, Akers, & Lyskawa, 2014). The central goal of the pilot study was to identify interview questions that can be used to provide rich and varied information on family engagement (Aikens et al., 2014). With the exception of the 1997 cohort of the Head Start Family and Child Experiences Survey (FACES 1997), ACF has not collected in-depth qualitative data on the experiences of families participating in Head Start and Early Head Start programs or information from the staff that provide family support services to them (Aikens et al., 2014). The qualitative measures developed by the HSFV study will complement future quantitative studies, descriptive studies, or experimental studies (Aikens et al., 2014). The HSFV is intended to help fill a gap in the knowledge base on family engagement efforts and service provision experiences in Head Start and Early Head Start by providing in-depth qualitative information.

Although the HSFV does include specific questions for fathers in the prenatal and Early Head Start interview questions it does not specifically target fathers in the Head Start center-based portion of the interview. At this time, no studies were found that have used and reported
findings of the HSFV qualitative interview measures.

However, what is needed is more qualitative information directly from fathers regarding their perceptions of their experiences in Head Start. One pitfall of the HSFV is that the Head Start center-based portion may overlook fathers and gather data solely from mothers, as the instructions do not indicate the importance of including fathers. As mentioned above, few qualitative studies have collected in-depth insight from fathers. This type of qualitative data could provide valuable insight into how Head Start programs can attract fathers, understand the barriers and challenges they face to their engagement, and to understand their perceptions on their overall engagement with their young children.

**Theoretical Framework**

Exploration of father engagement requires the recognition that families are complex systems comprised of overlapping relationships, which are affected by larger contextual factors (Adamsons, O’Brien, & Pasley, 2007). Accordingly, this study is grounded in Bronfenbrenner’s ecological framework (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Ecological theory focuses on how individuals interact with their environment and the impact these interactions have on the individual’s development. Bronfenbrenner’s ecological framework consists of two propositions that are each pertinent to this study. First, human development occurs through processes of increasingly complex reciprocal interactions with people, objects, and symbols; these are also known as proximal processes (Bronfenbrenner, 1995). For proximal processes to be effective, they must occur on a regular basis over extended periods of time (Bronfenbrenner, 1995). In the context of this study, proximal processes refer to father-child interactions and activities.

The second proposition of the ecological framework suggests proximal processes vary by the environment in which the process takes place (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Bronfenbrenner
describes this environment as, “a nested arrangement of concentric structures, each contained within the next. These structures are referred to as the micro-, meso- exo-, and macrosystems (1979, p. 22).” The microsystem is the innermost level that the child is directly in contact with. The microsystem includes the child’s family and home and has the earliest influence on a child’s development. This study focused on the interactions of the child’s father within this layer and the mesosystem. The mesosystem includes the child’s classroom, and Head Start program, and teacher. This layer also includes the linkages and processes occurring between two or more settings containing the developing person (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). This is illustrated as the interaction among the child, family, and their Head Start programs. The third component of the ecological environment is the exo-system. “An exosystem refers to one or more settings that do not involve the developing person as an active participant, but in which events occur that affect, or are affected by, what happens in the setting containing the developing person” (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 25). For children in Head Start, an example of a child’s exosystem would be the child’s neighborhood; this can be significantly impacted by characteristics of the neighborhood and community activities in which fathers may participate in with their children. Furthermore, the exosystem often influences a child and family’s behavior.

The final element of the ecological environment is the macrosystem. “A macrosystem refers to the overarching institutional patterns of the culture or subculture, such as the economic, social, educational, legal, and political systems, of which micro-, meso-, and exo-systems are the concrete manifestations” (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, p. 515). For Head Start families, the macrosystem is used to describe how national Head Start policies affect family engagement in diverse communities and what impact they have on local Head Start centers and the children and families they serve.
Numerous researchers exploring family engagement in Head Start have agreed with this theory’s assertions and have identified ecological systems theory as a valuable framework for understanding family engagement in Head Start (Brinson, 2011; Fagan & Iglesias, 1999). Finally, researchers examined father involvement among stepfathers and biological fathers using an ecological perspective to determine factors associated with involvement between the two groups (Adamsons, O’Brien, & Pasley, 2007). Findings suggested marital satisfaction among stepfathers, but not biological fathers, was positively related to the amount of involvement in childrearing activities (Adamsons, O’Brien, & Pasley, 2007). Additionally, for biological fathers, and increase in maternal work hours were associated with lower quality father engagement (Adamsons, O’Brien, & Pasley, 2007).

Examining father engagement through the lens of the ecological framework provides researchers an opportunity to explore the father-child relationship within a wide range of contextual environments. This study primarily explored father-child interactions within the micro-, meso-, and excosystems as participants reported on their engagement at home, in the community, and in Head Start programs. Finally, participants in this study revealed how processes, like their relationship with the child’s mother, impact their engagement with their children.

**Conclusion**

Although the body of research on father engagement in the early childhood years is small, studies indicate the positive impact of father engagement on young children’s developmental stages. We now know fathers make unique contributions to infants’ attachment development (Bronte-Tinkew et al., 2008); unique contributions to toddlers’ language and vocabulary development (Pancsofar & Vernon-Feagans, 2006, 2008); unique contributions in
their play with their children (McWayne et al., 2013); and make unique contributions to preschoolers’ early literacy development by engaging in home based literacy activities (Baker, 2014; Baker et al., 2015).

There is little information regarding fathers’ perceptions of their engagement with their young child and their child’s Head Start program and the factors influencing that engagement (Fagan, Day, Lamb, & Cabrera, 2014; Fagan & Kaufman, 2015a). Qualitative data from fathers will be most useful to Head Start practitioners and researchers. When Head Start practitioners have a clear and in-depth understanding of how fathers perceive their role as change agents for their young children they can determine how to tailor their program to increase father engagement. Additionally, Head Start practitioners can help fathers engage in developmentally appropriate activities with their young children. Furthermore, researchers will benefit from this study as it can be used as a beginning to larger quantitative and qualitative studies exploring father’ perceptions of their engagement with their young children and participation in Head Start programs.

**Research Questions**

The overall aim of the present study is to explore fathers’ engagement with their young children and their experiences in Head Start programs. The specific research questions to be addressed are:

1. How do fathers describe their engagement in their young child’s development?

2. What are fathers’ perceived experiences related to engagement in their children’s Head Start programs?

3. What are fathers’ perceived barriers and challenges preventing their engagement?
CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to explore fathers’ experiences and perceptions of their engagement in the lives of their young children and their engagement in Head Start programs. Using a qualitative research design this study gains valuable insight into the participants’ perceptions of their engagement and challenges they face. This chapter provides an overview of the research design, study participants, interviews, and data analysis. Participant recruitment and demographics are discussed, as well as procedures for conducting the interviews.

Research Design

The research questions lent themselves to the use of qualitative research methods. Qualitative research allows the researcher to make inferences based on fathers’ experiences and socially constructed meanings of their engagement with young children and in Head Start programs (Creswell, 2014). In this study, the lived experiences of fathers who have young children enrolled in Head Start programs were explored. This study explored participants’ responses to “how” and “what” questions and responses to situations that occur in the real-life context of their engagement with their child (Arksey & Knight, 2009). This exploratory methodology allowed the researcher to collect data while responding to the flexibility and spontaneity of a semi-structured interview (Arksey & Knight; 2009; Burkard, Knox, & Hill, 2012). This study focused on gaining insights into participants’ perceptions to provide a foundation for future studies into father engagement in the early childhood years.
Role of the Researcher

Prior to beginning the doctoral program in Early Childhood, Special Education, and Literacy, I was a pre-kindergarten teacher for seven years in the North Carolina public school system. I had many experiences working with young children and their families from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds, as well as with children with disabilities. As a Pre-K teacher, I noticed when family events were held there were an overwhelming number of mothers compared to fathers. I noticed fathers were often present on “family fun nights,” open house, school plays and other PTA events but were rarely present during parent-teacher conferences or Individualized Education Plan (IEP) meetings for children with disabilities. During this time I made special effort to specifically include fathers as special guests in the classroom and to invite them personally to meetings regarding their child’s progress (e.g. conferences, IEP meetings). At the time, low father participation was a concern.

During my graduate program, I noticed an interesting trend when researching family engagement. The overwhelming majority of studies that referenced “family engagement” actually discussed mothers’ participation. Thus, further research concerning father engagement in the early childhood years was found to make unique contributions to children’s development distinct from mothers’ engagement. Father engagement has been the focus of my graduate studies.

Furthermore, I was interested in father engagement based on my personal childhood and experiences with my own father. As a child, I had a very engaged father as we did many activities together. For example, I have fond memories of being four-years-old and participating in outdoor programs designed for fathers and daughters. Through these programs my father taught me how to canoe, use a compass, hike in the mountains, identify edible things in nature,
and other outdoor activities. During my middle childhood years, my father was active in coaching or attending recreational softball and basketball games and many weekends and weeknights included tossing the ball to each other or shooting hoops. When I entered high school and played on the school’s softball and basketball team my father was always in the stands cheering the team on. To this day, my father is the first person I call when I need advice, have an emergency, or have exciting news to share.

Although I have a great relationship with my father and he was very engaged in my childhood I know this is not the case for all children. As a Title 1 pre-k teacher I saw first hand how some children have absent fathers or those who are not as engaged with their children. Through my experience as a classroom teacher I saw how much some children valued their limited time with their fathers. For example, one boy was so happy when he was able to spend a weekend with his father. He would draw pictures of their time together the following week. On the other hand, I saw the behavior changes in one child when his father moved out halfway through the school year. Being a classroom teacher provided an inside look at how much fathers impact their children’s lives and this experience helped build a positive relationship the fathers interviewed in this study. At the beginning of the interview I briefly shared my experiences being a classroom teacher with participants to establish rapport with them.

Additionally, I served as a graduate research assistant on a large state funded program evaluation where the primary data collection methods were to attend and observe meetings, and conduct interviews and focus groups. I gained valuable experiences in conducting interviews, transcribing interviews, and coding transcripts for codes and themes. These experiences assisted me in the implementation of this study.
Participants

Recruitment. Participants for this study were fathers with children enrolled in Head Start services. The researcher partnered with two Head Start programs located in two Southeastern states. One program was located in a large metropolitan city and the other in a rural community. After receiving IRB approval, the researcher met with each program’s Family Service Worker to discuss recruitment. The use of a recruitment flyer (Appendix A) and a demographic questionnaire (Appendix B) facilitated recruitment. The use of this demographic questionnaire assisted with the maximum variation sampling strategy used. A maximum variation sampling strategy was initially used to capture the demographic heterogeneity of the sample as well as the range and variety of experiences of fathers (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). This is often referred to as informed or purposive sampling (Saldaña, 2016; Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). This sampling strategy was used because the researcher wanted to understand how fathers from diverse backgrounds and experiences view their engagement with their children and their children’s Head Start program. Because the researcher conducted the interviews, recruitment was limited to fathers who spoke fluent English.

The first round of recruitment took place at the beginning of the school year in September 2016. Distribution of the flyers and questionnaires took place through a combination of sending them home in “take home folders,” shared during home visits conducted by the Family Service Workers, and displayed at the entrance of the building. Eighty flyers and demographic questionnaires were distributed across two Head Start programs. Fathers who were interested returned demographic questionnaires via the “take home folder,” which were then collected by the Family Service Workers. After four weeks, the Family Service Workers gave the returned demographic questionnaires to the researcher. The first round of recruitment yielded fifteen
interested fathers. The Family Service Workers indicated thirteen of the interested fathers received the flyer through a home visit. The researcher then called the participants to discuss making interview arrangements. During this process seven interested fathers withdrew or did not respond to the researcher’s voicemails or emails. Thus, eight participants were recruited during the first round of recruitment, four from each state. Because the return rate of questionnaires was low a second round of recruitment was necessary.

The second round of recruitment occurred through snowball sampling. Snowball sampling was particularly beneficial because it provided an opportunity to access low-income fathers, a population that has been reported as a difficult one to recruit (Mitchell et al., 2007; Stahlschmidt, Threlfall, Seay, Lewis, & Kohl, 2013). The researcher contacted the previous eight participants and asked for their assistance in recruiting fathers. The researcher provided the recruitment flyer to the eight participants to assist with recruitment. Through snowball sampling, six additional fathers expressed interest. After contacting the possible participants, four agreed to be interviewed. This resulted in a total of twelve participants for this study.

Throughout the recruitment phases the use of text messaging was the most successful means of communication with participants during recruitment and scheduling of interviews. Participants suggested they preferred text messaging because it eliminated the hassle of “playing phone tag.” It was also noted in the field notes that texting made recruitment more efficient and allowed participants to screen the message before responding and deciding if they wanted to proceed with study participation. Several participants shared they do not answer the phone for numbers they do not recognize and may not listen to the voicemail. Others indicated they may over look or forget to respond to an email.

**Participant Demographics.** Participants were diverse in terms of ethnicity, age,
education, residence, marital status, family structure, and their children’s’ characteristics.

To begin the interview and to establish a comfortable atmosphere with the researcher the participants were asked to describe their child. For participants who had more than one child, they were asked to describe the “focus child,” or the child who attends the Head Start program. In the following section each participant will be introduced and their description of their child will be provided. Participants varied in the amount of detail they provided and their responses to this question set the stage for follow up questions and to gauge how comfortable the participant was in sharing information with the researcher.

Jamal is a 32-year-old African American living in Northern Virginia with his 4-year-old son and the child’s mother. He is not married to the child’s mother and also has a 1-year-old daughter who does not live with him. He completed his GED and is currently unemployed. A few days prior to our interview, a serious news story was released regarding a few Head Start programs in Maryland. During the interview he made it clear this news deeply affected him and his views on public child care and education. He described how he withdrew his child from his Head Start program the day after the Maryland news release because he feared the same thing could happen at his son’s Head Start program. Jamal shared strong opinions regarding his distrust in public education systems and this was typically the overall tone of the interview. However, when Jamal answered questions about activities he does with his child his tone changed and he expressed pride in his son and their relationship. Jamal described his son as “very friendly, outgoing, likable, with a lot of friends.” Jamal’s son enjoys activities like playing video games, learning about animals, swimming, riding his bike, and coloring. Jamal also described how he is fostering his son’s autonomy by letting him pick out food, letting him decide which outfit he will wear on the weekends, and giving him more privacy during bath time.
Finally, Jamal described how he must protect his son by sharing, “He’s a follower not a leader, that’s why I keep an extra eye on him.”

Rodney is a White 44-year-old single father living in Eastern North Carolina. He has sole custody of his 4-year-old daughter and the child’s mother left when the baby was born. Rodney and his daughter moved to North Carolina shortly after the child was born and they currently live with the participant’s parents. Rodney has a bachelor’s degree and is currently unemployed. His daughter was born with significant medical issues and disabilities and has been a patient at UNC Children’s Hospital undergoing a variety of surgeries. Rodney described the medical conditions his daughter was born with as, “She was born premature and she had a heart condition. She had open-heart surgery when she was two months old. Spinal cord issues, hearing problems, vision problems, she is unable to eat on her own and is g-tube fed.” He also shared his daughter is currently in a wheel chair and beginning to use her walker and is learning to sit up independently. As noted in the field notes, Rodney was soft spoken and had a drawl with long pauses in the middle of his responses. When he described his daughter he displayed deep job and love and often stated, “she’s my joy.”

Tyrone is a 36-year-old African American father of a 4-year-old daughter. Currently living in Northern Virginia with his wife and daughter, he has a postgraduate degree and currently works part time. Tyrone was reserved during the interview and some questions were asked, and rephrased, but did not elicit a response. According to field notes from this interview it seemed as if Tyrone gave responses he thought I “wanted to hear.” He was very cautious and vague in his responses but very proud of his daughter. Tyrone described his daughter as being a “wonderful child with a friendly personality who is always helping her friends.” He also described her as “a little temperamental and a little emotional” and also a problem solver who
enjoys figuring things out.

John is a White 33-year-old father of a 4-year-old daughter. He has joint custody of his daughter and they live in Eastern North Carolina. John recently completed his bachelor’s degree and works in the food service industry. He was very eager to answer questions but seemed preoccupied with his recent separation from the child’s mother as many of his responses centered on his complicated relationship with the child’s mother. As with other participants, John enjoyed sharing about his daughter stating, “She’s my world. She’s awesome. She’s a wild woman and is all over the place.” He was especially happy to share that he and his daughter have a shared interest in Star Wars, Ninja Turtles, and Ghostbusters.

Maurice is an African American 43-year-old father of a 5-year-old daughter and a 7-year-old son. He lives with his family in Virginia and he currently works in retail. Maurice was reserved during the interview and seemed to be inconvenienced by speaking to me. I offered to reschedule the interview but he declined and remained reserved throughout the interview. Although he was reserved he was well spoken and had a lot to share. Maurice described his daughter as reserved and quiet and typically entertains herself by playing with her dolls, looking at her books, and coloring. He described how his daughter and son are very different.

Hector is a Latino 40-year-old father of a 4-year-old boy and a 6-year-old boy. He is married and lives in Virginia with his family and works at a shop he owns. Hector moved from Mexico several years ago and he and his children speak English while his wife speaks Spanish. His children are bilingual. Hector was friendly and soft-spoken. He described his 4-year-old son as becoming more independent but Hector is happy his son still “needs” him and his wife. He shared, “He’s very competent about doing things on his own but he needs us a lot and I’m super happy about that.” Hector also described how his role of being a father changes as his children
become more independent. He added, “I have not mastered changing my expectations of what they can do and my expectations of what they need from me and what they want from me.”

Jacob is a white 34-year-old father of three children, two biological and one step-daughter, living with his wife and family in Eastern North Carolina. Jacob was also soft spoken and reserved at the beginning of the interview but quickly became comfortable with sharing about his daughter and family. Jacob has a high school diploma and works and lives on his family’s farm. He is a self-described “good ole’ southern boy.” Jacob is deeply passionate about his work on his family’s farm. The focus child for Jacob was his 3-year-old daughter who was recently diagnosed with a rare disorder. He shared, “She has Kleefstra Syndrome so she has delays and learning disabilities. She’s beginning to talk and is still in diapers. She also gets really bad rage.” Jacob was very candid with his experiences navigating life with a child with disabilities.

Terrell is an African American 32-year-old uncle of a 4-year-old boy in a Head Start program in Northern Virginia. He considers himself the father figure of his nephew and spoke very passionately about his role during our conversation. Terrell is single and does not have any children of his own. He is currently in school working on his associates degree and has aspirations of opening his own barber shop. Terrell elaborated on why he is being a father figure for his nephew by saying, “My sister and our mom raise [child] and I am doin’ my best to be a male role model for him. Our father wasn’t in the picture when men and [sister] was growin’ up and I won’t let that happen for [child].”

David is a White 28-year-old married man of three young children; twin 3-year-old boys and a five-month-old boy. His twin boys were the focus children for his interview. His family lives in Eastern North Carolina and David drives a truck for a living and is away from his family
for periods of time. David also seemed reserved and unsure of speaking to me at the beginning of our interview but once he started talking about his children he appeared to be relaxed. He described his twin boys as, “wild and crazy and also love Thomas the Train and helping wash the truck and ride the lawn mower.”

Andre is an African American 28-year-old and has two young daughters, a 5 and 3-year-old. During the interview Andre talked about both daughters since they both attend Head Start. He recently moved to North Carolina from Ohio and his daughters currently live in Ohio with their mother. Andre has a high school diploma and recently moved to North Carolina for a job and lives with his father. Andre was open to sharing his experience as a father living away from his daughters but also made it clear he was participating in the interview to get the gift card so he could use it for groceries until he got his first paycheck. He described his oldest daughter as, “She looks just like me but she acts like her mother. She’s the more sophisticated diva one. She’s smart and quiet.” He then described his younger daughter as, “More active and athletic and always bouncing around. She’s more rough.”

Brandon is a White 29-year-old father of a 5-year-old boy. Currently serving in the military and stationed in North Carolina, he is separated from his wife and son who live in Colorado. Brandon moved to North Carolina when his son was five months old and is eagerly waiting for his wife and son to relocate to North Carolina. Brandon was eager to share his experiences being in the military and being a “long distance father.” He described his son as having “an engineer kind of mind with a thirst for knowledge and artistic abilities.”

Darryl is a 28-year-old African American father of a 4-year-old daughter. He lives in North Carolina with his daughter and her mother. He has a high school diploma and described how he makes his living by doing “odd jobs” and trying to get in the music business. Similar to Jamal,
Darryl described his distrust in the public school system and this tone was present throughout the interview. Darryl seemed defensive as he answered questions and often made statements that compared him to other fathers by saying “I don’t know if others do this…” Although he was reassured several times that there were no wrong or right answers, he does with his daughter he seemed to think I was “looking for a correct answer.” At the end of our interview Darryl was very interested in learning more about the research on father engagement and expressed a deep desire in learning more about how his relationship with his daughter impacts her development. When he described this interest he seemed to “loosen up” and let his guard down with me.

Darryl described his daughter as, “My daughter is learning her own self right now. She’s in the stage of Barbie Dolls and is really into dolls. She’s into talkin’ to herself and making up friends and voices for her dolls. Really learnin’ herself and figuring out “what’s this”…I don’t know how much more deeper I can get than that. That’s what she likes most. She definitely enjoys playing outside and running around the house. She’s really into writing right now and tryin’ to read.”

Table 1 illustrates the demographics of participants. All participants were biological fathers except for Terrell who was the uncle of a child and acting as a father figure. Participants 10 and 11 were non-residential fathers, meaning they currently do not live with their children. Participants 1 and 12 were not married but live with the child and mother.
Participants also provided demographic information on their children. For participants who had more than one child they were asked to focus on their child enrolled in Head Start. Participants 9 and 10 had two children enrolled in Head Start thus had two focus children. David had a set of three-year-old male twins and Andre had a three and five-year-old daughter. Terrell, the uncle of a child, did not have any children. Table 2 represents children’s demographics.

### Participant Demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Relationship Status</th>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Location (Urban/Rural)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>AA</td>
<td>Cohabitating</td>
<td>GED</td>
<td>U</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>BS</td>
<td>R</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>AA</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>GED</td>
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<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>BS</td>
<td>R</td>
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<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>AA</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>BS</td>
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<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>L</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Associates</td>
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<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>HS</td>
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<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>AA</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>Associates</td>
<td>U</td>
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<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>HS</td>
<td>R</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>AA</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>HS</td>
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<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>BS</td>
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<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>AA</td>
<td>Cohabitating</td>
<td>HS</td>
<td>R</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2

*Children’s Demographics*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th># of Children</th>
<th>Age of Focus Child</th>
<th>Focus Child’s Gender</th>
<th>Child with Disability</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>M</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>x</td>
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<tr>
<td>3</td>
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<td>4</td>
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<td>4</td>
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<td>6</td>
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<td>4</td>
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<td>3</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>3 &amp; 5</td>
<td>F</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>M</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>F</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Benefits/risks to participants.** Participants received a $20 gift card for participating in the interview. Participants were reminded of how important their role is as a father and the valuable contributions they make to their child’s development. The majority of participants stated they benefited from the interview by having their voice heard and their experiences and perspectives acknowledged. Fathers were not distressed by the interview process and questions and some participants shared they gained a sense of purpose from being heard and having their thoughts recorded.

There was a possibility of risk to subjects if their identities were discovered or revealed. To ensure these risks were minimized, participants were assigned a number to ensure confidentiality. Additionally, informed consent was obtained before each interview began. The participants were reminded of the purpose of the interview and asked permission to use an audio recorder. Participants also were reminded that participation was voluntary and the interview
could end at any time. Confidentiality was maintained in this study by keeping all data and identities in a secure file in DeDoose (a password protected electronic qualitative and mixed methods data organizer). Using electronic software ensured data was stored, organized, and managed in a protected location.

**Instrumentation**

For this study, the researcher created a semi-structured interview protocol based on the current literature base and Bronfenbrenner’s ecological framework described in the previous chapter. Prior to the study, the interview protocol was piloted with three fathers of children in Head Start to refine the interview questions. Initial interview questions were revised based on the pilot study. Table 3 presents the final research questions and corresponding interview questions. Saldaña (2016) suggests researchers constantly revisit the central questions of the study to establish a base of reference for the exploratory interview questions. The study’s research questions provided scaffolding for the investigation and were the cornerstone for later data analysis.

Table 3

*Research Questions and Corresponding Interview Questions*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Question</th>
<th>Corresponding Interview Questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. How do fathers describe their engagement in their young child’s development?</td>
<td>• Tell me about your child. What is his/her personality like? What do they enjoy doing?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Tell me about a typical weekday for your family.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Tell me about a typical weekend for your family.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Tell me about your favorite activities you do with your child.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
2. What are fathers’ perceived experiences related to engagement in their children’s Head Start programs?

- Tell me about something you’ve done at your child’s school.
- Have you heard of any opportunities to participate in your child’s Head Start program other than visiting their classroom? If yes, have you participated in any of these opportunities?
- What are some ways you think Head Start programs could improve to make it easier for dads to participate in programs or services?

3. What are fathers’ perceived barriers and challenges preventing their engagement?

- What are some challenges that prevent you from doing the activities you and your child do together at home?
- What are some challenges that prevent you from doing community activities with your child?
- What are some challenges you face to being able to participate in your child’s Head Start program?

Procedures

Interviews were conducted on weekends between October 2016 and December 2016 at public locations such as libraries or fast food locations. Each Head Start program offered interview space at their centers but due to the participants’ work schedules and availability all of the interviews occurred during weekends.

Interview logistics. At the beginning of the interview the researcher thanked the father for agreeing to participate and reminded them of their voluntary consent in participation. The researcher also reminded the father of the $20 gift card that was given to them at the end of the interview. The researcher informed the father that the interview would last 45 minutes to an
hour. Next, the researcher asked the father if an audio recorder could be used in order to ensure all information was captured rather than the researcher taking notes the entire interview. All participants agreed to the use of an audio recorder. The researcher then explained the overarching themes of the interview: engagement with their child at home and in the community, engagement in their child’s Head Start program, and perceived barriers and challenges preventing their engagement. Probes were used throughout the interviews to gain more information or to clarify information.

**Field Notes.** Two types of field notes were recorded for each interview. First, the notes the researcher recorded during the interview contained information specific to things the father said during the interview that the researcher wanted to discuss in further detail or noteworthy comments made. The second type of field notes were written in a field notes journal immediately after each interview to capture the emotional climate of the interviews. The researcher wrote descriptive notes on the setting, body language, and the overall feel of the interview. After each interview, the corresponding field notes were typed and uploaded to DeDoose and stored in a secure location.

**Interview Transcriptions.** Interviews were transcribed by the researcher, which allowed the researcher to become intimately familiar with the data (Ezzy, 2002). Once the transcripts were completed the audio recordings were used to ensure accuracy of the transcripts. Interview transcriptions were also stored in a secure location.

**Data Analysis**

Transcripts, field notes, and analytic memos served as the primary data sources. All interviews were audio-taped and transcribed verbatim, and field notes were recorded to capture the tone and nature of the interviews. To maintain participant confidentiality transcripts and
field notes were blinded by assigning each participant a number, which was used throughout data analysis process. The interview data was analyzed by coding data using a constant comparative method where categories and subcategories of father engagement were constantly revised and recoded as interview transcripts, observational field notes, and analytic memos were analyzed.

A constant comparative process of reading, coding, analyzing, organizing, and reviewing the data was used to group the data into categories and subcategories, with specific examples included for each (Glaser & Strauss, 1999). This helped the researcher understand participants’ perceptions of engagement. An inductive approach that incorporated descriptive and pattern coding was used for analysis (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014). First, the researcher read each transcript several times and performed descriptive coding. Once the data was saturated with initial codes, they were then clustered into categories. The initial codes were examined for duplication, refined for clarity, and condensed into emerging themes. Appendix C provides the initial codebook and definitions. The researcher then trained a research assistant (RA) with no affiliation to the study. The researcher provided an overview of the scope of the study and discussed the initial codebook with the RA. Once the RA had a clear understanding of the initial codes and definitions the RA then coded two blinded transcripts. The researcher and RA met to discuss the RA’s experience coding, the initial codebook, emerging ideas, and any new insights into the data. During this phase, the researcher kept analytic memos to document the clarity of codes and definitions and relationships between codes and emerging themes. Using the initial codebook and the analytic memos the researcher revised the codebook (Appendix D). The revised codebook was shared with a member of the dissertation committee and peer debriefing occurred to allow the researcher to articulate her internal thinking process and to clarify emergent ideas and insights about the data.
To strengthen reliability of the data analysis, the researcher and RA coded an additional five transcripts. The researcher and RA met to discuss the coding process and the number of agreements and disagreements were calculated using the five transcripts to reach inter-rater reliability using the formula of (number of agreements/ number of agreements + number of disagreements) x 100. Initial coding achieved 63 percent inter-rater reliability. The two coders then used a negotiated agreement approach to discuss disagreements and resolve discrepancies (Campbell, Quincy, Osserman, & Pederson, 2013). After using the negotiated agreement method, reliability was raised to 80 percent. Using the negotiated agreement approach was advantageous in this exploratory study because it generated new insights into the data (Campbell et al., 2013). This process was used to assist with the development of the final chart of themes and subthemes (Appendix E). The researcher conducted final analysis of the data. Appendix F illustrates the themes of this study in relation to participant demographics.

This thematic analysis generated a greater understanding of fathers’ engagement with their young children and in early childhood programs. Exploring fathers’ perceptions of engagement is necessary to understand how they interact with their children, how they perceive their role in their child’s education, and factors that influence their engagement both at home and school. Insight into fathers’ perceptions and experiences is critical as early childhood policies and practices evolve to place greater emphasis on father engagement.
CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

The purpose of this study was to explore fathers’ perceptions of their engagement with their young children and participation in their children’s Head Start programs. In this chapter, findings from interview sessions and themes emerging from the fathers’ comments are presented. Specific research questions guiding the study were:

1. How do fathers describe their engagement in their young child’s development?
2. What are father’s perceived experiences related to engagement in their child’s Head Start program?

Fathers described their engagement with their child at home and in the community. They also shared challenges they face related to engaging with their children. These challenges included the father’s work schedule, the child’s behavior, and the long distance from their child. Themes emerging related to their engagement in their child’s Head Start program included communication with their child’s teachers, participation in events related to their children’s disability, and attendance at “important events.” Fathers also reported factors impacting their engagement in programs. In addition to factors like work schedule and distance, fathers also reported a strained mother-father relationship and father’s personal beliefs influencing their engagement in programs. Participants were also asked for suggestions to increase father engagement in early childhood programs. Those suggestions included increased parent supports, communication with both parents, activities focusing on fathers’ interests, have male liaisons for
fathers, and weekend activities. A discussion of the major themes and interview response examples are provided below.

**Engagement in Young Children’s Development**

Fathers were asked to describe a typical weekday and weekend with their children to gain perspective of their engagement with their child. Participants reported a variety of ways they engage with their child, which primarily occurred at home and in the community. Fathers discussed taking responsibility in daily routines, such as meal times and bedtime, playing with their children, and attending various community events with their child. Common themes of engagement at home and in the community, including fathers’ favorite activities to do with their child, and barriers to engagement are described below.

**Activities at home.** Participants’ engagement at home with their child consisted of four main areas of participation. Those areas included: (a) assisting in the child and family’s routine; (b) physically playing with their child; (c) participating in pre-academic activities with their child, and (d) cooking and being present for meal times.

**Routine.** Fathers described their involvement in their child’s routine, which primarily featured mornings and bedtimes. Some fathers described weekday morning routines using words like “rushed” and “hectic” as fathers got themselves ready for work while also getting their child ready for school. Fathers stressed the benefits of having the child’s clothes prepared the night before, making sure the child understands the morning routine and following a schedule, so the family is not late. Jamal illustrated this by discussing the importance of his son following a picture schedule, “He has a list on his wall with different colors and pictures. I keep the colors and pictures together so he knows the picture of the person brushing his teeth means that’s what he has to do first.” Fathers described weekend mornings as more relaxed allowing the family to
sleep in, children choosing their outfits for the day, and taking the time to eat breakfast together.

Interestingly, all residential fathers reported sharing responsibility with the child’s mother regarding engagement with their children in their family’s daily routines. Tyrone, a married father reported, “In the mornings I get [child] up and take her to school. Her mom picks her up and gets her ready for bed then I come in and read her a bedtime story and tuck her into bed.”

The shared responsibility of engagement in daily routines among married, or cohabitating, residential fathers was found regardless of geographic location or socioeconomic status.

Not surprising, single fathers or those that had joint custody of their child described having full responsibility for their child’s routine. Rodney illustrated this responsibility by describing his daily routine with his daughter with special needs:

I get up around 4:30am to get things ready for her. Feeding her is easy; I just plug her in (child has a feeding tube) and let her sleep. I go about doing whatever I need to do. When she’s done eating I unplug her, get her dressed, get her ready for school like any other kid, put her in her wheel chair, put her braces on and get her ready for the bus. She gets home around 2:15 so she’s gone for a good full 8 hours and she comes home then I get her out of the wheel chair and play with her. Ask her how her day is going and things like that but she can’t talk to ya…it’s just a routine.

Finally, the two non-residential fathers spoke about their routine in their children’s lives as long-distance parents. These participants shared they rely heavily on telephone calls and video-chatting technology like Skype or Face Time. They described talking to their children everyday to hear about the child’s day at school and other important events happening in their child’s life. Brandon, who is in the military shared, “[Child] is always eager to talk about his day at school, what he did with his friends, and what he wants to do during our next visit. It makes my day to talk to him.” Thus, fathers’ daily routines with their child differed according to their living arrangements, but all identified some routine activity in which they felt actively engaged with their child.
Physical Activities. The majority of participants gave specific examples of the physical play and activities they engage in with their children. Physical activity ranged from rough and tumble play to participating in games or outdoor activities with their child. Participants who mentioned rough and tumble play described wrestling with their child and sharing how their child enjoys climbing on them. Terrell offered, “She loves to climb on me. I call myself her jungle gym.” Interestingly, participants’ rough and tumble play included both male and female children. Fathers also noted how they tried to read their children’s cues about the play indicating some sensitivity to children’s preferences. For instance, two fathers noted they are mindful of their daughters’ mood and only engage in rough and tumble play when the child is “in the mood for it.”

Other participants described their physical activity with their children as engaging in games or other outdoor activities. Maurice stated he plays basketball and goes running with his son. He shared “I like running with him because it gives me competition and exercise you know. I always let him win…well he wins anyway because I can’t keep up with him.” Other participants described going on hikes with their children, playing at the park, or going on family bike rides. Rodney shared, “I put her in her chair and we go for walks every night. It’s good to get her out.” These comments from fathers indicted their enjoyment of physical activities they engaged in with their child. Fathers were enthusiastic and extremely positive as they described their activities.

Pre-academic Activities. Other activities with their children at home focused on strengthening the child’s pre-academic skills. Most fathers stated they read books to their children. Fathers read to their children for a variety of reasons including preparing their child for kindergarten, teaching their child about specific topics, and helping their child strengthen their
vocabulary. For example, Tyrone discussed how he intentionally reads books with his daughter by saying, “She likes her books. I’m sitting with her and helping to turn the page. Like *Harold and the Purple Crayon* and *Where the Wild Things Are*. It’s important I read to her so she is ready for kindergarten.” Darryl described how he felt the current school system does not do an adequate job of teaching students about African American history and this is something he wants to make sure his daughter is taught. He reiterated this while describing how he reads books to his daughter by saying; “She just pulls out a book, anything with an interesting picture, and she’ll listen to you. Like I said, I have little history books and that’s what I read to her. Tryin’ to keep her mind right.”

Other fathers described their role as their child’s teacher and the importance of preparing their child for kindergarten. This included working on colors, shapes, and letters; practicing flashcards; teaching their child to spell his or her name and working on problem-solving skills by building Lego models. John described specific activities he does with his daughter to get her ready for kindergarten. He explained:

I’m working on sight words and teaching her how to spell her name. I go over whatever colors and shapes they do at school we do them at home. I point out letters all around. I got the crayons for the bathtub and put up the ABCs and numbers and a house with different shapes so we can practice in the tub.

Brandon also reported doing pre-academic activities with his son during their visits. He described how his son has an “engineer kind of mind” and enjoys activities that encourage problem-solving and creativity by stating, “He has an engineer kind of mind so I give him a lot of Legos and we do a lot of model rockets and Star Wars models. He enjoys taking small pieces and building them together.” Finally, several participants described how their child enjoys playing on their tablet, and this is used to help teach colors, shapes, numbers, and letters. These fathers appeared to value and enjoy these activities with their children and saw them as an
essential component of their parenting roles. Again, fathers’ descriptions of their engagement in their children’s “pre-academic skill building” indicated their sensitivity to their individual child’s preferences and strengths. Their engagement in these activities also suggests they are invested in their child’s education.

**Cooking/Meal Time.** An unexpected activity mentioned by several participants was their desire to cook for their child or to be present at meal times. Meal times and meal preparation appeared to be “bonding times” for fathers and their children. It gave them opportunities to engage in routine activities with their child while strengthening the father-child relationship. Most of these participants shared they enjoy breakfast time with their children because it gave them an opportunity to talk to their child. For example, Jamal described:

> I let him cook with me, we like to cook waffles. I let him help and he’ll pour the syrup on. That’s one of my favorite things he does…when he fixes me breakfast. He’ll either fix my waffle or pour me a bowl of cereal. He’ll pour it all over the counter and make a mess but that’s okay. We’ll eat breakfast together and talk about how he’s doing.

Similarly, Brandon described how important breakfast is to him when he is visiting with his family. He explained how having breakfast with his son is a special time when they can reconnect after being separated for several months. He shared:

> We’ll wake up some mornings and him and I will have breakfast together and talk about everything happening in school and in life. You know, it’s kind of like a reconnection after a time of being separated for four or five weeks or sometimes longer.

Fathers’ descriptions of their engagement in meal times indicated they strongly value the bonding experience meal times provide and the opportunity to connect with their child. Meal times also provided fathers a chance to teach their children about different foods, which could positively impact the child’s eating habits and nutrition (Jarrett, Bahar, & Kersh, 2014).

**Engagement in the Community.** As fathers described a typical weekend for their family each described doing things in the community with their child. This included free
recreational activities like visiting parks or community recreation centers; enjoying entertainment activities like going out to eat, going to the movies, or community festivals; and traveling. Each subtheme will be discussed below with examples that illustrate each.

**Community Recreational Activities.** Fathers discussed utilizing community events and resources on the weekends with their child. This included playing at local neighborhood parks, going for hikes along nearby rivers or nature preserves, and playing at the community recreational center. Fathers shared they appreciated the various free community resources noting it provided them with opportunities to do things with their children that did not require spending money. Fathers also mentioned community resources were conveniently located and could be accessed by walking, using public transportation, or driving a short distance.

Participants also described visiting places in the community for entertainment purposes. Most fathers shared they take their children places like the zoo, museums, amusement parks, the movies, and go out to eat. The most common activity was going out to eat at places like McDonalds or Chuck. E. Cheese. Andre described an activity he does with his son at Home Depot. He shared, “I take him to workshops at Home Depot where we get to build stuff together and do lots of hands-on activities.” Terrell, who is the uncle of a child and filling the father figure role, described taking his nephew to places in the community, “I try to take him places. Like a movie, or the waterpark when it’s summer. This weekend we went and bought pumpkins.” He went on to explain why doing these activities are important to him, “I try to do things that give him experiences. I know a movie ain’t much but he still out there doing something.”

Fathers also described annual community events they attend with their child. These events included going to festivals, car shows, and the circus. Andre shared he enjoys taking his
daughters to festivals in their community, “We go to little festivals if there’s one going on. I’ll pack her up and we go. It’s good to get her out and have quality time.” John, who lives in a rural community shared, “We go to festivals if they’re goin’ on and if there are tractor shows goin’ on we go to that.” David, also a rural father, described taking his boys to truck shows, “We go see truck shows. For the boy’s birthday we went to a eighteen-wheeler show and we really liked that. We’ve gone to monster truck shows too.” These examples indicated that many fathers take an active role in engaging their child in community-based activities providing many social and play activities within a community based context.

**Travel.** Participants also mentioned their family’s travel for various reasons. This included traveling for many purposes such as visiting extended family, going on family vacations, and traveling for reasons related to their child’s disability. The two non-residential fathers reported they occasionally travel to visit their children while other participants described traveling with their children to visit extended family. Four participants noted their family travels to the beach for summer vacations. Brandon described how his family enjoys visiting new cities along the East Coast and going to the beach. He shared, “We enjoy traveling. We visit cities along the East Coast, and we also go to the beach. [Child] loves the water and doesn’t get to see the beach often.” Participants described their travel as a positive experience that allowed their families to reconnect and spend time together, especially the non-residential fathers who only see their children during their visits.

The two fathers of children with significant disabilities shared traveling experiences related to their child’s disability. Rodney described his travel across the state for his daughter’s routine visits at a children’s hospital. He shared how he prepares for these visits and the frequency of their visits.
We were going to the children’s hospital regularly because my daughter was born with a cleft palate. We were making regular weekly visits for weeks but that has been cut back to just check ups. I have to get everything ready, get her bag ready, get her pump ready and make sure her food is ready. I have to do all that before we get on the bus.

Jacob also discussed traveling to learn more about his daughter’s recent diagnosis of Kleefstra Syndrome. For this father and his wife, this trip was an unfamiliar experience and the first significant traveling for him and his daughter. He described the anxiety he and his wife felt when their trip began:

We recently went to Boston for a Kleefstra Syndrome weekend. It was a meeting or conference type thing with other families that have a kid with Kleefstra Syndrome. So me, my wife, and [child] went…my other kids stayed at their grandparent’s house. It was a good weekend but it was the first time we took [child] on a trip like that and the first time me and [child] flew on an airplane. She had a major melt down in the airport and really made a scene. We were scared of what was gonna happen on the airplane. My wife and I panicked because it was so bad. We just gave her whatever would calm her down. After that, the rest of the weekend was fine.

These medically related traveling experiences illustrate the sense of responsibility these fathers felt in taking care of their child’s medical needs and learning more about their child’s diagnosis. Specifically, for the father who traveled to Boston, his sense of responsibility in becoming educated about his daughter’s diagnosis required him to leave his comfort zone and the familiarity of his community.

**Favorite Activities with Child.** Fathers were asked to share *their* favorite things to do with their child. This question took several participants by surprise but as recorded in field notes each of them displayed joy, laughter, and love when describing their favorite thing to do with their child. Some participants described specific activities they enjoy while others described their love of “being a father.”

**Activities.** Fathers who reported a specific activity described playing with their child, doing hands-on activities, cooking, and reading with their child. Some participants mentioned
they enjoy playing sports with their child and this was special to them because it gave them a chance to bond over a shared interest. Other participants who described specific activities revealed they enjoyed these activities because it gave them an opportunity to talk to their child. For example, Hector said his favorite activity was riding bikes with his children because it gave him a chance to talk to his two sons. He recounted how riding bikes creates a “free place” for his sons to create stories and talk about things he otherwise might not ask them about. He described a story his son told him about playing on the playground with his friends at school. By letting his son take the lead in conversations this father learned about his son’s friends at school and things they play on the playground. Hector was attuned to the benefits of letting his children initiate conversations, or tell stories, that would give him a glimpse into their life and lend topics for future conversations. Tyrone said his favorite thing to do was read to his daughter because it gave him a chance to talk to her about different topics. He stressed the importance of teaching his daughter about African American history and culture through reading and felt she would not be taught this in school. He emphasized that he enjoyed talking to her and seeing her learn. The activities these fathers shared and the details they provided suggest these fathers recognize the value of having conversations with their children. They viewed these conversations; not only as an opportunity to teach the child but also a time for the father to learn intimate details about their children.

**Being a Father.** Several participants recounted their favorite thing is to “just be a father.” Rodney shared what it is like raising a daughter with significant disabilities as a single parent and how much joy his daughter brings to his life. He stated:

> Being a father to a special needs daughter…I’m grateful for my daughter. She’s my biggest joy. Other people don’t understand special needs kids and what it takes. People can be dumbfounded by what it takes. It’s like going to a new job. You start a new job and see all that it takes and wonder how you’re going to do it. Then you get into a
routine, everything becomes a routine and you get it done. She’s my daughter. I have 24/7 care over her and I love it. Being her father is my favorite thing.

John, a father with joint custody of his daughter, also described how being a father is his favorite thing. He shared:

Out of all my friends I don’t see them as involved in their children’s lives because they take it for granted. I don’t take anytime with [child] for granted because it’s so precious. I don’t know if I’m a good dad but it’s the best thing in my world. But I question if I’m doing it right, but I do feel like I’m a great dad.

The two fathers who reflected on their love of being a father were the single father and the father with joint custody of his daughter. These fathers previously described having full responsibility of their child’s routine, and throughout their interviews, they spoke passionately about caring for their daughters and exhibited a great sense of pride in their role as a father.

Fathers’ favorite activities revealed a softer side of the participants, and they revealed more than just favorite activities they enjoy doing. Fathers reflected on the importance of talking to their children, bonding over shared interests, and how being a father shapes their life.

**Challenges related to Engagement at Home and in the Community.** Participants were asked to describe challenges and barriers they face regarding engagement with their children at home and in the community. The most common challenge shared was fathers’ work schedules and being tired after work. Several fathers also described aspects of their child’s development as a challenge. Finally, the two non-residential fathers reported the long distance from their children was their main challenge. Examples of each type of challenge are shared below.

**Work Schedule and Low Energy.** Fathers reported their work schedule interferes with participation in their children’s routines (such as bedtime). They shared how working nights and weekends prevent them from being engaged in evening routines and weekend activities. Others
shared their biggest challenge is being tired and not having a lot of energy when they get home from work. This lack of energy prevents them from being able to play with their child. Hector described how it is difficult for him to stop thinking about work when he is home. He shared, “I’m really busy with work and feel a lot of pressure. I finish from the store and go home and I’m so tired and my mind is still thinking about work.” Finally, Darryl shared that his work schedule is a challenge but he tries to schedule his work around his family time. He stressed the importance of enjoying quality time with his family.

Other fathers revealed their work schedule was a challenge, but they offered a different opinion on their work schedule. These fathers explained that they take pride in their work and view their role as a father as being a provider. They recognized that their work hours limit the time they spend with their family but felt they were fulfilling their paternal role. Maurice discussed his role as a provider by sharing, “I take pride in my work because I know I’m good at it and it’s my job to provide and put food on the table for my family. That’s how I help my family.”

**Child’s Behavior.** Another common challenge fathers face was their child’s behavior. For most fathers, this was described as typical protest behavior of preschool age children. For example, Jamal described how his son gets irritable when his hour of cartoons is over and he wants to watch more. Other fathers mentioned their children are “cranky” after a long day at school and this can wear on the father’s patience. Tyrone, a father of an only child 4-year-old, recounted a time when he was traveling to visit extended family with his daughter and her behavior became challenging:

We were driving in the car and she was pretending to be a pet and I was driving her to the vet. It got old. I had to stop it. She kept making animal sounds but stuck in the car it got old. I do try to engage her sometimes but if it continues I have to say, “I’m done” or tell her to find something else.
On the other hand, the father of a child with a newly diagnosed disability described his daughter’s challenging behaviors that stem from aspects of her disability. Throughout the interview he mentioned that her behavior has an impact on the whole family. He described this challenge:

I think the biggest thing is [child’s] behavior problems that come up. It seems to be getting worse and I don’t know if she is frustrated that we can’t understand her or what (the child is nonverbal). But she will have meltdowns if something upsets her…or for other reasons. Like the other day, my wife had all 3 kids in the car and [child] pooped in her diaper. Before my wife could pull over to change her she started pulling the poop out of her diaper. The other kids were freakin’ out. When my wife was able to pull over to change her she had a complete meltdown because she didn’t want to be changed. My wife called me and told me to be ready when she got home cuz she couldn’t handle it anymore. When they got home she [wife] was crying because she was exhausted and frustrated. Then [child] didn’t’ want me to give her a bath and had another meltdown. It was the afternoon from hell.

Interestingly, fathers who mentioned their child’s behavior as challenges were fathers of an only child. They described the difficulties of typical preschool-aged noncompliant behaviors they were experiencing for the first time with their children. Similarly, Jacob also described behavior challenges related to his daughter’s disability also experienced these behaviors for the first time. Although he has two older children and has experienced typical noncompliant behavior before, the challenging behaviors related to his daughter’s disability are new and navigating these behaviors can be exhausting.

**Long Distance.** The two non-residential fathers discussed how the long distance from their child was their main challenge. Andre, who recently moved several states away from his children, described his challenge in maintaining ongoing communication with his daughters. He shared, “I mean the space (long distance). I guess having to use Face Time and having it freeze up and stop working. Then they [children] can’t see my face so that’s hard.” He also shared his children do not call him so they only communication is when he reaches out to them. Brandon,
who is stationed in the military on the other side of the country from his wife and son, described how the long distance is a challenge and impacts the way he and his wife discipline their son. He described:

Well I kind of mentioned it before but my wife is more free and I’m more conservative and I can see a difference in the way we discipline. Since I’m far away my discipline style doesn’t matter and when we are together I can see a change in his [son] behavior when I discipline him for certain things. Like, I may fuss at him for something his mom usually lets him get away with so he will get an attitude with me. I understand why he is doing it and I keep in mind that their home life is different without me there. But it will be interesting to see what happens when they move here and we are all together. I will have to figure out if I have to change my behavior to match my wife’s or if we can compromise on things. It will definitely be an adjustment.

Challenges shared by these non-residential fathers reflect common challenges from non-residential fathers including technology problems and being separated by long distances (Cabrera, Ryan, Mitchell, Shannon, & Tamis-LeMonda, 2008). Additionally, the challenges reported by the father in the military illustrate the challenges military parents face when reintegrating back into their family life.

Resourcefulness. Interestingly, participants did not mention transportation and financial constraints as challenges to their engagement at home and in the community. When probed about these specific challenges participants gave examples of their resourcefulness to overcome these challenges. Two participants described their transportation circumstances and how they utilize available resources and plan ahead. Maurice, an African American married father living in an urban community described how he relies on the public bus system to run errands, take his child to school, and to go and from work. Rodney illustrated his resourcefulness by stating:

I don’t know if it’s a challenge but more like careful planning. We only have one car so we have to plan around that. When I told you about the time I had to go to her school to help with feeding…her grandparents were out then so I had to call a taxi. Way out here I had to wait a while for it to arrive but he [driver] agreed to wait for me in the parking lot while I helped feed her. So I guess that could be a challenge but I don’t worry about it too much.
Overall, challenges fathers face to engage with their children included father’s work schedules and low energy levels, challenging child behaviors, and being separated by long distances from their children. These challenges interfere with daily activities, like playing and bedtime routines, and for some fathers impact the family dynamics. However, some fathers illustrated their resourcefulness by relying on public transportation and planning ahead because of limited transportation.

**Engagement in Head Start Programs**

Fathers reported a variety of ways they are engaged in programs and had varying opinions on the extent of their engagement. Fathers described their engagement activities as communication with teachers or programs, attending invited activities, and being involved with the program because of their child’s disability.

**Communication with Teacher or Program.** Several participants noted they feel welcome and comfortable communicating with their child’s teacher via phone calls and pick up and drop off times. Jamal shared he regularly calls to check on his son and typically picks him up in the afternoons. Jamal stated several times that it was imperative for him to have open communication with his child’s teacher so he could make sure his son was safe. Other fathers described their communication with teachers during pick up and drop off times. One father shared, “At morning drop off that’s when [child] has a chance to show me her art work, what her job is, and I get to say hello to all the teachers. They fill me in on what happens during the day.” Brandon expressed how he valued communication with his son’s school. He described his participation in parent-teacher conferences. He stated:

My wife is the “face” to all the interactions with the school and I had to ask to be invited. I felt like they didn’t know who I was or that I was interested in being involved. I didn’t feel like they were very inviting and maybe it was because they never had a situation like that before. They asked if I was going to be attending the conference and [wife] said I
wouldn’t be there because I’m in a different state but she put me on the phone so I could hear updates and ask questions.

He said the teachers now include him on all matters related to his son and call him when necessary. He shared an example, “There was a kid at school who threw a snowball and hit him in the face. They invited me to that call and told me what was going on. I made sure they knew I wanted to be involved.” Brandon reiterated he plans on being very involved in his son’s schooling when his wife and son relocate to be with him. He said, “When they move here I’ll be even more involved with his school because I want to know what’s going on in his day-to-day life.”

**Involvement related to child’s disability.** Two fathers of children with disabilities shared their engagement in their child’s programs and classrooms specifically related to their children’s needs. Rodney stressed how critical his relationship is with the school because of his daughter’s numerous medical needs and described positive and open communication with his daughter’s teacher by sharing, “I can call the school and talk to the teacher and she will tell me all the information I need to know. I can call or the teacher will call me. It’s all open.” Rodney also described his visits to his daughter’s classroom when she first started school to help the teachers feed her using her g-tube. He described one visit, “On one particular day it was good I went because she was having a hard time because she didn’t know where her dad was. She was unhappy so I calmed her down and let her know everything was okay.” He also described his engagement in the Individualized Education Program (IEP) process with his daughter’s school. He said, “It was a long process. It’s basically sitting there and explaining what she can do and can’t do. What her capabilities are…she has hearing aids and wears glasses so I explained all that. It was very informative for them.” As noted in the field notes, when he described the IEP meeting he had a sense of pride in his voice for being able to provide information to the teacher,
therapists, and staff. He knew the information he was able to provide was going to help his daughter’s teachers.

Similarly, Jacob described his engagement in his daughter’s school. He shared that his participation in the program has only been related to his daughter’s diagnosis of Kleefstra Syndrome. He reflected on his visit:

When we got her diagnosis from the doctor her mom and me had a meeting with her teacher and a bunch of other people from the school system. I don’t know exactly who they all were. Some of them were her therapists. We talked about what was going on and where she would do best. She will stay in her new room for two years before going to kindergarten.

**Attending Events.** Fathers discussed their attendance at “important events” at their children’s schools. These events included attending parent nights such as PTA, special events for fathers, IEP meetings, and award ceremonies. Several fathers described attending PTA meetings and one father said he was asked to join the PTA board but declined because of his work schedule. Several fathers stated their wife, or the child’s mother, primarily attend school functions but they would attend for “important events.” Hector expressed, “My wife is the one who does most of it. But if it’s something important like graduation or another meeting then I will go. I think I should be there for the important stuff but can’t be there for everything.”

On the other hand, Terrell shared he believes it is important for him to attend as many events as he can. He described his role in school events as being a role model for his nephew. He shared,

I go if they have things for parents to do. Like if they send home an invitation for parents to come for something and my sister can’t go then I try to go and if it’s something where dads are invited I make sure I go. I don’t want him to be the kid without a father or male role model there. I ain’t gonna let that happen. They had a parent breakfast in their classroom one day and I went. [Nephew] was so excited to show me his stuff hanging up.

Tyrone discussed his role as a decision maker in his daughter’s education and why it is important
for him to be present at events and conferences. He described:

I think that goes back to being a provider. I think there are some decisions that need to be made that include both the child’s mother and father. That’s what those things are for…they’re for both parents. And things like the award ceremonies, I feel like it wouldn’t be right for her not to see her mother and her father there. I mean, I grew up as a man and I looked at girls who didn’t have their fathers around. I already know I don’t want my daughter in the same position. I mean, if you look at statistics they say bad things can happen for girls who don’t have their father. It’s sad that it is that way so I got to be able to do better for her.

Advocacy. Several fathers described their advocacy roles for their child and their child’s education. For some fathers, this advocacy was evident as they attended their children’s IEP meetings and collaborated with school professionals to ensure their child would have their needs met in the most appropriate classroom. This was also illustrated in Jacob’s trip to a conference to learn more about his daughter’s diagnosis. He noted that attending this conference would equip he and his wife with knowledge about the diagnosis which would help them make better decisions regarding their child’s well-being and education.

Other fathers described advocating for themselves by insisting they were invited to parent-teacher conferences and working to maintain open communication with their child’s teacher. Andre strongly advocated for himself by being persistent in asking to be included in parent-teacher conferences even though he was across the country. After separating from his daughter’s mother, John realized he had to advocate for himself with his child’s school by stressing that he needed to be included in all communication and meetings. He noted that the child’s mother does not include him in school communication meaning he had to advocate for himself.

Fathers’ participation in programs illustrated how their perceptions of their fatherhood role influence their engagement. Some fathers described their role as being providers of critical information about their child’s needs and development, which was important to share during
conversations and IEP meetings. Others viewed their role as decision makers, which meant they needed to be present for conferences and IEP meetings. Others saw their role as a father figure to be a role model and be present for parent events, especially events for fathers. Although fathers shared various ways they are engaged in their child’s classroom or program there were also several challenges discussed impacting their participation.

**Challenges to Engagement in Head Start Programs**

Participants were asked specifically about challenges they face regarding engagement in their child’s Head Start program. The most common challenge shared was fathers’ work schedule. Whereas, other fathers shared they did not experience any challenges to being engaged and were pleased with their engagement. Participants also described how a troubled mother-father relationship could be a challenge. Finally, several fathers shared how their personal beliefs impact their willingness to be engaged.

**Mother-Father Relationship and Absent Fathers.** Several participants described how a strained mother-father relationship impacts father engagement in Head Start programs. John, who has joint custody of his daughter, shared his personal experience with the child’s mother. He discussed how the mother withholds information impacting his relationship with the school. John interpreted this gatekeeping as a deliberate act to make him appear irresponsible. He shared, “A note will be sent home on her mom’s week but it’s something that’s happening on my week and she doesn’t tell me about it. That makes me look bad and she likes doing things that make me look bad.” Interestingly, the urban African American fathers discussed the high number of single mothers and absent fathers among minority families and communities. Although these fathers are engaged they discussed how these circumstances impact other fathers’ willingness and ability to participate in their children’s education. Tyrone described:
I’m an African American male and we have a lot of single mothers and a lot of fathers aren’t in their children’s lives. I feel like a lot of minority children are not well rounded because of that. Here in the inner city we don’t see fathers like we should. It’s sad because it does impact the children, especially minority children.

Father’s Personal Beliefs. Several fathers shared their personal beliefs influence their engagement in programs. These beliefs were rooted in perceptions of gender roles and feeling uncomfortable in early childhood settings. Some fathers shared they feel it is the job of the child’s mother to be engaged in school especially with young children. Other fathers described a stigma they may feel interacting with young children. Maurice stated:

Some men might think there’s a stigma with preschool that it’s a woman’s job. A guy may be like, “I ain’t going around messing with a bunch of kids.” People have a stigma that if you’re a man and like to be around kids then you’re a pedophile or gay.

Other fathers described the negative views they have of school. Three fathers described distrust in programs and how this impacts their views of school and decisions they make regarding their child’s education. For example, Jamal repeatedly shared he does not trust teachers and programs and is considering homeschooling his son when he starts kindergarten. His distrust came from recent reports of child neglect occurring at a nearby Head Start program. Tyrone felt school does not teach his daughter everything she needs to know so he teaches her at home. Several times throughout the interview he stated he believes schools do not teach the truth about African American history and culture to students and believes his daughter will not learn the this unless he teaches it to her. David, the father of twin three-year-old boys, was quite negative about his personal experiences in school and how this impacts his engagement in his sons’ Head Start program. He shared,

I hated school. I mean, I know school is important for them but I don’t think I want to go back. I mean, if my wife needed me to go then I would go if my work schedule let me but really…I hated school. I was so glad to get out of there. I don’t think they would invite me to do anything.
Fathers shared a variety of challenges influencing their engagement in Head Start programs. These included contextual factors such as work schedules and long distances from their family; relationship challenges with the child’s mother; and personal beliefs regarding gender roles in early childhood education settings, and their personal experiences in school. Interestingly, some participants spoke to specific challenges they face, like work schedule and distance from family, while others generalized challenges to all fathers. For example, a perceived stigma related to fathers’ engagement in early childhood classrooms was mentioned as a challenge all fathers face.

**Suggestions for Programs**

Participants offered suggestions to early childhood programs on ways to increase father engagement. Suggestions included (a) offer “parent trainings” on topics including child development and relationship building; (b) have male staff or male liaisons in programs; (c) communicate with both parents; (d) feature activities that include fathers’ interests; (e) have events on weekends for fathers and children; and (f) recognizing fathers’ interest in engagement.

**Parent Support.** Several participants suggested programs offer “parent trainings,” or parent support, for both parents. Fathers suggested opportunities to learn about child development, activities to do at home, and relationship building techniques. Interestingly, each of the participants who made these suggestions stressed the importance of both parents’ participation. They believed if both parents are involved in parent support programs what they learned could be applied at home. For example, Tyrone described how it was helpful to have someone from Early Head Start visit their home to help him and his wife prepare for their new baby. He thought it would be helpful to have the same help now that their child is older. He described,

> When my daughter was a baby someone from Head Start came over to talk to my wife and me about taking care of the baby and things like that. It was helpful because she was
our first baby and we didn’t know what to do. But now that baby is a 4-year-old and she’s our first 4-year-old. It’s like they helped with the baby but we are supposed to know what to do with a 4-year-old. I mean, we can figure things out easier because she can talk to us but as far as knowing how to teach her things…we’re kinda flying by the seat of our pants.

Tyrone’s experience illustrates one of the cornerstones of Head Start and Early Head Start programs, which is providing home visiting services. Early Head Start families can opt to receive services directly in their home while Head Start families receive home visits at various points throughout the preschool year. Tyrone’s experience also suggests families greatly benefit from home visiting services throughout the early childhood years.

**Communicating with Both Parents.** Another common suggestion from participants centered on stronger communication from teachers to fathers. Participants expressed they felt teachers and programs do not make an effort to communicate with fathers. For example, John felt the program did not include him in communication unless he specifically asked questions while dropping his daughter off at school. As recorded in the field notes, when responding to this question he appeared to be annoyed with the current communication with teachers. He stated, “Regardless of martial status, communicate to both. Regardless if they’re living in the same home still communicate with both. Somehow do an email or social media to both parents.”

Brandon shared a similar frustration:

I feel like they should have more of an understanding of people’s circumstances. Not everybody comes from the same background so just be accepting of people’s life. Different families have different arrangements. So make sure they talk to both of us is my biggest suggestion.

**Father’s Interests.** Participants suggested more fathers would be engaged in programs if there were specific activities geared toward fathers. Hector explained, “I think they could have activities they know dads enjoy. Like building models. I think that’s a typical “dad” thing so if they had events like that maybe it would be a good way to get fathers in the door.” Other
suggestions included inviting fathers to speak to children about their work. Darryl shared similar ideas but also suggested programs should be willing to try engaging fathers more than once if it does not work out. He shared:

I think it’s important to invite them in and have activities that they would enjoy. They know the things we like to do with kids at home like sports or superheroes so bring those over to the school. I also think they need to try something more than once. If the turn out isn’t good the first time then try again but don’t try it once and say, “oh, we tried but it didn’t work.

**Liaisons for Fathers.** Fathers expressed they might feel embarrassed to ask questions to female teachers and having more males present would provide another outlet to ask questions. Andre suggested, “Maybe get one or two fathers to be advocates or liaisons. I think that would help tremendously. That way fathers can ask questions to the liaison if they aren’t comfortable asking the teacher.” Similarly, Terrell offered:

Another idea would be to have a time for fathers or male role models to have time together to get to know each other. Like barbershop talk. Sometimes we might have questions about things but don’t know who to ask. If we can ask other fathers then it’s not so embarrassing. Fathers or people like me might feel embarrassed to ask a female teacher or worker.

**Weekend Activities.** The last suggestion centered on offering activities on the weekend that would interest fathers. This suggestion was offered so fathers could engage in school related activities outside of their work schedules and these activities may not seem to be associated with “typical” school events. A sample activity suggested was, “Maybe programs could have a sports day on a Saturday or let us do something with our hands like build something with the kids.” Conflicted, Maurice offered the same suggestion but was hesitant about fathers being interested in attending. He stated:

Maybe it would be better if there was something on the weekends where dads could just play with their kids. But I don’t know if people would want to give up their weekend to do some kind of group thing if they could just play with their kid at home.
Recognizing Fathers’ Interest in Engagement. Finally, the most unexpected piece of this study was how interested participants were in having their voices heard. Several participants asked during the beginning of the interview or at the end how the information they shared was going to be used and who would hear what they had to say. Several participants wanted to make sure programs would hear what they were sharing and other participants wanted other fathers to hear what they had to say. Other participants were also especially interested in learning more about the research aspects of father engagement. Their interest suggests fathers could benefit from understanding the research on the impact of father engagement and what activities they can do to enrich their children’s lives. This interest could be especially valuable to programs aiming to increase father engagement. Each of the participants showed genuine interest in making sure programs recognize they are interested in engagement and learning more about child development.

Summary

Results indicate participants engaged in similar types of activities with their children and faced similar challenges. Most fathers are engaged in their child’s daily routine and are engaged in activities such as reading books, physical play, cooking, and taking their children to various events and activities in the community. Fathers were also more engaged in home and community activities with their children than activities in Head Start programs. Although these fathers have varying levels of engagement with their children it is clear they each love their children very much and their children bring them great joy. As noted in the field notes, participants’ demeanor changed when talking about their child. As they described their children fathers’ body language opened up, they smiled more, and often laughed. Fathers offered suggestions to Head Start programs, and other early childhood programs, on how to generate
father engagement. The two most common suggestions for programs were having activities related to fathers’ interests and having activities on the weekend to accommodate fathers’ work schedules.

Interestingly, fathers with similar circumstances shared similar experiences. For example, fathers who have children with significant disabilities described similar experiences going through the IEP process. They felt their role in the IEP meeting was valuable because they had important information to share regarding their child. Fathers who were separated from their children by long distances shared similar experiences to challenges to being engaged in their children’s lives. They described the challenge of relying on technology to communicate with their children. They also felt they miss out on daily events because they are not physically present. Several African American fathers living in urban areas each described the prevalence of absent fathers and single mothers among minority families.

Fathers also described a variety of ways they are engaged in Head Start programs as well as factors limiting their engagement. Fathers reported they communicate with teachers during drop off and pick up times and parent conferences. Other fathers reported engagement regarding their child’s disability through IEP meetings and assisting teachers with their child’s medical issues. Finally, most fathers stated they attend “important events” which included graduations and award ceremonies, IEP meetings, and conferences. The engagement fathers reported centered on engagement through communication and parenting but did not include higher levels of engagement such as volunteering in classrooms and programs, decision making in the program or school, and collaborating with the community. Some fathers stated they were aware of opportunities to be engaged at higher levels, such as serving on the PTA board or volunteering in the classroom, while others indicated they were not aware of these opportunities.
Challenges fathers experience to engagement were similar to the challenges they described related to engagement at home, which was primarily the father’s work schedule and availability. Other obstacles shared were similar to those reported in the literature including a perceived stigma to men participating in early childhood settings; personal views on school and teachers, including their personal experiences in school; and a strained mother-father relationship (Anderson et al., 2015; Fagan & Palm, 2004; Roberts et al., 2014).

Lastly, participants shared many suggestions for Head Start programs to increase father engagement. Several fathers suggested programs support fathers’ parenting skills through workshops or education programs. Participants also suggested programs increase engagement through communication with both parents. Many fathers recommend programs provide activities that peak fathers’ interest and host these activities or events on weekends to accommodate fathers’ work schedules. Finally, and most importantly, participants asked for programs to recognize fathers are interested in being included in having their voices heard when it comes to children’s learning and development. Building on the suggestions provided, early childhood programs could generate father interest in a variety of parent engagement activities.
CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

This study sought to explore fathers’ perceptions of their engagement with their young children. Results indicate fathers have varying levels of engagement with their children in a variety of ways at home, in the community, and in Head Start programs. This study also discovered various factors impacting fathers’ engagement with their children. Father was defined using the Office of Head Start’s definition of father, which is any male family member and father figure who positively influences a child’s life including grandfathers, uncles, or close male friends of the family (Office of Head Start, 2013). Father engagement was defined as the direct interaction between a father and child; accessibility, or being available to the child when needed; and taking responsibility, managing and providing resources for a child. This qualitative study allowed fathers to describe their individual experiences of engagement and attach their own meanings to these experiences. The emergent themes from this study validated findings from the current literature and highlighted other areas needing further research regarding father engagement with their young children. This chapter will discuss the study’s results relative to the existing literature followed by a discussion of the findings related to the Bronfenbrenner’s ecological framework. Implications and limitations of the research, and proposed future research conclude the chapter.

Engagement at Home and in the Community

Findings from this study indicate fathers engage in a variety of activities at home and in the community with their children. Engagement at home included daily routine activities, pre-
academic activities, and play activities. Fathers also described activities in the community they engage in with their children like visiting parks and recreation centers. Two fathers in this study have children with significant disabilities and they described their engagement in various community activities related to their child’s needs. Finally, participants shared challenges they face to engagement. These findings will be discussed in the context of the current literature on father engagement.

**Engagement at home.** Participants reported engagement in a variety of activities with their children in the home and community settings. Fathers shared they primarily engage in daily routines, pre-academic activities, and play activities with their children at home. Daily routines included caregiving responsibilities like helping the child get dressed, bathed, and fed. Not surprising, residential fathers reported engagement in routine activities more than nonresidential fathers. This finding echoes reports from Jones and Mosher’s (2013) and Guerrero et al. (2016) who each examined national data sets and found residential fathers were more likely than nonresidential fathers to be involved in caregiving activities. Extending beyond quantitative analysis, this study discovered some fathers deeply value activities like feeding and mealtimes because it gives them an opportunity to talk and connect with their children. In fact, several fathers stated cooking and mealtimes were their favorite activities to engage with their children.

**Pre-academic activities.** Participants reported engaging in various pre-academic activities with their children like reading books and practicing number, shapes, and letters. Fathers stated they engage in these activities to prepare their child for kindergarten and to teach their child. This finding builds on Baker’s (2014) examination of data from the ECLS-B, which found fathers engage in home literacy activities with preschoolers. Further investigation found fathers’ engagement in home literacy activities positively predicted children’s reading and math
achievement (Baker, 2014). Taken together, these findings suggest fathers are aware of the importance of engaging in home literacy activities and this engagement could lead to greater school achievement.

**Play activities.** The majority of fathers reported engaging in rough and tumble play with their children. Furthermore, this was reported among fathers who have male and female children. This finding is consistent with Flanders et al.’s (2009) study that found fathers engaged in rough and tumble play with children. Although Flanders and colleagues hypothesized fathers would engage in rough and tumble play with boys more than girls, their findings actually suggest fathers engaged in this type of play with both children. However, fathers engaged in longer periods of rough and tumble play with boys than with girls (Flanders et al., 2009). This could be possible for participants in this study as well as one participant reported he monitored his daughter’s mood and quit rough and tumble play when she was no longer interested.

**Community engagement.** Fathers reported they are engaged with their children at community settings like parks and recreational centers. Visiting these places was described as a regular activity because they were conveniently located, free or inexpensive, and offered activities to both the child and father. For example, one father described taking his son to the community recreational center so he and his son could exercise by playing a variety of sports. This finding is consistent with Buckelew, Pierre, and Chabra’s (2006) countywide needs assessment of fathers. Researchers found fathers view community recreation centers and parks as a valuable resource for their engagement with their young children (Buckelew et al., 2006). Respondents to the needs assessment also reported the use of parks and recreation centers because of location, accessibility, and cost (Buckelew et al., 2006).
**Children with special needs.** Two fathers in this study had children with significant disabilities and medical conditions. Both of these fathers described numerous ways they are involved in the care of their children. This included taking their child to various medical appointments, educating themselves on their child’s diagnosis, and advocating for their child in IEP meetings. Reports from these fathers are similar to findings from other qualitative studies of fathers with children with disabilities or serious illnesses. Chesler and Parry (2001) interviewed fathers of children with cancer to learn about their experience while McNeill (2004) interviewed fathers of children with juvenile rheumatoid arthritis. Fathers from these two studies reported increased engagement with children with chronic illnesses and often advocated for their children’s medical needs with health care professionals (Chesler & Parry, 2001; McNeill, 2004). Similarly, participants from this study also reported high levels of engagement as one traveled with his daughter to numerous hospital visits for surgeries and the other traveled to a conference specifically to learn more about his daughter’s recent diagnosis.

**Challenges to Engagement.** Fathers were asked to share challenges impacting their engagement with their child at home and in the community. Challenges reported included work schedules, the child’s behavior, and long distances. For residential fathers, the most common challenge to engagement was the father’s work schedule. Challenges reported in this study are consistent with findings from studies by Anderson et al. (2015) and Stahlschmidt et al.’s (2013). These two studies also found transportation and financial constraints were challenges fathers experienced. Interestingly, these were not reported as a challenge among participants in this study. Two participants in this study were nonresidential fathers and faced challenges due to the long distance separation. One father serving in the military described how the separation from his wife and son impacts his parenting style and discipline. This is consistent with findings from
Willerton et al. (2001) who interviewed military fathers of older children. Findings suggested long deployments and separation have an impact on all aspects of family life (Willerton et al., 2001). The other nonresidential father shared the challenge of relying on telephone calls and video chatting technology to communicate with his children. The challenge of reliable communication with children was also reported in Roberts et al.’s (2014) qualitative study of fathers with teenage children.

**Engagement in Programs**

Participants reported they participate in their child’s Head Start programs in a variety of ways. This included communicating with teachers during drop off and pick up times, attending parent-teacher conferences and IEP meetings, and attending other events the father felt were important. On the other hand, a few participants stated they do not participate at all. Fathers who attended conferences and IEP meetings stated they did so because they saw themselves as decision-makers in their child’s education. This finding is similar to findings in Murray and Hwang’s (2015) study on father’s perceptions of their fatherhood role. Their study found fathers who saw their role as a teacher and supporter were more likely to attend school events, including parent-teacher conferences.

Fathers discussed factors that influence their engagement in programs. The primary challenge was fathers’ work schedules. This is consistent with Mendez’s (2010) finding from a survey to Head Start parents indicating parents’ work and education demands are significant impediments to their participation in programs. Furthermore, participants in this study reported challenges from the mother-father relationship and fathers’ personal beliefs also influence their engagement. Studies by Stachlschmidt and colleagues (2013) and Potter and Olley (2012) also found mothers gatekeeping of information and fathers’ personal views of school impede
engagement. Stachlschmidt et al (2013) also reported lack of transportation as a notable barrier to participation; however, this was not reported as a challenge in this study.

**Geographical Differences**

Participants were recruited from an urban setting and rural setting to determine if any similarities or differences emerged based on geographic differences. Differences emerged during the recruitment phase as the majority of urban participants were African American and the majority of rural participants were White. These trends are consistent with current demographics among urban and rural residents (Patten, 2013). A common finding among African American urban participants was the prevalence of absent fathers. This finding is similar with current reports of high rates of absent fathers among African American urban families (Threlfall, Seay, & Kohl, 2013). Finally, the resourcefulness several fathers noted when describing their limited transportation differed from findings stating that transportation challenges are common among low-income families, including fathers, in both urban and rural settings (Murray et al., 2014). Although fathers from both settings mentioned they have limited transportation, they did not report this is a challenge. Instead, participants described how they are reliant on public transportation and careful planning. Although several similarities and differences were found between urban and rural participants more research is needed with homogenous groups of fathers to gain deeper insight into specific challenges and perceptions among each group of fathers.

**Ecological Framework**

Father’s relationships with their children need to be examined within a wider network of relationships and interactions. Using Bronfenbrenner’s ecological framework, father’s responses in this study illustrated several processes and environments that affect children’s development.
Applied to this study, process refers to the dynamic interactions between fathers and their children, interactions between mothers and fathers, and between fathers and other contexts (i.e. Head Start programs). This section will first discuss participant’s reports of proximal processes followed by examples of distal processes.

Proximal processes involve the interactions between the child and their immediate surrounding that are responsible for the child’s development and well-being. Among preschool children, parenting is the primary proximal process and these interactions drive the child’s development. Furthermore, proximal processes occur in the child’s microsystem, which is their home and school. Fathers in this study described several examples of proximal interactions they provide for their children. First, fathers described engaging in activities that allow them to bond with their child such as meal times and doing activities they have a shared interest in with their child. Additionally, fathers described their participation in caregiving activities and preparing the child for kindergarten.

Participants also described proximal processes with the child’s mother. These interactions included shared responsibility in daily routines, navigating a troubled relationship, and overcoming contextual factors (i.e. distance) impacting their relationship with the child’s mother. Because the child’s parents are within their microsystem, all of these interactions impact the development of the child. For example, fathers who reported shared responsibility in daily routines with the child’s mother may create a predictable routine for their child and this could positively affect their child’s development. On the other hand, the father in the military shared how the long distance from his family has resulted in different parenting and discipline styles between him and his wife. He reported a negative consequence from this difference is behavior challenges from his son. Although this is a negative consequence now, the father noted a need to
work together with his wife to resolve these differences once they are reunited. Because the father has been out of the child’s microsystem for the past five years it is likely his interactions do not have as much of an impact as the processes between the child and his mother.

Fathers also reported engaging in interactions with their child’s Head Start programs. Although the child’s classroom is within their mesosystem, if fathers seldom participate in programs (i.e. parent-teacher conferences) the interaction is likely to be a distal process on the child’s development. Distal processes are those that have an indirect impact on the child’s development. For processes to have an impact on development they must occur regularly and over an extended period of time (Bronfenbrenner, 1995). One father in this study described having a close relationship with his daughter’s teacher and described his participation in the classroom to assist with his daughter’s medical needs. Because this father and the teacher’s engagement in the child’s education are mutual, the result is a functioning mesosystem for the child (Bronfenbrenner, 1995). In this case, the mesosystem would be comprised of the father-child microsystem, the teacher-child microsystem, and the teacher-father microsystem.

Throughout the interviews, participants indirectly described how processes within the chronosystem impact their engagement with their child. Parenting in the 21st century is impacted by various structures including societal changes, class, cultural contexts, politics, economics, and communication. Throughout the study the use of technology aided in the communication between the researcher and participants and was also discussed as a platform for communication between parents and the school. Several fathers suggested schools communicate with parents through the use of social media (e.g. Facebook and Twitter) to keep them updated on school events and details about their child’s education. Another father suggested schools use Twitter to give fathers ideas of things to do at home with their children. These suggestions and the use of
social media as a vehicle for communication is a notable phenomenon of the 21st century. Future studies should investigate the impact social media has on increasing communication between parents and schools as well as which social media platforms are most successful.

Based on fathers’ reports, it is suggested they engage in a range of processes that impact their child’s development. However, further investigation is needed to explore the quality of these interactions. For processes to have a positive impact on a child’s development they must be high quality interactions that occur for extended periods of time.

Implications

Practice. It is evident that positive father engagement in their children’s lives has a range of beneficial impacts. The more fathers can be supported in their parenting role the more likely these benefits will impact both families and children. Unfortunately, fathers are not regularly engaged or included in a range of family related services within ECPs. The following section will address implications for practice including suggestions from participants from this study as well as findings in the literature.

Fathers as equal partners. The primary suggestion fathers offered to programs was for programs and practitioners to treat fathers as equal partners in their child’s education. Fathers want to be included in communication via newsletters, phone calls, and social media. Participants expressed they feel teachers defer to the child’s mother in matters related to the child’s education. This suggestion is also reflected in the research and literature. Researchers note fathers are more likely to be engaged when they are treated equal to mothers in educational settings (Anderson et al., 2015; Potter & Olley, 2012). Furthermore, programs should move towards normalizing father engagement rather than treating it as a rare occasion (Head Start Performance Standards, 2016; Potter & Olley, 2012). Programs should also collect contact
information for fathers to ensure communication occurs and use the words “mothers” and “fathers” instead of “parents.” It has been found that both mothers and fathers assume “parents” refers to just mothers (Potter & Olley, 2012). By listing both parents, fathers may feel included and recognized as equal partners. This, in turn, could validate fathers’ importance in children’s learning and development. When fathers feel valued and included they are more likely to be active in program activities and pre-academic activities at home (Fagan & Palm, 2004).

*Listen to fathers.* Programs can enhance their relationship building with fathers by seeking input and listening to fathers’ opinions on information related to their child as well as ideas for father engagement in programs. Both the American Academy of Pediatrics (2017) and the Office of Head Start (2017) stress the importance of valuing fathers’ voices and suggest fathers who feel their opinion is valued are more likely to be engaged. However, this also means fathers must be willing to participate and share their thoughts when programs seek their opinion.

*Reduce the stigma.* A common barrier to father participation in ECPs is the perceived stigma associated with men in early childhood education (Anderson et al., 2015; Fagan & Palm, 2004; Potter & Olley, 2012). This stigma was also noted in the findings of this study. Participants expressed hesitation to participating for fear of being labeled “gay” or a pedophile. Researchers suggest comprehensive ECPs, such as Head Start, are ideal programs to reduce the stigma in early childhood. Because Early Head Start and Head Start work with families throughout the early childhood years they can build individual relationships with fathers early on, which can reduce the perceived stigma (Anderson et al., 2015). McWayne et al. (2008) suggest when fathers are included in the family unit of service and are satisfied with their relationship with practitioners they more likely will be engaged in programs. This implication is
also suggested for programs other than Head Start. All early childhood settings should work to reduce the stigma of men participating in programs.

_Scheduling._ Research indicates fathers’ work schedules are a leading barrier to engagement in programs (Anderson et al., 2015; Potter & Olley, 2012). Fathers in this study also reported this as a primary challenge. Early childhood programs are making efforts to accommodate fathers’ work schedules by providing services and activities on the weekends (Bauman & Wasserman, 2010; Potter & Olley, 2012). Another benefit to scheduling activities on the weekend is that activities may not be associated with school, thus more inviting for fathers. Programs are encouraged to consider hosting father-friendly activities like sports days or family picnics on the weekends.

_Ideas for home._ Fathers in this study expressed an interest in receiving information about activities they can do at home with their child. Particularly, participants were interested in learning how they make a unique contribution to their child’s development. For example, when fathers engage in rough and tumble play with children they are helping the child develop self-regulation skills. Fathers in this study stated they wanted to receive “tips on activities” through social media and email. Recently, a program was launched in Sydney, Australia where fathers receive text messages on tips for taking care of their newborns. The program, SMS4dads, sends a text with links to online resources and support to fathers until the child is twelve-months-old (Fletcher, 2017). Using online means of communication and text messaging may suggest fathers are more receptive to this communication than typical newsletters and flyers containing ideas for fathers.

_Policy._ In recent years the Federal Government has released several family engagement policy changes in early childhood education and care. In May 2016 the U.S. Department of
Health and Human Services (DHHS) and the U.S. Department of Education (ED) released a joint policy statement on family engagement in the early years through the early grades. Based on the research and best practices of family engagement and the core principles of each department this policy statement provides recommendations and resources to early childhood programs and practitioners. This policy statement defines family as “all adults who interact with early childhood systems in support of their child including biological, adoptive, and foster parents; grandparents; legal or informal guardians; and adult siblings (Family Engagement, 2016).” Early childhood systems include childcare options, Head Start and Early Head Start, early intervention programs, preschool programs, and elementary school from kindergarten through third grade (Family Engagement, 2016). The two departments suggest family engagement be integrated throughout early childhood systems and programs by viewing families as essential partners in children’s learning and development and nurturing positive relationships between families and staff (Family Engagement, 2016).

In September 2016, The Office of Head Start released updated Head Start Performance Standards. The new regulation requires programs to implement strategies to engage fathers in their children’s learning and development; however, parent participation is not required (Head Start Performance Standards, 2016). The Office of Head Start also released a revised Program Information Report (PIR) to match requirements in the 2016 requirements. Each Head Start program completes a yearly PIR to provide data on each of the program standards. In the 2017 update of the PIR, programs are now required to report on the participation of father, or father figures, across program activities open to all parents/guardians (Father Engagement, p. 57). This includes reporting the number of fathers who participated in the following: (a) family assessment, (b) family goal setting, (c) involvement in child’s Head Start child development
experiences (e.g. home visits, teacher conferences, etc.), (d) Head Start program governance, such as participation in the Policy Council or policy committees, and (e) parent education workshops. While these policy changes will be interesting to monitor over the next few years as Head Start programs implement changes it will be critical for the Office of Head Start to offer technical assistance to programs to teach them how to implement strategies to engage fathers.

It is also important to recognize Head Start is only one type of ECP. Other federal funding sources for early childhood programs include the Child Care Development Block Grant, issued by the DHHS, and the Preschool Development Grant issued by ED. Although each of these funding sources stress the importance of family engagement they vary in requirements and do not explicitly state father engagement. The Preschool Development Grant requires grantees to have family engagement activities like home visits, family conferences, classroom visits, parent satisfaction surveys, and parent night or family activity night. The Child Care Development Block Grant does not have specific requirements or suggestions for family engagement activities. Although grantees are encouraged to use the recommendations from the joint policy statement, ultimately programs are left to interpret their definition of “family engagement” and how fathers will be included. Programs need clear standards of what father engagement looks like in their programs and need to make these standards available to both mothers and fathers.

**Limitations**

Several limitations exist for this study warranting acknowledgement and discussion. First, studies investigating low-income fathers, especially those that collect data directly from fathers, face difficult challenges to recruitment (Mitchell et al., 2007; Stahlschmidt et al., 2013). This study faced similar challenges. The first round of recruitment yielded a low response rate
through the use of flyers. The majority of fathers in this study were recruited by face-to-face contact with the Family Service Worker on home visits or by word of mouth recruitment through snowball sampling. These recruitment strategies are noted as the most successful when recruiting fathers, especially low-income fathers (Mitchell et al., 2007; Fagan & Palm, 2004; Stahlschmidt et al., 2013). Second, the fathers interviewed in this study were diverse in terms of ethnicity, age, education, residence, marital status, family structure, and their children’s characteristics, but they were not representative of all fathers in Head Start programs. Third, this study utilized exploratory interview questions. As an exploratory study, the interview questions began with broad open-ended questions about fathers’ engagement (e.g. tell me about your experiences). As ideas about engagement emerged from fathers’ responses, follow-up probes were used. The strength of this data collection is that the descriptions of father engagement emerged directly from the fathers. However, more structured interview questions could explore engagement at a deeper level. Finally, data analysis and interpretation of results were conducted by the researcher and are subjective, since the researcher role and positionality can create bias in analyzing and interpretation of data.

Despite these limitations, this study also has several strengths. First, fathers were recruited directly rather than through mothers (Mitchell et al., 2007; Roy & In Kwon, 2007; Stahlschmidt et al., 2013). Second, findings were gleaned from the perspective of fathers themselves father than from reports from mothers or teachers (Honig, 2010; Palm & Fagan, 2008). Based on the strengths and limitations of this study, as well as the findings, several avenues of future research have emerged.
Future Research

The results of this study provide a better understanding of fathers’ perceptions of their engagement in the lives of their young children. First, future research is needed to examine perceptions from larger groups of fathers and in other types of ECPs. The use of focus groups with larger groups of men may encourage participants to share details they may withhold during interviews. Additionally, focus groups may deepen the discussion based on the variety of participants and their experiences. Furthermore, conducting qualitative research with fathers from other types of ECPs is necessary. Participants from this study were recruited from Head Start programs that have comprehensive standards on family engagement. Understanding engagement from the perspective of fathers from childcare programs, state funded pre—kindergarten programs, and Title 1 pre-k programs is pertinent to strengthen the research base. ECPs like childcare programs and state funded pre-kindergarten programs may have flexible family engagement policies leaving much interpretation to programs. On the other hand, federally funded programs, like Head Start and Title 1, have family engagement requirements programs must follow. Also, qualitative studies should explore fathers’ perceptions among Head Start programs with specific father engagement programs. The two programs used in this study did not have specific father engagement outreach programs. Other Head Start programs with specific outreach programs for fathers may yield different perceptions of engagement in programs.

Second, future studies should develop more structured questions to look at specific aspects of father engagement. In this study fathers were not directly asked how they view their role as a father yet several discussed their role and how it impacts their engagement. For example, fathers who viewed their role as a teacher described engagement in specific pre-
academic activities. Qualitative research that asks targeted questions about perceptions of the fatherhood role may provide valuable insight into how roles impact engagement at home and at school. Furthermore, these studies could be framed using symbolic interactionism. Symbolic interactionism explores the meaning people impose on objects, events, and behaviors (Murray & Hwang, 2015). Future studies could examine the meaning fathers give to their role in father-child relationships.

Third, future studies should examine diverse groups of fathers. This includes culturally and linguistically diverse fathers as cultural norms and practices impact engagement (Leavell et al., 2012). Additionally, greater examination is needed among fathers and families with diverse or unique circumstances like divorced fathers, stepfathers, incarcerated fathers, teen fathers, homosexual couples, and military families (McWayne et al., 2013; Porter & Olley, 2012). Understanding the diversity among fathers is crucial as practitioners decide how they define father engagement in their programs. As one participant in this study shared, “programs need to be aware that every family is different.”

Finally, research should continue to utilize various methodologies to explore father engagement. For example, mixed methods are necessary to investigate father’s perceptions of engagement and actual engagement. A future study could conduct focus groups or interviews to glean perceptions of engagement in programs then measure fathers’ actual engagement in programs. Mixed method studies may be more time consuming and expensive but they are necessary to further understanding father engagement.

**Conclusion**

Numerous studies have highlighted the unique contributions fathers make to their children’s development. However, studies investigating fathers’ perceptions of their engagement
in their children’s lives is scant. This study makes a valuable contribution to the field of early childhood education because it captures fathers’ opinions on their engagement with their children at home and engagement in Head Start programs. In depth interviews allowed fathers to illustrate the complexities of fatherhood. They gave detailed accounts of rewarding experiences like bonding with their child through home and community activities. Difficult experiences such as navigating their child’s new diagnosis, maintaining close relationships with their child across long distances, and constantly asking “am I doing this right?” were major concerns fathers shared.

This study adds to the limited body of qualitative research exploring fathers’ engagement. Other studies examining father engagement relied on secondary data analysis and reports from teachers and mothers (McWayne et al., 2013). Although those studies are valuable, they did not collect information directly from fathers. This study provided insight into ways fathers participate in their child’s Head Start program and factors influencing their engagement. This study echoed challenges found in previous studies like fathers’ work schedules and availability, perceived stigmas to participating in early childhood classrooms, and difficult mother-father relationships (Anderson et al., 2015; McWayne et al., 2013).

The present study asked fathers to offer suggestions to ECPs to increase father engagement. Fathers’ suggestions mirrored other recommended practices to increase father engagement. This included having events on the weekends to accommodate fathers’ schedules, view fathers and mothers as equal players in their child’s education, and increase male staff in programs to reduce the stigma of men in early childhood programs (Fagan & Palm, 2004; Roberts et al., 2014; Solomon-Fears, 2016). However, the most common suggestion was for programs to value the interest fathers have in their child’s learning and development. The fathers
in this study insisted that the information shared throughout the interviews be provided to early childhood programs. They felt undervalued by programs, and that by participating in this study their voices would be heard.
Head Start Father Research Study
Are you a father or father figure of a child in Head Start?
If so I want to talk to you!

I want to know about things you enjoy doing with your child. For your participation in my research study you will get a $20 gift card. Interviews will last about 45 minutes. Please call me at 704-577-4833 or email me at mkjones1@live.unc.edu if you want to participate.
APPENDIX B: DEMOGRAPHIC SHEET

If you are interested in talking to me about your role as a father, please complete the following questions and return this form to your child’s teacher. You may also email Meredith if you wish to participate at mkjones1@live.unc.edu. If you are selected for this interview you will be given a $20 gift card.

Your Age: ______

**Marital Status (Please circle one)**
- Single
- Married
- Divorced
- Other
- I do not wish to answer this question

**Education Level (Please circle one)**
- Did not finish high school
- High school diploma
- 2 year college degree
- 4 year college degree
- Graduate degree
- I do not wish to answer this question

**Race/Ethnicity (Please circle one)**
- African American
- Asian
- Latino
- Caucasian
- Other
- I do not wish to answer this question

**Employment (Please circle one)**
- Full time
- Part time
- I am unemployed
- I do not wish to answer this question

Number of Children: ______

Age of Children: _________

**Is Your Child in Head Start a**
- Girl
- Boy

**Does your child in Head Start have any special needs? (Please circle one)**
- Yes
- No
- I don’t know
- I do not wish to answer this question

Your Name: _________________________

Phone Number: _________________

Email Address: _____________________

Best time to contact you:
- Morning
- Afternoon
- Evening
### APPENDIX C: INITIAL CODEBOOK

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Perceptions of Engagement with Child</td>
<td>Statements about how the participant views his interactions with his child</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Activities at home</td>
<td>Statements regarding the participant's engagement with child at home</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Activities in the community</td>
<td>Statements regarding the participant's engagement with child in the community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Routine</td>
<td>Statements made by the participant regarding having an established routine at home</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal views of other parents thoughts</td>
<td>Statements made by the participant that represent his opinions or ideas of what other parents think related to parenting, education, engagement with children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Basic needs and care</td>
<td>Examples of the father describing how he participates in daily care activities with his child</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cognitive activities</td>
<td>Statements about activities the father does with the child that support the child's learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical Play</td>
<td>Statements about activities the father does with the child that support the child's growth and physical development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceptions of Engagement in Head Start Programs</td>
<td>Statements about how the participant views his engagement in programs or classrooms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Activities at school</td>
<td>Statements regarding specific examples of the participant’s engagement in the child's school or classroom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Making decisions regarding school</td>
<td>Statements the participant makes regarding future plans for the child's education (i.e. going to kindergarten, homeschooling)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship with school/teacher</td>
<td>Statements made by the participant describing his interactions with the child's school or teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Necessity</td>
<td>Statements from the participant describing his involvement in the program that relate to his child with special needs. For example, medical reasons, IEP meetings, transition meetings.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived Challenges to Engagement with Child</td>
<td>Statements reflecting challenges the participant faces to engagement with his child</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Category</td>
<td>Description</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child's temperament</td>
<td>Statements from the participant describing challenges faced to involvement because of the child's developmental stage, ability, or temperament</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship with child's mother</td>
<td>Statements made by the participant that describe his relationship with the child's mother</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work schedule</td>
<td>Statements from the participant describing how his work schedule is a barrier to his engagement with his child</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child's development</td>
<td>Statements from the participant describing challenges faced to involvement because of the child's developmental stage, ability, or temperament</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Perceived Challenges to Engagement in Program</strong></td>
<td>Statements reflecting challenges or barriers impacting a fathers' engagement in programs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal views of teachers</td>
<td>Statements made by the participant that represent his opinions of teachers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal views of school culture</td>
<td>Statements made by the participant that represent his opinions of school culture. Either the current program his child attends or schools in general.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender roles</td>
<td>Statements regarding expectations of each gender in regards to interacting with their child, or responsibilities at home, community, or school.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stigma</td>
<td>Statements made by participants describing how engaging with young children or Head Start programs is something the child's mother should do.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Perceptions of Fatherhood Role</strong></td>
<td>Statements made reflecting his view of his role as a father</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Worry</td>
<td>Statements made by the participant showing concern for their child's physical or emotional safety</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joy</td>
<td>Statements where the father expresses happiness about his child</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Questioning parenting ability</td>
<td>Statements of the participant reflecting on his ability to parent such as &quot;am I doing this right?&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suggestions for HS Programs</td>
<td>Statements made to offer specific ideas to programs to increase father engagement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Having their voices heard</td>
<td>Statements from the participant expressing an interest in having their opinions and thoughts shared with Head Start programs and researchers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bullying program</td>
<td>Statements made by the participant suggesting Head Start programs offer programs to prevent bullying</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mentoring program</td>
<td>Statements made by the participant suggesting Head Start programs should offer role model programs where fathers can be role models for children who do not have a father figure.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parenting classes</td>
<td>Statements made by the participant suggesting Head Start programs should offer trainings or classes for parents or fathers on their child's development of things to do with their child.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## APPENDIX D: REVISED CODEBOOK

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Description</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Activities in the community</td>
<td>Statements regarding the participant's engagement with child in the community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Routine</td>
<td>Statements made by the participant regarding having an established routine at home</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Basic needs and care</td>
<td>Examples of the father describing how he participates in daily care activities at home with his child</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cognitive activities</td>
<td>Statements about activities the father does at home with the child that support the child's learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical play</td>
<td>Statements about activities the father does at home with the child that support the child's growth and physical development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Long distance engagement</td>
<td>Examples of how the participant is engaged with his child from far away</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Activities at school</td>
<td>Statements regarding the participant’s engagement in the child's school or classroom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Making decisions regarding school</td>
<td>Statements the participant makes regarding future plans for the child's education (i.e. going to kindergarten, homeschooling)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication with school/teacher</td>
<td>Statements made by the participant describing his interactions with the child's school or teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Necessity</td>
<td>Statements regarding the participant's involvement at school that are out of necessity for the child's development or wellbeing (ex. IEP meetings, medical reasons related to the child)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child's development</td>
<td>Statements made by the participant suggesting their child's personality, temperament, and disability that make it challenging to be engaged.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship with child's mother</td>
<td>Statements made by the participant that describe how his relationship with the child's mother can challenge his involvement with his child</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work schedule</td>
<td>Statements made by the participant describing how his work schedule can be a challenge to his involvement with his child.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low energy</td>
<td>Statements about the participant's low energy or being tired from work that makes it challenging for him to engage with his child</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial</td>
<td>Statements regarding money being an obstacle to being able to do things with their child</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distance</td>
<td>Statements regarding the distance between the father and child that creates a challenge for the participant to be involved with their child</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technology</td>
<td>Examples of technology not working or limiting the ability of the father to communicate with his child</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stigma</td>
<td>Statements regarding the participant's beliefs of stigmas attached to men in early childhood classrooms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father's views of school</td>
<td>Statements regarding the father's perceptions of school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Absent fathers</td>
<td>Examples of the participant talking about absent fathers at a societal level (ex. absent father of minority families).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Open communication with both parents</td>
<td>Statements suggesting the participant thinks open communication is important for fathers to feel welcome</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trainings for fathers</td>
<td>Statements regarding specific trainings for fathers only</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weekend activities for children and fathers</td>
<td>Specific examples of the participant suggesting the program offer weekend activities for fathers and their children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Activities based on father's interests</td>
<td>Suggestions for programs related to things the father is interested in or has knowledge about (i.e. funds of knowledge)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX E: THEMATIC CHART

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Subcategories</th>
<th>Characteristic Interview Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Engagement at home</td>
<td>Routine</td>
<td>That’s part of his routine he has to do. He has a list on his wall with different colors and pictures. I try to keep the colors and the pictures together so he knows the little blue circle or the picture of the person brushing his teeth means when he wakes up that’s what he has to do first. In the mornings I get up, I get myself together for work, then get her up. I get her together for school in the morning and I take her to school. Her mom picks her up from school. Mom usually cooks her dinner, I may chip in at times. And mom usually gets her ready for bed like a bath and teeth brushing then I come in a read her a bedtime story or two. Then I tuck her into bed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Physical Activities</td>
<td>She loves to climb on me. I call myself her jungle gym. She likes to play football with me. You know, he loves to jump around and roll around. We like to ride bikes and he is big into hiking.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pre-academic activities</td>
<td>She gets hooked on some of her favorite books and we’ll read them for 3 or 4 days. She likes her busy books. It has this thing that reads the books and colors, shapes, and letters. Even if we do that I’m there sitting with her and helping to turn the page. She has a lot of classic books. Like</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Harold and the Purple Crayon and Where the Wild Things Are. We’re working on sight words and teaching her how to spell her name. I go over whatever colors and shapes they do at school we do them at home. Pointing out letters all around.

Cooking/Meal time And I let him cook with me. Like we like to cook waffles. I let him help and he’ll pour the syrup on. That’s one of my favorite things he does…when he fixes me breakfast. He’ll either fix my waffle or pour me a bowl of cereal. He’ll pour it all over the counter and make a mess but that’s okay. We’ll eat breakfast together. I like to cook for her cuz she loves to eat. That’s another thing I love to do. She wants to be helpin’. She’s gonna want to do something. I give her a little something. Like if we’re makin’ eggs I’ll let her stir.

Thematic Coding Categories

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Subcategories</th>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>Interview Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Engagement in the Community</td>
<td>Recreational Activities</td>
<td>On the weekends we will go the park down the road and play.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>We go running on the track at the rec center and play kickball</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>I try to take him places. Like a movie, or the waterpark when it’s</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Q2. Tell me what you do on the weekends with your child.
summer. This weekend we went and bought pumpkins. I love taking her to museums and we go to zoos aquariums.

We’ve gone to Myrtle Beach and Topsail Beach and Wilmington. He loves the water and hasn’t seen the beach a lot living in Colorado.

We recently went to Boston for a Kleefstra Syndrome weekend. It was a meeting or conference type thing with other families that have a kid with Kleefstra Syndrome.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Thematic Coding Categories</th>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Subcategories</th>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>Interview Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Q3. What is your favorite thing to do with your child?</td>
<td>Participant’s Favorite Activities</td>
<td>Activities</td>
<td>I guess my favorite thing to do is to roughhouse with them. When they climb all over me. To be honest my favorite thing to do with her is to read to her and talk to her. I like seeing her learn. The more she knows now the better she’ll be in the future.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Being a Father</td>
<td></td>
<td>I don’t take anytime with [child] for granted because it’s so precious. I don’t know if I’m a good dad but it’s the best thing in my world. But I question if I’m doing it right. Being a father to a special needs daughter…I’m grateful for my daughter. She’s my biggest joy. She’s my daughter. I have 24/7 care over her and I love it. Being her father is my favorite thing.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Q4. Tell me about some things that make it hard for you to play with your child at home or do things with them in the community

Challenges to Engagement

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Challenges to Engagement</th>
<th>Interview Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Work Schedule and Low Energy</td>
<td>I’m really busy with work and feel a lot of pressure with work. I finish from the store and go home and I’m so tired and my mind is still thinking about work. Sometimes you know, she wants to play and I just don’t have the energy when I get home from work.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child’s Behavior</td>
<td>Sometimes he is cranky because I won’t let him watch more than his hour of TV. It can be challenging when he is cranky. I think the biggest thing is [child’s] behavior problems that come up. But she will have meltdowns if something upsets her…or for other reasons.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Long Distance</td>
<td>I mean the space (long distance). I guess having to use Face Time and having it freeze up and stop working. Then they [children] can’t see my face so that’s hard. Well I kind of mentioned it before but my wife is more free and I’m more conservative and I can see a difference in the way we discipline. Since I’m far away my discipline style doesn’t matter and when we are together I can see a change in his behavior when I discipline him for certain things.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Thematic Coding Categories

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Subcategories</th>
<th>Characteristic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Interview Responses</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Q5. Tell me about something you’ve done with your child at their preschool
Engagement in Head Start Programs

Communicating with Teacher

I can call the school and talk to the teacher and she will tell me all the information I need to know. I can call or the teacher will call me. It’s all open.

There was a kid at school who threw a snowball and hit him in the face. They invited me to that call and told me what was going on. I made sure they knew I wanted to be involved.

Involvement related to child’s disability

When she first started school I needed to go to her class to feed her because at that time they were unable to feed her because they needed to know now…it was all medical. They couldn’t do anything with her until they were trained how to do it. They needed a note from her doctor saying she is g-tube fed. I had to go in and feed her.

When we got her diagnosis from the doctor her mom and me had a meeting with her teacher and a bunch of other people from the school system. I don’t know exactly who they all were. Some of them were her therapists. We talked about what was going on and where she would do best. She will stay in her new room for two years before going to kindergarten.

Attending Events

My wife is the one who does most of it. But if it’s something important like graduation or another meeting then I will go.
I think I should be there for the important stuff but can’t be there for everything.”

I go if they have things for parents to do. Like if they send home an invitation for parents to come for something and my sister can’t go then I try to go and if it’s something where dads are invited I make sure I go. I don’t want him to be the kid without a father or male role model there.

No Engagement in Programs

It’s not like I couldn’t find the time but I don’t. I know there are parents who go on field trips but I just haven’t.

I hated school. I mean, I know school is important for them but I don’t think I want to go back. I don’t think they would invite me to do anything.

Thematic Coding Categories

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Subcategories</th>
<th>Characteristic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Q6. Tell me about some things that make it hard for you to participate in your child’s school</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Challenges to Engagement in Head Start Programs</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Mother-Father Relationship and Absent Fathers

A note will be sent home on her mom’s week but it’s something that’s happening on my week and she doesn’t tell me about it. That makes me look bad and she likes doing things that make me look bad.

A lot of families now have deadbeat fathers or fathers in prison. A lot of this is goin’ on in cities. There are a lot of
single mothers taking care of their kids.

Father’s Personal Beliefs

A lot of fathers think it’s the job of the mother to do school stuff and take care of it but I think it’s up to the individual. I think fathers should get involved but they think it’s the woman’s job. That’s my opinion.

In general what keeps me from doing more is that it feels like it’s in the realm of the mother. It’s more of the role of the woman to take care of that stuff.

Thematic Coding Categories

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Subcategories</th>
<th>Characteristic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interview Responses</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Q7. What are some ways Head Start programs could make it easier for dads to participate in programs and services?

Suggestions for Head Start Programs

Parent Trainings

'I think they should provide opportunities to help fathers like parent trainings or something that focus on the father because maybe fathers may have the mindset that it’s the mom’s job to do that kind of stuff.

When my daughter was a baby someone from Head Start came over to talk to me and my wife about taking care of the baby and things like that. It was helpful because she was our first baby and we didn’t know what to do. But now that baby is a 4-year-old and she’s our first 4-year-old. It’s like they helped with the baby but we are supposed to know what to do with a 4-year-old. I mean, we
can figure things out easier because she can talk to us but as far as knowing how to teach her things...we’re kinda flying by the seat of our pants.

Open communication with both parents

Regardless of the marital status, communicate to both. Regardless if they’re living in the same home still communicate to both. Somehow to do an email, or social media, etc… Make sure to have open communication with both parents.

Communicating with Both Parents

Regardless of marital status, communicate to both. Regardless if they’re living in the same home still communicate with both. Somehow do an email or social media.

I feel like they should have more of an understanding of people’s circumstances. Not everybody comes from the same background so just be accepting of people’s life. Different families have different arrangements. So make sure they talk to both of us is my biggest suggestion.

Father’s Interests

I think they could have activities they know dads enjoy. Like building models. I think that’s a typical “dad” thing so if they had events like that maybe it would be a good way to get fathers in the door. I think it’s important to invite them in and have activities that they would enjoy. They know
the things we like to do with kids at home like sports or superheroes so bring those over to the school.

Liaisons for Fathers

Maybe get one or two fathers to be advocates or liaisons. I think that would help tremendously. That way fathers can ask questions to the liaison if they aren’t comfortable asking the teacher.

Another idea would be to have a time for fathers or male role models to have time together to get to know each other. Like barbershop talk. Sometimes we might have questions about things but don’t know who to ask. If we can ask other fathers then it’s not so embarrassing. Fathers or people like me might feel embarrassed to ask a female teacher or worker.

Weekend Activities

Maybe programs could have a sports day on a Saturday or let us do something with our hands like build something with the kids.

Schedule activities on the weekends so dads don’t have to take off work. Or a playground day where you help kids use the playground equipment or teaching them how to throw a ball or hit off a tee.
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REFERENCES


