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Researchers suggest that there is a correlation between student achievement and parental involvement (Abel, 2012; Fan & Chen, 2001; Harris & Goodall, 2008). Research pertaining to African American parental involvement and the achievement of African American students, particularly males, has been depicted through a deficit lens (Cross, 2003; Peters, 2007; Spencer, Fegley, & Harpalani, 2003). There is a dearth of literature on African American males who are performing well academically at the middle school level. This matter is compounded when single parents are introduced. Mothers, regardless of their marital status, play a significant role in the lives of their sons.

The purpose of this qualitative study is to identify the strategies, approaches, and expectations employed by single African American mothers to support the academic success of their middle school age sons. Open-ended interview questions served as the primary means of data collection for this study. The ten mothers who participated in this study provided a counternarrative to the current perception that African American single mothers do not support the academic pursuits of their children.

The major findings of this study included the mothers' belief in the importance of education as a core value that was instilled at an early age. High expectations, an authoritative, no-nonsense parenting style, resiliency, and the need to create a strong support system were also themes that emerged. The implications of this study indicate a need for school leaders and educators to revisit policies that are hindering the success of

African American males. The voices of the mothers of successful African American males is currently missing from the literature (Griffin & Allen, 2006). This study afforded ten single mothers the opportunity to share their personal experiences regarding the challenges of raising academically successful sons. Amplifying their voices is critical to shifting the narrative on African American single mothers and the ability of their sons to achieve.

AFRICAN AMERICAN SINGLE MOTHERS AND THEIR INFLUENCE ON THE
ACADEMIC SUCCESS OF THEIR MIDDLE SCHOOL AGE SONS

by

Lori Michelle Bolds

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Carl Lashley
Committee Chair

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This dissertation is dedicated to my loving parents Nathaniel and Margaret Bolds. Without their love, encouragement, and support, completing this journey would not have been possible. Thank you for being my first teachers and for instilling in me a love of learning. Daddy Bolds, although you were not able to see me finish the process, I hope that I have made you proud.

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This dissertation, written by Lori Michelle Bolds, has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of The Graduate School at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

Committee Chair Carl Lashley

Committee Members Jewell Cooper

Brian Clarida

March 7, 2019

Date of Acceptance by Committee

March 7, 2019

Date of Final Oral Examination

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

Background

At the banquet table of life, there are no reserved seats. You get what you can take and keep what you can hold. If you can't take anything, you won't get anything. And if you can't hold anything you won't keep anything. And you can't take anything without organization. (as cited in Smiley, 2006, p. 4)

A. Phillip Randolph, a towering figure within the American Labor and Civil Rights movements, believed in the power of action and effective struggle and coined the quote above. The question remains, what if one were never invited to the table? Such is the case for African American males and their ability to achieve in the current educational setting.

The achievement gap has been at the center of the economic, political, social, and educational debate for decades (Darling-Hammond, 2010). Over the years, a bevy of educational initiatives has been instituted in an effort to address the divide. According to Ladson-Billings (2006), the achievement gap is one of the most talked about issues in United States education. For the purpose of this study, the achievement gap is defined as “the disparities in standardized test scores between Black and White, Latino/a and White, and recent immigrant and White students (Ladson-Billings, 2006). Noguera (2000) contends:

Were the problems of confronting Black males regarded as an “American” problem, meaning an issue like cancer or global warming that must be taken on by the entire society in order to be addressed, the plight of Black males would be a subject that policymakers and research centers would embrace in an effort to find ways to reduce and ameliorate the hardships. (p. xviii)

This study will seek to uncover and illuminate the great lengths in which single African American mothers engage to support the educational pursuits of their middle school age sons. The mothers participating in the study met a specific set of criteria to include having a son who attends a Title I middle school and is also performing well academically.

African American Male Achievement

The current state of affairs for African American males paints a complex picture. African American males comprise 4 million or 7% of students in the United States (U.S. Department of Education, 2011). Throughout much of the literature, these students are described as “problematic,” “in crisis,” “left behind,” “endangered,” “remedial,” and “extinct” (Howard, 2014). A report conducted by the Schott Foundation revealed that approximately 52% of African American males in U.S. high schools graduated in 2008 compared to 58% of Latino males and 78% of White males. Rather than take into account educational policies or practices that may be unjust, the blame for the high dropout rate is placed squarely on the shoulders of the African American males.

In comparison to their peers, African American males are underrepresented and are missing from gifted education and accelerated programs (Ford, 2011; Ford & Whiting, 2010; Henfield, Moore, & Wood, 2008). Researchers believe there are a number

of explanations regarding this phenomenon. According to Henfield, Moore, and Wood (2008), students:

. . . frequently lack access to, drop out of, or choose not to participate in gifted education programs for reasons ranging from low teacher expectations, lack of motivation to do the work, and fear of separation from their social or peer group to the perception that the gifted education environment is “the wrong place” for African American students. (p. 434)

Although many students experience shortcomings in school, it appears that African American males are judged more harshly than their peers (Howard, 2014; Noguera, 2008). Also noteworthy is that while being underrepresented in accelerated programs, these same young men are overrepresented in special education programs (Harry & Klinger 2006; Howard, 2014; Skiba et al., 2008).

Single African American Mothers

One of the most widely recognized factors that impact a child’s learning and development is parental involvement (Abel, 2012). Current literature on parental involvement is viewed through a White middle-class lens while African American parental involvement is viewed from a deficit perspective (Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Olivios, 2003; Wells & Serna, 1989). Research on African American single families portrays them as consisting of never-married women raising their children in households without other adults (Murray, Bynum, Brody, Willert, & Stephens, 2001).

According to P. Jackson, Brooks-Gunn, Huang, and Glassman (2000), “a majority of African American males are being raised by single mothers” (p. 1409). Despite this, very few studies have focused on African American single mothers’ experience with

raising sons (Gantt & Grief, 2009). Single Black mothers have been marginalized by class, race, and gender inequities and have been identified as “bad mothers” (Elliott, Powell, & Brenton, 2015). Although the literature on single African American mothers views them from a deficit lens, there are those mothers that are defying the odds and are raising children that are performing well academically. This study will pay particular attention to the efforts and expectations set forth by single African American mothers raising middle school age sons to support their academic achievement.

Rationale

I have been passionate about working with young people for as long as I can remember. I was raised by parents who were high school teachers. They gave me firsthand knowledge of the effort and dedication that is required of teachers who are serious about their craft. I have observed that African American males have been cast in a negative light in the educational system. Early in my career, I saw how differently African American males were treated when compared to their peers. Some educators viewed them with disdain while others were simply afraid of them. I began to wonder why some educators held such fear about African American males. I wondered why similar actions of White students were depicted as “cute” or typical behavior while the same actions taken by African American males became offenses worthy of suspension.

As I transitioned from the classroom to administration, the achievement of African American males continued to be a priority for me. In my role as principal, I was made more aware of the microscope African American males were placed under. Somehow, the intelligence of African American males became synonymous with the

neighborhoods they lived in or the professions of their parents. They were judged on factors outside of their control. These factors fueled speculation and doubt about their ability to perform academically. The more I served students and in leadership roles, the more I wondered about the plight of African American males and effective practices supportive of their success. These questions and observations serve as the catalyst for this research study.

Problem Statement

The gap in achievement between African American students and their White peers continues to widen (Brown & Davis, 2000; Davis, 2008; Howard, 2014; Noguera 1996; Polite & Davis, 1999). African American males are being outperformed by their White peers. Research has shown that parent involvement has a significant impact on student achievement (Harris & Goodall, 2008; Fan & Chen, 2001; Auberach, 2008). Despite the bleak outlook on the achievement of African American males, there are still a large number of them who are excelling academically.

Many of these young men are being raised in households led by single mothers. Research of African American single families portrays them as consisting of never-married women raising their children in households without other adults (Murray, Bynum, Brody, Willert, & Stephens, 2001).

Significance of the Study

African American males have been viewed through a deficit lens that discounts their talents and gifts (Bruton & Robles-Pina, 2009; Hargrove & Seay, 2011; Howard, 2014). The intent of this study is to illuminate the stories of African American males who

are experiencing success in school through the voices of their mothers and amplify the voices of and highlight the strategies employed by their single mothers to assist the students in their educational pursuits. In an effort to change the narrative on African American males, it is important to research and share the experiences of those who are defying the odds and excelling academically. Middle school was specifically selected for this study. Unlike elementary and secondary school, middle school is a time where students are not only experiencing changes in their bodies but are adjusting to more difficult curriculum. Middle school serves as the connector of one's educational journey and plays a pivotal role in their development.

There are several benefits to be gained from this research. The research findings can be replicated into instructional practices for future generations. Also, the study provides African American single mothers a platform to voice their perspectives about the educational system and the steps they took to positively influence the academic success of their sons.

Research Questions

The purpose of this study is to identify strategies, approaches, and expectations employed by single African American mothers of academically successful middle school age sons. The dissertation will provide an opportunity to hear and amplify the voices of single African American mothers—voices that warrant further exploration by researchers.

Four significant questions will guide my research regarding the strategies utilized by single African American mothers to support the academic success of their middle school age sons:

1. How do single African American mothers draw on their own life experiences to support their academically successful middle school age sons?
2. What approaches do these mothers use to navigate the educational system?
3. How do these mothers exercise acts of mothering to support the academic success of their sons?
4. What support do these mothers rely on to support their son's academic success?

Definitions

Academically Successful—For the purpose of this research study, academic success is defined by performance on report cards (i.e., student has earned grades of all A's or all A's and B's); annual attendance records (i.e., no more than five absences during the academic school year; no disciplinary or office referrals; and performance on formative assessments such as end-of-grade tests (i.e., student scored in the proficient range, or at or above grade level).

Acting White—Description of a set of social interactions in which Black students ridicule other Black students for investing in behaviors deemed characteristic of Whites such as speaking Standard English, raising a hand in class; and making good grades (Fryer & Torelli, 2006, as cited in Ford & Whiting, 2010).

African American male—A male person of African descent born and raised in the United States between the ages of eleven and fourteen and currently in middle school (Brown and Davis, 2000).

African American single mother—A female of African descent born and raised in the United States and serves as the head of her household (Brown and Davis, 2000)

Cultural Capital—Refers to a collection of symbolic elements such as skills, tastes, posture, clothing, mannerisms, material belongings, and credentials that are acquired through being part of a particular social class. The set of languages, customs, styles, and behaviors that produce and reproduce social class positions. Cultural capital comes in three forms—embodied, objectified, and institutionalized (Bourdieu, 1977; Lareau, 1987, 1989, as cited in Abrams & Gibbs, 2002).

Deficit Thinking—The dominant paradigm that shapes U.S. educators' explanations for widespread and persistent school failure among children from low-income homes and children of color (Skrla & Scheurich, 2001, p. 235).

Parental Involvement—Based on Epstein's (1990, 1995) model of family-school-community partnerships. The overlapping spheres of home, school, and community influences that shape children's learning and developing and a six-part typology of forms of parental involvement that schools should promote: basic obligations of parenting, home-school communication, volunteering at school, learning at home, school decision making, and community-school connections (Abram & Gibbs, 2002).

Scholar Identity—Whiting (2006) contends that self-efficacy, future orientation, willing to make sacrifices, internal locus of control (LOC), self-awareness, need for achievement, need for affiliation, academic self-confidence, racial identity, and masculinity are ingredients that contribute to an African American male's scholar identity.

Single Mother—“Single” when used in the context of “single parent family/household,” means only one parent is present in the home. The parent may be never-married, widowed divorced, or married, spouse absent (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019).

Successful African American middle school male—Middle school age male scoring at grade level on district and state formal assessments with no discipline referrals who receives satisfactory grades on report cards in the categories of conduct and grades.

Title I School—an elementary, middle, or high school that is eligible to receive federal funding based on having a significant number of low-income students (U.S. Department of Education, 2015).

Overview of the Theoretical/Conceptual Framework

A gap in the achievement of White and minority students has existed for some time. In addition to ineffective teachers and curriculum, lack of parental support and a lack of resources have also been used to explain this phenomenon (Ford & Thomas, 1997). A theoretical perspective that is widely accepted by educators as a root cause is that of cultural deficit thinking (Solorzano, 2001). The notion of cultural deficit thinking is one that impacts both African American males and single mothers and serves as the theoretical framework for this study. According to Valencia (1997), educational deficit thinking is:

a form of “blaming the victim” that views the alleged deficiencies of low-income groups and racially and culturally different groups as mainly responsible for their school problems, academic failure, and social outcomes, while frequently holding structural inequality and/or systematic inequities without blame. (p. 7)

This deficit viewpoint places school failure on the shoulders of the students (Dray & Wisneski, 2011).

Cultural deficit thinking affords teachers the opportunity to blame students and their parents for their failures, yet it absolves the teachers and the schools of their responsibility for these students (Cooper, 2006; Ford & Thomas, 1997; Gorski, 2006; Valencia, 1997). The occurrence of deficit thinking affects the way educators view African American students (Hernstein & Murray, 1994). Educators may believe that African American students are genetically deficient or culturally disadvantaged.

Cultural deficit theory can be traced back to early racist theories and practices (Menchaca, 1997; Castro, 2014). Scientific work conducted during the 18th and 19th centuries supported the claims that minorities possessed cultural deficits in addition to mental and physical ones. In the 1870s, Social Darwinism provided scientific support through genetic evidence in the belief that deficits existed due to race (Valencia, 1997). This school of thought continued to be widely accepted until the 1970s. Terms such as *at-risk* began to be used to label minority students in the 1980s. The belief was held that minority students shared the following characteristics: low academic, poor performance on standardized test, a disconnect from school, have a low socioeconomic status and because of these factors are at-risk of dropping out of school (Donnelly, 1987; Orstein & Levine, 2000).

Methodology

According to Marshall and Rossman (2011), qualitative methodology “delves in depth into complexities and processes” (p. 2). Qualitative methodology investigates the

why and how, not just the what, where, and when (Yin, 2003, 2009, 2016). In order to close the achievement gap, it is necessary to understand “how” the mothers of successful African American middle school males contribute to their success. Understanding how these women achieved this goal will allow other African American mothers and parents the opportunity to replicate their practices or refine their own practices to better meet the needs of their own sons. Baxter and Jack (2008) suggest that two key approaches guide qualitative interview studies. Stake (2006, 2010) proposed one approach while the other approach was proposed by Yin (2003, 2009, 2016). Both have their foundation in a constructivist paradigm. According to Searle (1995), constructivism is built upon the premise of a social construction of reality.

Summary

The current educational landscape for African American males is often perceived as bleak. The research on African American males tends to characterize their academic and behavioral abilities through a deficit lens. By doing so, this fails to take into account the heights of academic achievement they could accomplish (Howard, 2014; Luster & McAdoo 1994; Noguera, 2008). It is important for studies to shed light on the myriad of African American males who are achieving and excelling in schools. It is important to examine the factors that contribute to the success these students are able to make despite the conditions they find themselves in (Griffin & Allen, 2006). One avenue to explore is the impact of mothers on their sons. Very few studies have focused on cases where single African American mothers are raising sons that are achieving academic success (Griffin & Allen, 2006).

In Chapter II, the achievement of African American males and the factors that contribute to their academic success are explored through a survey of the literature landscape. High teacher expectations and culturally relevant pedagogy are just a few of the elements needed for African American males to succeed. The topic of parental involvement will be examined from multiple lenses. A review of the various models of parent involvement will provide background knowledge on the subject while showing its evolution over the years. Particular attention will be given to single mothers, their parenting style, and their efforts to raise academically successful young men. For the purpose of this research, academic success is defined by performance on report cards, no discipline referrals, attendance records, and performance on formative assessments such as district benchmarks, and summative assessments such as state end-of-grade tests.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

This chapter will summarize the literature and research relevant to this study. The review of the literature will provide support to the study by identifying key concepts that address African American males at the middle school level. It is important to understand the social and emotional changes that impact students during these critical years.

Research on African American males will highlight the educational landscape as well as examine teacher expectations and deficit thinking. Literature on parental involvement reveals that there are several models that have evolved over the years. The sections that follow will examine African American parental involvement and present the factors that distinguish their involvement from previous models. The chapter will conclude with a discussion of the single African American mothers. The research provided suggests that the involvement of African American mothers can positively support the academic success of their sons.

Substantial research has been conducted on the achievement of African American students (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Delpit, 1995; Howard, 2014; Noguera, 2008). The gap in achievement that exists between these students and their White counterparts has been well documented, yet the problem still remains (Brown & Davis, 2000; Noguera, 2008; Polite & Davis, 1999; Price, 2000). For the purpose of this study, the achievement gap is defined as “the disparities in standardized test scores between Black and White,

Latino/a and White, and recent immigrant and White students” (Ladson-Billings, 2006). Despite the stark statistics regarding the academic performance of African American students, males in particular, there is a dearth of research on those who have been academically successful.

Literature on school success indicates that parental involvement is a key factor in student achievement (Fan & Chen, 2001; Harris & Goodall, 2008). Extensive research has been conducted on the topic of parental involvement (Abrams & Gibbs, 2002; Auberach, 2008; Epstein, 1990, 1995; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997; Lareau, 1989, 2003); however, it is narrowly researched as a contributor to closing the achievement gap. From the development of theories to strategies shared in order to assist schools in improving engagement, parental involvement continues to be an area of focus for many schools. Researchers have shown a correlation between parental involvement and student achievement (Auberach, 2007; Lareau, 2003; Epstein, 1990; Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Much of the research has been conducted utilizing a White, middle-class lens (Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Olivos, 2003; Wells & Serna, 1989). The question remains: “What does parental involvement look like for marginalized groups of parents, particularly single African American mothers?”

Middle School

Transitioning from elementary school to middle school can be quite challenging for students. “Most research on middle school transition focuses on developmental and psychological changes around the age of transition, and investigates or discusses the impact of such changes on academic performance, motivation and behavior in schools”

(Vanlaar, Reardon, & Kalogrides, 2014, p. 1). In addition to learning to navigate a new educational setting and adjusting to multiple teachers, students have to deal with emotions that come from being the oldest in elementary school to the youngest in middle school (Bellemore, Villarreal, & Ho, 2011; Ryan, Shim, & Makara, 2013; Vanlaar et al., 2014). Early adolescence is considered a challenging time for youth. Adolescence is a critical time of development in the minds and bodies of children (Peterson, 1988; Ryan et al., 2013). Additionally,

these students are beginning to become more and more responsible for their own learning as they leave elementary school and transition into high school. Adolescents are striving toward independence during a time in their lives when physiological and psychological changes are occurring rapidly. The rapid changes and desire for independence can make adolescents more self-conscious about their bodies and their emotions. (Peterson, 1998, p. 591)

As adolescents transition to middle school, they are developmentally ready for academically challenging work, yet educators must acknowledge the social aspects of learning (Peterson, 1988; Shaunessy & Alvarez-McHatton, 2009; Vanlaar et al., 2014). Despite being ready, teacher expectations play a role in student performance, especially for African American males. Vanlaar et al. (2014) stated the racial achievement gap widened for African American students when they transition to the middle school. “Teacher bias and stereotypes begin early in students’ education” (Newton & Sandoval, 2015). In fact, teacher expectations are consistent predictors of academic performance for elementary, middle, and secondary students (Tyler & Boelter, 2008, Newton & Sandoval, 2015).

Achievement of African American Males

Middle school students face a lot of adversity just from being themselves. Middle schoolers experience a lot of changes from transitioning from elementary to middle school, growth changes, hormone changes, personality changes, social, and academic changes (Vanlaar et al., 2014). Fordham (1996) and Ogbu (1999) have hypothesized that understanding and improving the achievement of African American students is very difficult. O'Neil, Challenger, Renzulli, Crapser, and Webster (2013) suggested that adolescent boys in general are in crisis with Hispanic and African American boys showing the least gains academically while behaviorally both groups are the most disciplined. Out of the two groups, African American boys show the most struggle. Whether the perceived struggle of African American children is due to adversities or due to stereotypes is also a concern stated McGee (2013). The achievement of African American male students has gained notable attention from scholars and educators in recent years. Within the past two decades, there has been an increase in the literature, both academic (Fashola, 2005; Ferguson, 2000; Hopkins, 1997; McGee, 2013; Polite & Davis, 1999; O'Neil et al, 2013; Taylor & Phillips, 2006) and popular (Hrabowski, Maton, & Greif, 1998; Kunjufu, 1985, 1989, 2005; Porter, 1998) regarding the underachievement of African American male students in U.S. schools. Although they rank among the lowest in academics, African American males are ranked the highest among students who are suspended from school, drop out of school, score poorly on standardized tests, and are underrepresented in gifted education (McGee, 2013; Whiting,

2006, 2009). Additionally, African American males are underrepresented in the areas that are associated with success (Fergus, Noguera, & Martin, 2014).

As the gap continues to widen between African American students and their White counterparts, educators are searching to identify factors which suggest why African American males continue to be outperformed by their peers. Whitman (2006) contends that a missing ingredient in closing the achievement gap is the limited attention educators devote to developing a positive image of African American males as scholars. Swinton et al. (2011) referred to the fact that “traditional gender stereotypes were reflected in youth’s attributions about reasons underlying their academic successes and failures” (p. 1495). Likewise, O’Neil et al. (2013) believe middle school urban boys need programs that help them focus in becoming positive role models in their society, especially when related to their gender identity, believing the need to promote strong masculine identities. Whiting’s (2006) concept of scholar identity notes the likelihood of Black males achieving academically is greater when they possess a scholar identity. These same students are more likely to be viewed as gifted by educators, if they demonstrate they are able to achieve at high levels. Additionally, he asserts that in order to break the cycles of underachievement it is necessary for educators to assist Black males in developing this scholar identity at an early age (Whiting, 2006). McGee (2013) reported many African American males feel the need to embrace negative stereotypes; however, some do fight back against stereotypes. McGee (2013) further stated “stereotype management describes the range of strategies and various forms of individual agency that high-achieving Black students employ to reduce the academic impact of

demeaning stereotypes while maintaining a high standard of academic achievement” (p. 253).

Researchers have indicated in multiple studies that no one single factor caused the achievement gap. Factors such as low teacher expectations, deficit thinking, peer pressure, fear of being accused of acting white, and student engagement are a few of the influences that contribute to the achievement gap. Wiggan (2014) notes there are several studies on the failure of minority students, yet very few studies focus on successful African American students. African American male students, if nurtured, represent a largely untapped reservoir of potential (Henfield et al., 2008). Because of this, it is essential to consider the experiences and perceptions of African American students. Students must be given the opportunity to share their experiences and articulate their fears and concerns.

Although research exists on gifted education programs, the examination of minority representation in those programs is quite limited. Very few studies have focused on African American students and their experiences in gifted education programming (Henfield, Moore, & Wood, 2008). However, in this era of high stakes accountability, it is imperative to study African American students and gifted education to ensure no child is left behind. In an ethnographic study, Staiger researched gifted magnet programs. The researcher discovered that the lack of minorities is likely to intensify the psychological damage that segregated schools had on minority children and that *Brown v. Board of Education* was supposed to overcome (Henfield et al., 2008). African American male students, if nurtured, represent a largely untapped reservoir of potential (Henfield et al.,

2008). Because of this, it is essential to consider the experiences and perceptions of African American students. Students must be given the opportunity to share their experiences and articulate their fears and concerns.

Sarouphim (2004) asserts that the main reason for minority underrepresentation is a deficit perspective that directly or indirectly influenced the access of culturally diverse students to gifted education. Educators who ascribe to this way of thinking believe that students from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds are cognitively inferior. This notion of inferiority is coupled by a narrow definition of intelligence (Sarouphim, 2004). Simply relying on standardized testing as the only means of assessment further excludes African American students from gifted education programs. Ford, Grantham, and Bailey (1999) offer nine suggestions to address the issue:

1. Culturally sensitive definitions and theories must be adopted by school districts.
2. Instruments must be chosen with care. Those deemed valid, reliable, and culturally sensitive should be adopted.
3. Interventions must address the underachievement and other factors that hide students' abilities.
4. School personnel must receive substantive and ongoing training in both gifted and multicultural education.
5. Gifted programs must be more representative of the diverse student population.
6. Efforts must be made to increase minority teacher representation in gifted programs.
7. Family and community members must be involved throughout the recruitment and retention process.
8. Gifted Black males need to have a supportive learning environment.
9. Schools must help to develop resilience among Black males for them to participate successfully in gifted programs. (p. 17)

African American males have the ability to participate and excel in gifted education programs when provided with the right kind of support.

Teacher Expectations

Teacher expectations are essential to the academic achievement and success, particularly for African American students. The effects of teacher expectations have been well-examined in the literature (McGee, 2013; Newton & Sandoval, 2015; Sandilos, Rimm-Kaufman, & Cohen, 2017; Tyler & Boelter, 2008). “Teacher’s educational expectations for students also influence student’s academic attainment” (Newton & Sandoval, 2015). Negative teacher perception and low teacher expectations contribute to the underachievement of African American males. Both McGee’s (2013) and Newton and Sandoval’s (2015) studies discuss how stereotypes have influence on how a student views him or herself. Most negative stereotypes break a student’s motivation and very few students use that negative motivator as a drive to succeed. Likewise, Sandilos et al. (2017) discusses how disparities in achievement exist between minority and non-minorities some of these disparities may be connected with how students perceive treatment of them by their teachers. Teachers are one of the most critical groups needed to assist in increasing student academic performance. Khalifa (2011) discusses teacher expectation as one of the means for narrowing the achievement gap and increasing academic outcomes for African American students. The teachers who work most effectively with African American males are those who take the time to develop positive relationships with their students (Foster & Peele, 1999).

Deficit thinking is a factor that contributes to the achievement gap and to low teacher expectations. Walker (2008) suggests, “Deficit thinking theory blame school failure for these students on the students’ lack of readiness to learn in the classroom, the parents’ lack of interest in their education, and the families’ overall lifestyle” (p. 577). McGee (2013) further stated, “the explicit racial practices that perpetuate the U.S. educational system are coded as cultural differences, leaving little attention to the power of structural and institutional inequalities” (p. 260). The preconceived views educators have about African American students have a significant impact on their student achievement and success. Many school practices support this deficit thinking and preventing African American students from achieving. As a result, these negative assumptions and stereotypes of African American males create a toxic learning environment of low expectations and reinforce a cycle of failure. “Educators and educational researchers should incorporate broader understandings of the social, psychological, and emotional damage of stereotypes along with the academic ramifications of being constantly perceived as intellectually inferior as a Black student” (McGee, 2013, p. 260). A study conducted by the Schott-Foundation (2012) suggested 13 conditions impacted the success and failure for students, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1

Conditions Impacting the Success and Failure for Students

Conditions for Success	Conditions for Failure
Equitable resources to support students to master rigorous, content standards-based education	Watered-down curriculum for disadvantaged students in school inadequately supported by funding far below that in successful suburban schools
Universal, well-planned, and high-quality preschool education for all three- and four-year-olds.	Insufficient access to well-planned and high-quality preschool education for disadvantaged three- and four-year-olds
Programs to address student and school needs attributable to high-poverty, including intensive early literacy, small class size, after school care, and summer programming, and social and health services	Little intensive early literacy, large class-size, short school days, no weekend and summer programs, and a few social and health services
New and rehabilitated facilities to adequately house all programs, relieve overcrowding, and eliminate health and safety violations	Old, overcrowded, and ill-maintained facilities
State accountability to ensure progress in improving student achievement	Inexperienced and ill-trained teachers Little or no state accountability to ensure progress in improving student achievement
	Lack of educationally sound living and learning environments Lack of parent and community engagement in the reform process

Note. Source: Schott Foundation for Public Education. (2012). *The Urgency of Now: Schott 50 State Report on Public Education and Black Males*. Retrieved from www.blackboysreport.org.

Parental Involvement

Parental involvement is one of the most widely recognized factors that impact a child's learning and development (Abel, 2012). Despite the important role it plays, factors such as socioeconomic status, educational background, residential status, and the

sex of a parent can impact the level and type of parental involvement (U.S. Department of Education, 2011). There are several models of parental involvement each with its own distinctions and characteristics.

Grolnick and Slowiaczek (1994) discovered a correlation between certain types of parental involvement and improvement in student grades. They proposed a three-pronged framework that identified behavioral involvement, cognitive-intellectual, and personal involvement in parents. Within their framework, Grolnick and Slowiaczek placed emphasis on both home-based and school-based involvement strategies. They believed that in addition to parents assisting their children with their homework, it was important for them to expose children to educationally stimulating activities and experiences. The final prong of their framework stressed the personal involvement of parents in the education of their children. The attitudes and expectations held by parents about school reflected a joy for learning while also conveying their socialization around the value and utility of education. It was believed these components impacted students and their academic performance in school.

Unlike Grolnick and Slowiaczek, Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (2005), proposed a parent involvement model for investigating how parents become involved in the education of their children. This model consists of three domains believed to positively influence a parent's decision to become involved in his or her child's formal education. In essence, the domains address the personal motivation of parents and the roles they expect to play in their children's education. The first domain focuses on parental efficacy or how parents perceive their ability to assist with academic related tasks. The second

domain involves invitations that parents receive from the school that request their participation and attendance at school activities or schools sponsored events. The third and final domain entails life context which is composed of parental knowledge and skills and the time and energy that parents put into assisting their children with academic endeavors.

Hester (1989) proposed five types of parent involvement that covered a broad spectrum. The five types include:

1. Communication with parents—promote direct and personal contact between school faculty and parents
2. Parents as teachers—provide opportunities for parents to work with their child on specific learning goals through homework projects and home administered tests
3. Parents as supporters of activities—get parents involved in school activities as a way to enhance communication and relationships with school staff
4. Parents as learners—provide parent education programs that are cooperatively developed with parents and staff
5. Parents as advocates—emergence of a group of parents who are educational advocates willing to serve in capacities to help improve

The Hoover-Dempsey/Sandler model shares similarities with Hester's model. Both models focus on schools reaching out to parents and also having parents assist their children in academic-related tasks.

Rather than creating a singular definition of parent involvement, researchers have focused more on categorizing the various types of parent involvement. Gordon (1977) presented six distinct types of parent involvement: (1) parents as bystanders, (2) parents as decision makers, (3) parents as classroom volunteers, (4) parents as paid paraprofessionals, (5) parents as learners, and (6) parents as teachers at home. This research and classification of parental involvement was extended through the works of Williams and Chavkin (1989). In their research, they expanded the six typologies of Gordon (1977) pertaining to parental involvement.

In their model, Williams and Chavkin (1989) define parent involvement using six roles: audience, home tutor, program supporter, co-learner, advocate, and decision-maker. As an audience member, parents support their child as a member of the school community. This is commonly expressed through participation in activities such as bake sales. The role of home tutor refers to parents helping their children at home with school work or other educational materials. The role of program supporter involves parents assisting in school activities such as volunteering in a classroom or chaperoning a field trip. As a co-learner, parents attend in-service workshops with teachers and principals to learn more about teaching methods, child development, and other topics of interest. By making proposals aimed at changing existing school practices and policies, parents serve as advocates. In their role as decision-maker, parents participate in school decisions by serving on advisory boards, school committees, or governing boards.

Epstein's (1995) seminal framework explicates six types of parental involvement. They are:

- Type One: refers to parenting or helping families establish home environments that support children as students
- Type Two: refers to communicating or designing effective forms of school-to-home and home-to-school communications about school initiatives and student progress
- Type Three: refers to volunteering or recruiting and organizing parents to help and support with school initiatives
- Type Four: refers to learning at home or providing information and ideas to families about ways they can help children at home with their homework and other curriculum-related endeavors
- Type Five: refers to decision-making or including parents in school decisions, developing parent leaders and representatives
- Type Six: refers to collaborating with the community or identifying and integrating resources from the community to strengthen school programs, family practices, and student development and success

Furthermore, Epstein's typologies were based on three overlapping spheres of influence. The spheres include home, school, and community. While a ground-breaking work in the body of research on parental involvement, Epstein's model was criticized for its Eurocentric values (Smith & Wohlsetter, 2009).

With each of the models of parental involvement, parents are actively involved and visible within the school community or at the school. Whether they are volunteering at the school or serving on school-based committees, these models do not consider the

full spectrum of parents—especially parents whose work schedules or lifestyles prevent them from serving any of the six role types posited by Epstein. The inability to be physically present does not make them any less concerned about the educational endeavors of their children.

African American Parental Involvement

Parental involvement in education has been socially constructed to privilege White, middle-class norms and the expectations of educators (Auerbach, 2007; Jordan, Orozco, & Averett, 2002; Lareau, 1989, as cited in Auerbach, 2007). Prior research has demonstrated ethnic differences in the level of parental involvement strategies (Baker & Stevenson, 1986; Hill & Tyson, 2009). African Americans, in particular, have had a long tumultuous history with American schools (Cross, 2003; Spencer, Fegley, & Harpalani 2003). From a cultural perspective, African Americans have placed much value on education; however, their negative experiences with discrimination have led to mistrust.

Research pertaining to African American parental involvement focused on involvement from a deficit manner (Peters, 2007). Lightfoot (2004) challenges this notion in her examination of parental involvement. She contends,

This pattern of describing middle-class *parental involvement* as dangerous but potentially valuable contrasts strongly with accounts of the so-called *other* type of parent. These include families that are low-income, linguistically, ethnically, or culturally diverse—those that are often described as *at risk* to use another highly loaded term. Even relatively positive, or sympathetic, accounts of the lives of such families tend to center on the idea that such parents are empty, or lacking, as expressed in the use of the words such as *don't* or *can't*. (pp. 98–99)

Lightfoot continues, adding,

Rather, then, than considering what lower income, language minority, or so-called *diverse*, families can contribute to their children's upbringing, or to their children's school, most accounts of *parental involvement* among low-income parents focus either on what the families lack or on what the schools can do to teach them to exemplify the common metaphor framing lower income parents as empty. (p. 99)

The relationship between parents and teachers is also a key factor in parental involvement. Archer-Banks and Behar-Horenstein (2008) conducted a study to determine the factors that contributed to African American parents being involved in their children's middle school experience. Although the parents recognized the importance of parental involvement, they conveyed that the following influenced their involvement: (1) family structure and socioeconomic status, (2) school personnel's expectations of parents, as well as the (3) practices and policies of middle school personnel. Teacher attitudes can have a tremendous impact on how parents choose to engage with schools. Helping teachers understand parents from varied backgrounds and cultures may help prevent them from making false assumptions that parents who they view as not actively working with teachers or the school care less about their children.

Research conducted by Gutman and McLloyd (2000) on the involvement of minority parents indicates that the involvement of parents of high achieving African American students differs from those who were struggling academically. Parents of high performing African American students used strategies such as tutoring, requesting additional academic work, and close monitoring of their child's homework schedule to support their children at home. Additionally, these parents

held high expectations for their children's academic performance, supported their academic inspirations, were actively involved in their children's schooling, and maintained contact with school personnel. High-achieving African American parents also ensured that their children were actively involved in various types of community-based activities such as dance, art, music, and religious groups. (p. 14)

This advocacy on the part of parents provides African American students with another layer of support.

Another factor that influences the involvement of African American parents in their child's education is social class. The literature suggests that middle-class and working-class African American parents often navigate very different educational environments (Archer-Banks & Behar-Horenstein, 2008; Diamond & Gomez, 2004).

Diamond and Gomez (2004) suggest:

Typically, working-class African American parents have families of three or more with combined incomes of \$35,000 or less and live in more economically and socially challenging neighborhoods with lower quality schools than middle-class African Americans. Middle-class African American parents typically have families of three to four with combined incomes of \$65,000 and above and tend to have greater access to human, financial, social, and cultural resources than working-class parents. (p. 387)

Diamond and Gomez (2004) further suggest that middle-class and working-class African American parents customize their children's academic experiences differently.

In terms of course selection and class placement, middle-class African American families have a tendency to be more proactive in decisions regarding their children (Archer-Banks & Behar-Horenstein, 2008). Conversely, working-class parents tend to be more confrontational in their dealings with their child's school (Diamond & Gomez

2004). It is believed this may be due to negative experiences they had when they were students (DeMoss & Vaughn, 2000 as cited in Archer-Banks & Behar-Horenstein, 2008).

In their study on the factors that influenced African American parents, Archer-Banks and Behar-Horenstein (2008) revealed five key themes: (a) the importance of parental involvement, (b) types of parental involvement, (c) the impact of family structure and socioeconomic status, (d) expectations of parents and school personnel, and (e) the impact of middle school practices and policies on parental involvement. It is important to note that African American parents who participated in the study repeatedly referenced the ways in which middle school policies and procedures impacted their level of involvement (Archer-Banks & Behar-Horenstein, 2008). The manner in which discipline was dispensed and the reasons students received consequences also contributed to the willingness of African American parents to be involved in their child's school programs and activities.

Parent involvement in school and the roles of parents tends to be viewed based on “what they do” and how that fits or does not fit in with the needs of their child (Barton, Drake, Perez, St. Louis, & George, 2004). In their research on parent engagement Barton et al. (2004) propose a framework that provides a data-driven approach that addresses parent engagement particularly at the elementary level. Their framework, the Ecologies of Parental Engagement (EPE),

mark a fundamental shift in how we understand parents' involvement in their children's education—a shift from focusing primarily on what parents do to engage with their children's schools and with other actors within those schools, to also considering how parents understand the *hows* and *whys* of their engagement,

and how this engagement relates more broadly to parents' expectations and actions both inside of and out of the school community. (p. 3)

They further contend that

in explaining this framework, parental engagement is positioned as a relational phenomenon that relies on activity networks. In doing so, the crucial importance of both space and capital play in the relative success parents (and teachers) have in engaging parents in the academic venue of urban schooling. Drawing from our understanding of the intersections between space and capital in the worlds of parents and school, we make the argument that parental engagement ought to be thought of as the mediation between space and capital. (p. 3)

Approaching parental engagement in this manner takes into account myriad experiences and resources that parents bring to the table.

The Ecologies of Parental Engagement (EPE) framework offer conjectures and a conceptual framework that tackles the ways in which traditional research on parental involvement “neglects the ways in which parental engagement is a social practice sustained through active participation and dialogue in a social world” (Barton et al., 2004, p. 4). Figure 1 depicts the traditional explanation of parental involvement. Literature on parental involvement paints a view that is “parental involvement is linear, unidirectional, and not particularly tied to other external factors” (p. 4).

In Conjecture 1, Barton et al. (2004) suggest, “Parental engagement is the mediation between space and capital by parents in relations to others in school setting” (p. 6). Current models of parent involvement deem parents involved if they attend parent conferences or school events. As a result, parent attendance is linked to parent participation.

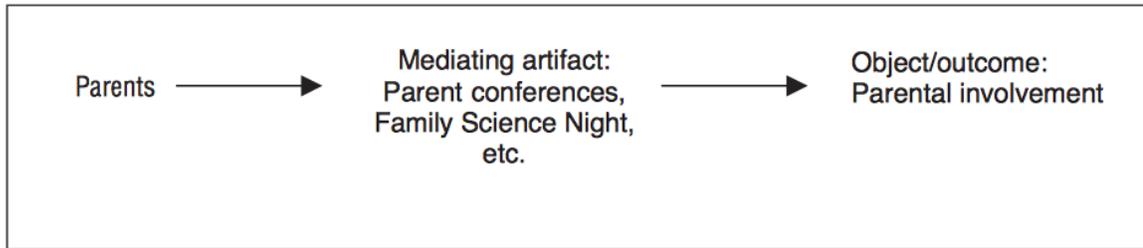


Figure 1. Traditional Explanation of Parental Involvement.

Conjecture 2 is depicted in Figure 2. Conjecture 2 views “Engagement as mediation must be understood as both an action and an orientation to action” (Barton et al., 2004, p. 7). Parent engagement shifts from being viewed as a “thing” one does or an action to the interactions parents have with “other parents, teachers, and other school-and-community based people within a particular space” (Barton et al., 2004, p. 6). While research exists on the involvement of African American parents, there is a more work to be done. Frameworks, such as the Ecologies of Parental Engagement (EPE) framework offer a new perspective on parental engagement versus parental involvement that does not cast parents aside because of their educational level or socioeconomic status but takes into account and values their experiences.

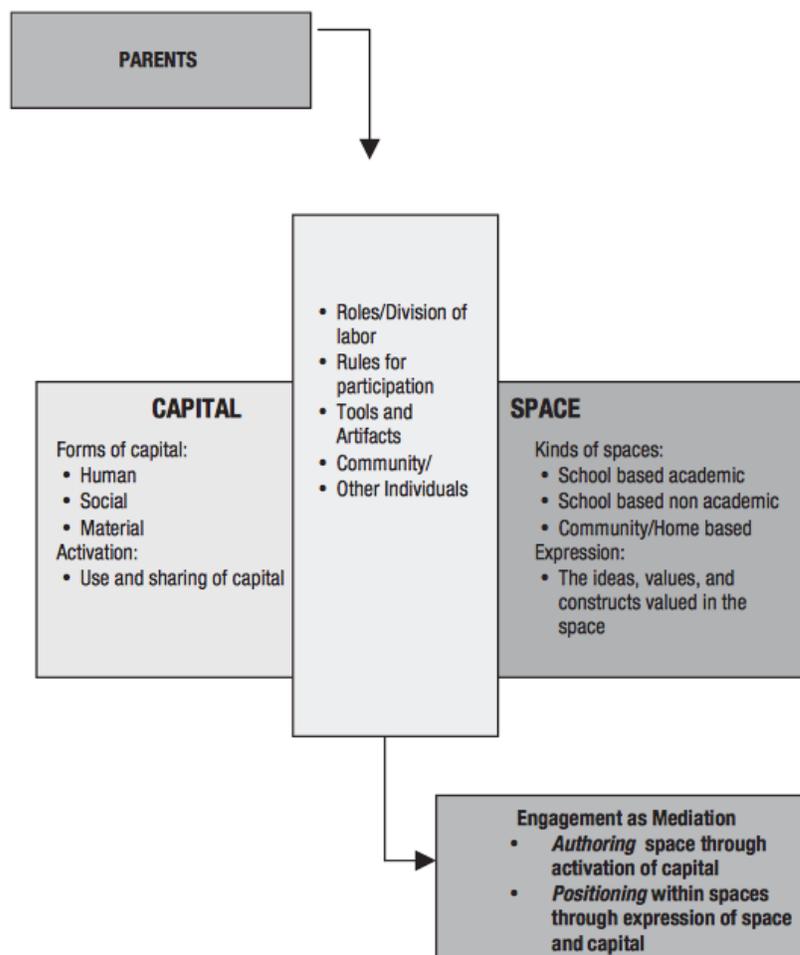


Figure 2. Ecologies of Parental Engagement.

Parental Involvement at Middle School

There is a growing body of literature on parental involvement in education during the middle school years; however, this research has not been examined systematically to determine which type of involvement has the strongest relation to student achievement (Hill & Tyson, 2009). As students transition to middle school, early adolescence is often marked by changes in school context, family relationships, and developmental processes (Grolnick, Price, Beiswenger, & Sauck, 2007; Hill & Tyson, 2009; Vanlaar et al., 2014).

Consequently, Vanlaar et al. (2014) point out that middle school students go through “intrapersonal developmental changes and experience significant changes in school context and school experience” (p. 1). Parental involvement is a key factor in the transition process that middle schoolers go through as they need that support not only at school but also at home (Hanewald, 2013).

At the elementary level, parental involvement tends to focus more on a child’s achievement (Hill & Tyson 2009). This may look like conferences between the parent and the child’s teacher. During this process, parents are exposed to the curriculum (Epstein, 2001; Hanewald, 2013; Hill & Tyson, 2009; Vanlaar et al., 2014). Once students transition to middle school, new challenges present themselves. The transition move is from a closed environment to an open environment (Hanewald, 2013). In essence, students’ transition from elementary to middle school while they are going through changes themselves can be very difficult. They are moving from a very structured environment, mainly one classroom teacher and one set of classmates to a less structured, several classrooms, several classmates, several teachers, and several schedules among the changes, all while their bodies are growing and their hormones are changing. Middle schools are large and complex which may make it more difficult for parents to determine how to be involved (Sanders & Epstein, 2000).

In addition to size, the middle school model begins the process of departmentalizing or specializing which means students receive instruction from multiple teachers as opposed to the elementary level where instruction is typically provided by one main teacher. With these changes, it can be difficult for parents to determine what their

role should be in terms of involvement. Regardless, parent expectations, especially those with higher expectations of grades and positive attitudes towards school, had children that also felt the same way about school and grades (Hanewald, 2013). Though parents are also overwhelmed by the changes in the transition from elementary to middle school, Hanewald (2013) further added the importance of parents keeping the lines of communication open between them and the school in order to support their children's academic success.

Single African American Mothers

The number of children being raised in the United States by single mothers continues to grow from year to year. Furthermore, the United States currently leads the world in the number of homes with absent fathers, according to Horn and Sylvester (2002). And among the Black population in the United States, the number of homes with absent fathers is higher than the rest of the population. In 2000, the U.S. Census revealed that 3,809,000 African American children under the age of 18 were being raised by single mothers due to an absent husband or the mother's status as divorced, widowed, or never married (U.S. Census, 2000). Results of the 2011 U.S. Census showed that more than 4,332,000 African American children were being reared in single-mother homes (U.S. Census, 2011). According to P. Jackson et al. (2000) "a majority of African American males are being raised by single mothers" (p. 1409).

There has been an increase in the number of African American males being raised by single mothers. Mothers, regardless of their marital status, play a significant role in the lives of their sons (Robinson & Werblow, 2012). These mothers still hold high

expectations for their sons despite the challenges they experience. P. Jackson et al. (2000) contend that single African American mothers are more likely to experience stressful events. These stress experiences can lead to them being more susceptible for psychological distress, which may negatively impact their ability to parent. U.S. Census data from 1970s revealed that 65% of African American families consisted of two parents. In the 1990s, the number of two parent households had fallen to 39% (Hrabowski III, Maton, & Greif, 1998).

According to Stevenson, Chen, and Uttal (1990) that in addition to encouraging their children, mothers value their children's education. This is not evident in the literature. Despite their beliefs in the power of education, these same mothers receive a disparate amount of criticism when things do not go well (Brown & Davis, 2000).

Research has shown that there is a strong correlation between a mother's expectations and the academic performance of a child (K. Jackson & Remillard, 2005; Robinson & Werblow, 2012; Seginer, 1986). A study conducted by Brody and Flor (1998) revealed that mothers raising their sons alone have a more authoritative, non-nonsense parenting style. The study goes further to share common characteristics of mothers raising sons that are performing well academically in school. Tables 2 and 3 summarize the common characteristics and strategies used by single African American mothers in supporting their sons.

Table 2

Common Characteristics of Single-Black Mothers of Academically Successful Black Males in Low-performing Schools

Characteristic	Explanation
Knowledgeable resource	Use their own skills and resources to teach their sons how to be successful (in and out of school) and ensure that other key people in their sons' daily environment assist in keeping their sons on a positive path.
Tactful motivator	Motivate their sons by nurturing their passions and strengths, while constantly "redirecting" them away from negative influences.
Supporter of "whole-child"	Through constant monitoring (direct/indirect), they provide financial, psychological, and emotional support to their sons at the level needed when needed

Note. Source: Robinson, Q. L., & Werblow, J. (2012). Beating the odds: How single Black mothers influence the educational success of their sons enrolled in failing schools. *American Secondary Education*, 40(2), 52-66.

Table 3

Strategies Used by Single-Black Mothers to Influence the Academic Success of Their Sons in Low-performing Schools

Strategy	Explanation
Talk to him regularly	Know what issues and problems their sons are facing by having meaningful, daily interaction with their sons. Successful mothers use their knowledge and resources to help teach and guide their sons.
Leverage positive role models in the community	Surround their sons with positive (live) role models (teachers, ministers, coaches etc.) and use them to provide extra support for their sons when needed.
Address the root of the problem affecting their son	Get to the root of the problem by identifying individual people (peers, teacher, or counselor) in school who can solve it and ensure that this person follows through until the problem is resolved.

Note. Source: Robinson, Q. L., & Werblow, J. (2012). Beating the odds: How single Black mothers influence the educational success of their sons enrolled in failing schools. *American Secondary Education*, 40(2), 52-66

Gaps in the Existing Literature

Although there is substantial research on the impact and significance of parental involvement, little research exists on the involvement of African American single mothers at the middle school level (Abel, 2012). Studies that have been conducted have focused on single African American mothers. Additionally, much of the early research was designed to show the deficits of the Black family (Peters, 2007). In addition to focusing on deficit models of involvement, very few studies have focused on providing a platform for the mothers of successful African American students, males in particular, who are excelling academically at the middle school level.

There are many young men who have experienced and continue to experience academic success and have helped bridge the achievement gap. Amplifying the voices of their mothers will hopefully provide insight into the ways in which successful African American middle school males have been influenced and supported by their mothers to achieve in a system that has at times failed to support their successes.

Summary

African American males have the ability to be successful academically; however, it is difficult to do so within the current educational structure. Policies, school practices, and curriculum that support a deficit culture and create barriers must be removed in order for students to thrive. Educators and school officials need to be aware of the critical role single African American mothers play in the lives of their sons. Middle school is a critical juncture for students as they matriculate through their educational journey.

Providing support for African American males during this critical period can drastically change the trajectory of their lives.

Chapter III will focus on the methodology and research design of the study. A qualitative interview study will be utilized to share the lived experiences of single mothers who are overcoming the odds and raising academically successful middle school age sons. The mothers will have the opportunity to share the specific strategies and approaches they use to instill the importance of education in their sons. Interviewing these mothers will shed light on their individual stories with the hopes of providing an alternate view for educators and school leaders as to what is deemed parental involvement. The role of the researcher as well as the research questions that will guide this study are also discussed in Chapter III.

CHAPTER III

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

Qualitative Interview Study

A qualitative interview methodology was used in this study to examine the strategies, approaches, and expectations utilized by single mothers to support the academic success of their middle school age sons. According to Creswell (2007), “qualitative research begins with assumptions, a worldview, the possible use of theoretical lens, and the study of research problems inquiring into the meaning of individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem” (p. 37). Interview studies in qualitative research require a detailed examination of a topic, specific event, organization, or phenomenon (Lichtman, 2013; Wiersma & Jurs, 2009). This subject matter lends itself to qualitative research according to Marshall and Rossman (2011), in that qualitative research is “pragmatic, interpretive, and grounded in the lived experiences of people” (p. 2).

Methodology and Its Justification

Qualitative research has been defined in several ways. According to Merriam (2009), “qualitative researchers are interested in understanding the meaning people have constructed, that is, how people make sense of their world and the experiences they have in the world” (p. 13). Denzin and Lincoln (2005) define qualitative research in the following manner:

Qualitative research is situated activity that locates the observer in the world. It consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that makes the world visible. These practices transform the world. They turn the world into a series of representations, including field notes, interviews, conversations, photographs, recordings, and memos to the self. At this level, qualitative research involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or to interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them. (p. 3)

Baxter and Jack (2008) suggest that two key approaches guide qualitative methodology. Robert Stake (1995) proposed one approach while the other approach was proposed by Robert Yin (2003, 2006). Both approaches have their foundation based in a constructivist paradigm. Researchers subscribing to this viewpoint contend that truth is relative and that it depends on one's perspective (Baxter & Jack, 2008). Because of this, "there is no single, observable reality. Rather, there are multiple realities, or interpretations, of a single event" (Merriam, 2009, pp. 8–9).

The vantage point of the researcher plays a critical role in qualitative research. Creswell (2007) contends that the terms constructivism and interpretivism are often used interchangeably. He goes further to say:

In this worldview, individuals seek understanding of the world in which they live and work. They develop subjective meanings of their experiences. These meanings are varied and multiple, leading the researcher to look for the complexity of views. Often these subjective meanings are negotiated socially and historically. In other words, they are not simply imprinted on individuals but are formed through interaction with others (hence social constructivism) and through historical and cultural norms that operate in individuals' lives. (pp. 20–21)

Qualitative interviews as a research approach, facilitates the exploration of a phenomenon within its context using a variety of data sources (Baxter & Jack, 2008).

Research involves the study of an issue explored through one or more cases within a bounded system, i.e. setting, a context (Creswell, 2007). Qualitative study research is not a methodology, but rather a choice of what is to be studied (Stake, 2005 as cited in Creswell, 2007). Denzin and Lincoln (2005 as cited in Creswell, 2007) introduce qualitative study as a strategy of inquiry, a methodology, or a comprehensive research strategy.

Interview studies in qualitative research require a detailed examination of a topic, specific event, organization, or phenomenon (Wiersma & Jurs, 2009; Lichtman, 2013). “Qualitative interview study research involves the study of an issue explored through one or more cases within a bounded system i.e. setting, a context” (Creswell, 2007). Yin (2003) suggests that a qualitative interview study design be investigated when the following conditions are present:

1. the focus of the study is to answer “how” and “why” questions;
2. you cannot manipulate the behavior of those involved in the study;
3. you want to cover contextual conditions because you believe they are relevant to the phenomenon under study; and
4. the boundaries are not

One of the benefits of this methodology is the ability of the researcher to analyze data through thick, rich description of the case and themes. Crabtree and Miller (1999) contend that one of the advantages of qualitative interviews is the close collaboration that occurs between the researcher and the participants while enabling participants to tell their stories. The participants are able to share their views of reality through their stories. This

allows the researcher to gain a better understanding of the participants' actions (Lather, 1992; Robottom & Hart, 1993, as cited in Baxter & Jack, 2008).

Research Setting

This study was conducted at six urban middle school located in the southeastern part of the United States. The school district was diverse both economically as well as ethnically. In order to effectively meet the needs of the 96,000 students it serves in over 100 schools, the district adopted a regional model that has decentralized the central office. Schools are able to receive support from district personnel in a timely manner. The district is a leader in technology and prides itself on educating all students in a manner that will lead them to be responsible and productive citizens.

Initially, two middle schools were selected for the study. The pool of participating schools was widened after the researcher found it difficult to identify study participants. The middle schools chosen for this study were selected based on the following inclusion criteria:

1. The academic achievement of its African American male students
2. Designated a Title I school (schools receive federal funding based on the number of students that receive free and/or reduced lunch)
3. Proximity to the researcher

The researcher obtained approval from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro's Institutional Review Board (IRB). In order to gain final approval to conduct the study, the researcher submitted IRB documentation to the school district. The researcher sent emails

to the principals of the schools participating in the study requesting access to their schools to conduct the study once IRB and district approval was granted.

Research Participants

Since the researcher had no connection to any of the six schools from which participants came, it was necessary to rely on recommendations by the principals or their administrative team for research participants. The selection criteria were shared with the principals in order to ensure that research participants met the necessary requirements. The initial study identified a total of 20 single African American mothers. Each participant was selected for this study based on having a middle school age son who was performing well academically. Out of the 20 identified subjects, 10 agreed to be interviewed and participate in the study. The ages of the mothers participating in the study ranged from age 30 to 46 years of age. Table 4 provides demographic information about the mothers who participated in this study.

Table 4

Demographics of Study Participants

Pseudonym	Age	Grade Level of Son	Marital Status	Level of Education
Contessa	35	8th	Single	License (Aesthetician)
Felicia	42	8th	Divorced	Master's degree
Angie	43	8th	Divorced	Doctorate
Kenya	41	7th	Single	Doctorate
Julissa	43	8th	Divorced	High school diploma
Eva	30	6th	Single	High school diploma

Table 4

Cont.

Pseudonym	Age	Grade Level of Son	Marital Status	Level of Education
Veronica	32	7th	Single	High school diploma
LaShon	42	8th	Single	Associate's degree
Monique	44	6th	Single	2 years of college
Vivian	46	7th	Divorced	Associate's degree

Note. Parent information was self-reported and revealed during the interview process.

A total of 13 interview questions were created. The questions were semi-structured and open-ended (see Appendix A). The questions were developed from the research and background information discussed in Chapter II. Analysis of the results of the interview questions was aligned with key themes that emerged from the literature on African American mothers.

Once a pool of potential participants was gathered, the researcher contacted each of the participants via telephone. An overview of the study was shared with each potential participant as well how they were recommended for participation in the study. This process continued until the desired number of participants was reached. After securing participants, consent forms were emailed to each of the mothers. The consent form provided them with specific information regarding the study as well as what will be required of them should they choose to participate. The researcher shared with the participants that they were able to end their participation during any part of the study without being penalized. After reviewing the document, research participants were asked

to provide their signature indicating their agreement to participate in the study.

Participants received a signed copy of the consent form for their records.

Data Collection

Utilizing multiple data sources to enhance data credibility is a distinguishing characteristic of qualitative interview study research (Patton, 2009; Yin, 2009). After IRB approval and district approval were obtained, prospective mothers were recruited.

Sources of data for this study included:

- Interviews with each of the mothers (interviews ranged from 60 to 90 minutes)
- Review of school documents (report cards, standardized test scores, attendance and discipline record, awards and recognitions, etc.)
- Reflective notes taken during interviews
- Demographic data for mothers (see Table 4)

In an effort to maintain confidentiality, each of the mothers selected a pseudonym.

Pseudonyms were also selected for their sons. They were also able to select the location of their interview. The semi-structured interviews allowed participants the opportunity to reflect on their own personal educational experiences and expound on the strategies, approaches, and methods they utilize to instill the importance of education in their sons. This style of interview allowed the researcher “to hear what participants have to say in their own words, in their own voices, with their own languages and narratives”

(Lichtman, 2013, p. 195). Follow up interviews were conducted with participants to clarify any responses. Ten African American single mothers were interviewed for this

study. Participants were selected by purposeful sampling. Maxwell (2013) maintains purposeful sampling is a strategy that is selected when “particular settings, persons, or activities are selected deliberately to provide information that is relevant to your questions and goals, and that can’t be gotten as well as from other choices” (p. 97). Interviews were conducted over a seven-month time period. See Table 5 for data collection timeline.

Table 5

Data Collection Timeline

Month	Activity/Task
November 2017	Individual Interviews (1 candidate withdrew)
December 2017	Individual Interviews
February 2018	Follow Up Interviews
April 2018	Individual Interviews (2 candidates withdrew)
May 2018	Follow Up Interviews (1 candidate withdrew)
June 2018	Individual Interviews

Note. Four participants declined interviews after initially agreeing to participate in the study. This delayed the interview process.

Data Security

Data collection began once consent was granted from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) to study human subjects. The research participants were asked to sign a written consent and confidentiality agreement (see Appendix D). This document specified the researcher’s intent to keep the identity of the research participant private and that the data collected would only be used for its intended purpose. The research

participants also chose a pseudonym and any identifying information (e.g., child's school, school district) was changed to protect the identity of the participants.

All data collection and storage followed the guidelines for confidentiality set forth by the University of North Carolina at Greensboro's Office of Research Integrity in order to ensure no harm is caused to the research participants. This data was stored in the home of the researcher. Care and caution were taken with the researcher's field notes, transcription tapes, written documents, and audio files. Based on IRB guidelines, the research participants and researcher agreed on the manner in which documents were handled, stored, and destroyed. Data was kept throughout the duration of the research study and will be destroyed three years after the completion of the study.

Data Analysis

This study provided an analysis and evaluation of the strategies and approaches utilized by mothers of successful African American middle school males that support their academic success. Interviews were transcribed and the data pool was coded with reference to the research questions to extract and summarize the main themes. In reporting the research findings, pseudonyms were used to protect the privacy of the research participants.

Data was collected from ten single African American mothers. Methods of analysis included obtaining a general sense of data by reading through each transcript before beginning individual transcript analysis. Thoughts, observations, questions, and insights were typed into each transcript using the track changes feature of the word processing software. Additionally, the researcher maintained a journal to record

additional observations and notes during the interview process. Member checking took place by reading through each transcript and sending all of the transcriptions back to the participants to confirm if what they shared was accurately recorded in the transcript. A data matrix was created to begin the interview coding process. Codes were categorized and emerging themes were noted. A priori codes were identified by using the initial interview question matrix. A line-by-line analysis of transcripts was conducted by the researcher with additional codes being developed as needed.

Analysis of the transcripts were entered into the data matrix. A narrative of each participant's responses was written and submitted to the participants electronically for their review and feedback. Participants were asked if the narratives were a fair representation of their comments. The data continued to be analyzed to seek out what general observations or interpretations are correlated to the research questions. Through the interview and coding process, differences and common themes were extracted and categorized.

Trustworthiness

In an effort to build rapport and establish trustworthiness, the research participants were given the opportunity to determine the location and meeting times where the interviews would take place. Research participants were also able to select a pseudonym of their choosing to protect their identity. One of the most critical techniques for establishing credibility is member checking in naturalistic inquiry (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, 2000). The process of member checking involves research participants reviewing and verifying data that will be captured through interviews. Member checking can be

both formal and informal. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), informal member checking serves several purposes such as:

- It provides the opportunity to assess intentionality—what it is that the respondent *intended* by acting in a certain way or providing certain information.
- It gives the respondent an immediate opportunity to correct errors of fact and challenge what are perceived to be wrong interpretations.
- It provides the respondent the opportunity to volunteer additional information; the act of “playing back” may stimulate the respondent to recall additional things that were not mentioned the first time around.
- It puts the respondent on record as having said certain things and having agreed to the correctness of the investigator’s recording of them, thereby making it more difficult later for the respondent to claim misunderstanding or investigator error.
- It provides an opportunity to summarize—the first step along the way to data analysis and
- It provides the respondent an opportunity to give an assessment of overall adequacy in addition to confirming individual data points. (p. 314)

In order to establish trustworthiness, member checks were conducted with the research participants. Thick rich data was obtained in this study through interviews lasting between 60 to 90 minutes. There was a triangulation of the data. Triangulation

using multiple sources of data means comparing and cross-checking data collected through observations at different times or in different places, or interview data collected from people with different perspectives or from follow-up interview with the same people. (Merriam, 2009, p. 216)

Benefits and Risks

Educators, school leaders, and African American single mothers and families may benefit from this study. Information from this study may be used by educators in an effort to better meet the diverse needs of the students they serve. They may also gain insight

into ways to improve their relationships and interactions with parents. School leaders may benefit from learning how the policies and procedures that have been instituted may negatively impact the involvement of single African American mothers. African American parents may benefit from this study in that they may hear their own concerns and frustrations voiced through the mothers who participated in the study.

There were minimal risks in this study. Four of the mothers felt honored to have been selected to participate in the study. They felt that all single mothers were lumped into the same category and were viewed by the educators serving their children. A few of the mothers who participated in the study were worried that educators might be critical of their parenting styles but were willing to continue with their participation in the study. One of the mothers who originally agreed to participate in the study changed her mind when she saw the tape recorder placed on the table. Although she was made aware that her interview would be recorded at the onset, she declined to participate when she saw the actual tape recorder. A potential risk of this study is that it may add to the negative perception some have regarding public schools. It may also expose unfair teaching practices as well as ineffective instructional practices.

Summary

Qualitative researchers are concerned with how people make sense of their lives. Marshall and Rossman (2011) contend that for qualitative studies, “the researcher needs to understand the deeper perspectives that can be captured through face-to-face interaction and observation in the natural setting” (p. 2). The setting of this study and the

women selected to participate in it were selected in order to gain perspective of what steps single African American mothers are taking to support their middle school age sons. Although obtaining study participants proved to be somewhat challenging, the women provided insight to the efforts they take to ensure their sons' academic success.

This chapter addressed the methodology, data collection processes, and analysis used to support the research study. Chapter IV will present the findings of the study. The experiences of the ten single mothers will be presented in their own words.

CHAPTER IV

DATA PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS

This qualitative interview study was designed to explore the approaches and strategies used by single African American mothers to impact the academic success of their middle school age sons. Qualitative interview study as a research design allowed me to examine the specific strategies and practices employed by single African American mothers to foster the success of their sons. Interview studies in qualitative research require a detailed examination of a topic, specific event, organization, or phenomenon (Lichtman, 2013; Wiersma & Jurs, 2009).

This study investigated ten single African American mothers whose sons were experiencing academic success at Title I middle schools. The interview questions were used to investigate the methods used by these mothers to influence their son's academic performance as well as to explore the ways these mothers navigate the educational system. The investigation was conducted through in-depth interviews with the mothers at a location of their choosing. As the researcher, I wanted to be able to share the rich experiences that were expressed by the mothers in a way that captured the heartfelt sentiment they were shared with. Their narratives were passionate, engaging and provided a firsthand account of their trials, challenges, and successes in raising their middle school age sons.

Findings

This section begins with a profile of each of the mothers followed by a summary of the data collected through in-depth interviews. The interviews were then analyzed for recurring key words and ideas. The ten mothers selected for this study come a variety of backgrounds. The road that led them to being a single mother ranged from divorce to having an incarcerated partner. Their experiences, though different, had a common thread that ran through each of them. The love these mothers had for their sons was the driving force that guided their every decision.

Contessa's Story

Contessa is a 35-year-old self-employed single mother. She graduated from high school in 2000. She attended trade school for 2.5 years and specialized in the beauty industry. Contessa is the youngest of five children and her parents still live together. She is the mother of two boys, one in first grade and the other an eighth grader. When asked about her feelings on the successes her middle school son Tevin had experienced in school, Contessa stated that he was doing really well in school and had straight A's. In fact, he was in the accelerated program and attended a performing arts school.

Contessa described her son's typical day as one of a normal teenager. He dreaded having to get up early and head to school. He took the bus to and from school. In addition to playing video games, he was a member of football team. During the season he would not arrive home until 7:00 p.m. Once he got home, they always sat down to dinner and discussed his day. After dinner her son would start his homework and then go to bed around 11:00 p.m.

She felt that she prepared her son academically by talking to him daily and spending one-on-one time with him. She would encourage him to research different things as well as ask his elders, especially from family members, when in need of help or advice.

Felicia's Story

Felicia is a 42- year-old divorced single mother who works in risk management. She is a mother of two. She has a daughter attending college and a son who attends a local middle school. As a single mother, she wanted her son and daughter to have the experience of attending a private school without having to pay private school tuition. Therefore, she placed both in a public charter school that received Title I funding from the federal government. The fact that the school required parents to volunteer several hours at the school was something that attracted Felicia to the school.

Felicia believes that parents who are involved in volunteering at the school are the type of parents who are concerned with their child's education; therefore, a school that has high expectations of its parents to volunteer their time must also be a school where parents are involved because they want to be involved. This school was an excellent choice for her children. Felicia stated that her ultimate goal, "has always been to get my kids to the schools where I feel like they would be expected [to do well in school] and would flourish."

Angie's Story

Angie is a single mother through divorce. She is 43 years old and was raised in a small predominantly White community. It was not until middle school that she was

exposed to the only Black teacher she would have until she attended college. This was during the middle school art class rotations for 22 days at a time. This lack of exposure to Black people made her decide to attend a Historically Black College or University (HBCU) with the goal of becoming a teacher. She shared, “my Mom was a teacher. I wanted to be a teacher since maybe I was two or three. I was teaching my dolls and stuffed animals.”

Angie described a typical day for her son as one where he got up early to get ready for school. Before heading to school, their church does a prayer call, so they usually hear the prayer in the morning. After getting dressed, depending on the time, they would eat breakfast together. When this did not happen, her son ate breakfast at school with his friends. A stickler for time, they rarely ran late. If there were no afternoon activities for her son, he would come and start dinner. He stayed after school 2 days a week to participate in the school’s robotics club.

Kenya’s Story

Kenya is a single mom as she raised her son and daughter. Along the way she earned a bachelor’s degree in Psychology, a master’s degree, and finally a doctorate degree. She works as a special education administrator. Additionally, she is the worship leader and choir director at her church. Education is important to Kenya and she has high academic expectations for her son. When he was in elementary school, specifically kindergarten, first, and second grade, her son was not behaving well in class. Kenya described that time as “extremely rough.” It seemed like her son’s teachers were calling her every day and she could not figure out what was causing her son to misbehave.

Kenya described a typical day for her and her son involved him going to school and her going to work. Monday was her “lax day,” as she put it, where they would try to get all of his homework done for the week. Her son would “get his studying in,” according to her. This was done since the rest of the week was busy for him.

Her son’s outgoing personality meant that since third grade he was very vocal and not afraid to interact with his teachers. Once Kenya’s son was in middle school, he would advocate for himself. He even tried convincing his teachers that it was not necessary to have homework. As one choir teacher described him, “He’s that student that if we learn a new piece, he’s not just learning the piece, he wants to know where it came from, what’s the origin, what’s the purpose, and what’s the meaning behind it.”

Julissa’s Story

Julissa is a 43-year-old single mother through divorce. As a young girl, she always saw herself married with a beautiful house and white picket fence. She married her high school sweetheart and they had one son together. After 10 years of marriage, he filed for divorce. Julissa’s son was young when the divorce occurred and so he has very little memory of the depression his mother sank into following the end of her marriage. Julissa credits her mother with helping her get her life back on track. During those dark days, her mother moved in and served as her son’s primary caregiver. After seeking counseling, Julissa was able to come to terms with her divorce and her son became the center of her life.

At an early age, Julissa started talking to her son about the importance of a good education. As an eighth grader, her son lived for sports. Julissa often found herself trying

to help her son understand that he could be an athlete and a scholar. A typical day for her son begins with him getting up early to exercise. When she was growing up, Julissa's mom made her iron her clothes for the entire week on Sunday evenings. She reinforces the same thing with her son. Having his clothes ready the night before not only allowed him time to exercise but also provided him with some additional time to complete his homework if he did not complete something the night before.

Eva's Story

Eva is a 30-year-old single mother of four boys. She was always concerned about her boys staying on the right path. Before her son was in preschool, she would play games with him and his brothers in order to prepare them for school. She adds that she would use toys and candy to intrigue them and reward them for answering correctly. When asked what a typical day in her home looked like, she stated that she would ask her son about his day and how he was feeling. They would also watch movies together on a regular basis, eat out, or just laugh together. Her son loved Legos and was able to build things freestyle without using a pattern. Even if Eva did not understand what her son was doing, she was always supportive.

Now that he is in eighth grade, she uses the same technique of talking to her son. She stated that she does not try to shield from the world. Eva often told her son that she was proud of him, encouraged him to keep doing the right thing, and listened to him when he came to her with a problem. She added that she did not try to force him into sports, although he played basketball. When Eva was asked about her beliefs regarding education, she replied that she told her son that she expected him to go to college.

Veronica's Story

Veronica is a 32-year-old mother with four children. Her middle school-aged son is the oldest boy and he has an older sister. In order to provide for her children, Veronica accepted a position in the security industry. Working from 7:00 p.m. until 7:00 a.m. allowed her to be there in the morning to see her children off to school. In the evenings, she calls them from work to ensure that they are doing their homework. Because of the neighborhood in which they live, Veronica rarely lets her children play outside if she is not at home. The bullying in her housing project was so bad at one point that she had to take out a protective order against one of her neighbor's sons.

Because of her work hours, Veronica is able to end her night shift just as her kids are getting ready for school. She calls them at 6:00 a.m. to make sure they are awake. By the time she gets home, they have taken their showers, brushed their teeth, and eaten breakfast. Because of her son's maturity, she relies on him to help with his younger siblings. Her son is very strong in math so he helps his brothers and sister with their homework. In turn, his sister assists him with his Language Arts homework. Veronica teaches her children responsibility by making them do chores. She shared, "It is their job to keep the house clean. I am trying to teach them responsibility. I want them to know that it is not okay to be lazy."

LaShon's Story

LaShon is a 42-year-old mother with three kids. Her now deceased mother passed on and instilled on to LaShon core values. LaShon boldly proclaimed that she was a Christian and "believer of Jesus Christ all the way." She attended Atlanta Area Technical

College and was in the process of graduating with an Associate's degree in Electronics Education. As a food service manager, LaShon has the opportunity to work in the same school district where her children attend school. Her son was 13 years old and an athlete. He also did very well academically.

LaShon sets ground rules for her son. He had older siblings who are 25 and 18 years old. LaShon describes the siblings' relationship as being close-knit. The older siblings were also great examples of the family's Christian values and work ethic. They had to work hard for what they had. LaShon's son was most skilled at football, but his favorite sport was baseball. Additionally, among her son's sources of inspiration were his siblings and several church members.

LaShon started preparing her son for school long before he stepped foot in a school. She felt that schools were designed for girls rather than boys, so in order to prepare him, she would have him work on various tasks and she would time him. In her opinion, girls can sit for longer periods of time. She would increase the length of time her son completed task until he mastered staying in his seat for 30 minutes. LaShon commented, "I can put him in a room with a child his same age and the difference is amazing. Two different outcomes, totally different. Not because one is better but because it was so important for me to talk to him." As a Black mother, training her son to navigate school was her priority.

Monique's Story

Monique is a 44-year-old single mother of three. After getting pregnant her junior year in college, she dropped out of school and started working to provide for her oldest

daughter. Although Monique was engaged to the father of her children, they never married. Despite some ups and downs, they have managed to co-parent their three children. Growing up, her parents stressed the importance of education and were quite disappointed when she dropped out of college.

Monique shared that she was usually the first one to get up in the morning in order to make sure everything was taken care of. She would take care of anything her son and siblings needed to do before leaving for school. Monique would usually write out what was expected of her son from the time he got up until the time that he went to school. Some of the tasks included walking and caring for two little dogs they owned. Monique admitted that her son did not do everything as well as expected when it came to his tasks at home since some of the time it took reminders from her to get his work done.

Vivian's Story

Vivian is a 46-year-old twice-divorced mother of one son. After being raised in a small rural town in Georgia, Vivian could not wait to move to the big city. Although she planned to attend college, she was not able to afford it. As a result, she attended a local community college where she earned her associate's degree. Serving as a teaching paraprofessional gave her a great appreciation for education. Her son suffered from frequent earaches as a child, which led to some hearing loss.

Vivian felt she has prepared her son to be successful in school because she instilled in him the same values she instilled in the students she works with on a daily basis. She encouraged him to take chances and to be willing to try new things. Because of his slight hearing loss, her son tries to compensate so his classmates are not aware that he

has difficulty hearing. Middle school is a time when students start becoming more self-aware, so Vivian was concerned that her son's classmates would be mean to him and tease him about his hearing loss.

While each of the ten mothers introduced above share the commonality of having a middle school age son experiencing academic success in school, they are vastly different based on the events and experiences that have shaped their lives. The roads that led them to becoming a single mother was also quite varied. The stories these mothers shared paint a different picture of single African American mothers and shed light on factors that are not often represented in the literature. The next section provides an analysis of the data that was revealed during in-depth interviews.

Data Analysis

Interviews were conducted with the ten mothers and then transcribed. Interview transcripts were reviewed and analyzed for recurring topics or ideas among single African American mothers and their influence on the academic success of their sons. Transcriptions, along with field notes, were filed individually for each participant. Coding methods were used to analyze the interview data. The coding process included looking for key words, phrases, or events (Creswell, 2009). The process of coding also involves categorizing and organizing data (Creswell, 2009).

Analysis of Findings

As the mothers shared their individual stories, common experiences started to take shape. Recurring terms and ideas began to emerge. This section offers a summary of the data collected through in-depth interviews. The data were organized into three themes.

Those themes were (1) biographical factors, (2) barriers, and (3) support systems. The categories from which the themes emerged were (a) modeling the importance of education, (b) resilience, (c) the importance of education, (d) parenting style, (e) interactions and relationships with teachers, (f) stereotypes and deficit thinking, (g) importance of advocacy, (h) reliance on extended family, and (i) positive role models. Table 6 at the end of this chapter lists the categories and themes that emerged during the study.

Biographical Factors

One of the themes that emerged during the interviews was that of biographical factors. The categories that fell under this theme pertained to those traits that were directly associated with the mothers or the beliefs and values that were instilled in them at a young age. These traits speak to the very heart of the participants and serve as their foundation. The biographical factors serving as the cornerstone for helping these young men succeed in school.

Modeling the Importance of Education

The mothers who participated in the study felt strongly about the power and importance of education. Each of the mothers expressed that having a good education would open doors for their boys that might otherwise be closed. LaShon shared,

Oh, I believe education is a prime source of anything, but first we have to encourage, ignite [it], in order to educate. You can't encourage and ignite, because if you encourage - when you go and flick on your stove, if you got a gas stove, when you encourage, you're twisting that knob to encourage and ignite. The igniting is the clicking . . . click, click, click, click, click, click and then, if blows and gives you fire, that's your knowledge.

She went further to explain:

If you're turning the knob and it don't click, you're not going to ignite the knowledge. You can't do one without the other, and that's what we get. We get a lot of people that want to skip and want to transform everything but nobody wanna go back to the basics. I promise you, if we go back to the basics of our ancestors who didn't have all this stuff. Lord, we're bombarded with a whole bunch of stuff, you know we are so bombarded now, and if we go back to the basics, we will find that it made knowledge so much easier.

Angie shared that education was something that her family really valued and respected when she was growing up. Based on her upbringing, she wanted to pass this same sentiment down to her own children. At a young age, her parents instilled in her the need to value her education. Her father used to say that, "once you have an education, no one can take it away from you."

Similarly to LaShon and Angie, Erica believed in the importance of education. She wanted to ensure that her son was ready for school so she started working with him before he even entered kindergarten.

Well . . . from the beginning, from like, I'd say starting pre-k from the beginning you know. Even before he entered into that, I used to, because him and his brother he got older brothers. I will like play games with them like to get them prepared for even pre-k . . . and how they liked the little games I would play. And sometimes, it would be something like, playing for candy, different stuff, or little toys to like to intrigue them more, like that, it was "Oh yeah, okay," and so okay, well so, you know, you guessed this answer right, then you get a toy or certain little things like that. I know that intrigued [him] and pulled them more in, and then, you know, as he got in there he's like "Mama, I like school and this," because I know when he made it to pre-k and the other kids was like they was getting ready to—they needed to go over their names and everything, he was like "I already know mine!"

Erica felt that getting her son interested in learning before he went to school would pay off in the end. Her son loves school now and she attributes part of it to starting him off early.

Although Veronica valued education, she found herself without the support she needed to continue her studies after high school. She had always wanted to attend college. Before she turned thirteen years old, she saw her parents murdered in front of her. She loved school and was a bright student. After the death of her parents, she moved from family member to family member. She wanted something better for her own children. Veronica declared,

I believe that, with my experience, I believe that it's [education] is the only ticket to a better life. I just have to really instill that in them. That my belief because I did not have that. I was very smart and I was in the advanced class at my school. But when you don't have the right support system things don't turn out like you think they should. I'm trying to be a support system for my children. It is very important to me, very important.

Veronica wanted to dispel the myth that in order to receive a good education, a person had to attend school outside of the state. She shared,

You don't have to travel to different places to get a education. You know, you can get an education right here in the city, but it's pushing yourself to want to do it, because it's not going to be easy . . . so I'm trying to teach them [my children] that no, it's not going to be easy, but this is the only ticket that you can ever have to make yourself—to be something.

Frecia wanted to be an example for her children. She wanted them to understand that even though she graduated from college, there are always opportunities to continue your education.

Just in general, I definitely believe education is important and it's definitely—it's needed. It's something that's continuing because I'm continuing my education. I don't have my MBA, but I'm working on what's called an ARM certification, which is—which holds a lot of weight in the risk management field.

The importance of education was echoed by several mothers in this study. The mothers saw a good education as a gateway for their sons. Not only a gateway to more opportunities but to a better life as well. These mothers walked the walk and talked the talk. While their sons were doing homework, quite a few of the mothers were also taking classes or working on advanced degrees.

Resilience

One common trait or characteristic possessed by the mothers in this study was resiliency. For the purposes of this study, resiliency refers to overcoming difficult situations. Wright (2003) asserted that resilient women, despite their circumstances, are still able to build external support systems and develop meaningful relationships with their children as well as with individuals outside of their families. Monique recalled the courage it took to pull herself out of a depression once her ex-husband filed for divorce. She felt that

he should have been a man about it. Rather than start another relationship after the divorce, he actually started seeing a woman during our separation. My ex-husband was the love of my life and although our marriage wasn't perfect, getting divorced was the furthest thing on my mind. I am ashamed to admit it, but there were times that I wanted to hurt myself. Even though I had children, I couldn't see past my own pain. If it had not been for my mother stepping in, we might not be having this conversation.

Monique credits her mother for being her saving grace during one of the lowest points in her life. Between her faith in God and her mother's help, she was able to start picking up the pieces.

Veronica recounted the heartbreaking story about how she lost both of her parents when she was young. She shared,

I can remember talkin' to my mama. We were in my bedroom and she was getting ready to braid my hair. Someone knocked on the front door and the next thing we know, we heard my daddy scream. My mama shoved me into my closet and as she turned around, she was shot in the chest by the man who broke into our house. I guess I was in shock because I didn't scream . . . I didn't cry . . . I sat there on the floor in the closet trying to figure out what happened. After that night, my life was never the same.

As she spoke about staying with a variety of family members, her voice broke as she recalled one of the lowest points in her life. "Miss Lori," she said, ". . . once I got older, it became harder and harder to find family members to stay with. It got to the point where I found myself sleeping on a park bench." Growing up, I had the privilege to be raised by my mother and father so hearing her story made me even more grateful for them. When I asked her how she was able to deal with everything and still attend school, she shared that by the time she got to her senior year, she spent less and less time at school and eventually had to start working. While she was sharing this story, her face clouded over and she said, "imagine what I could have been if my parents were still alive?"

Contessa was in college with the hopes of becoming a special education teacher when she got pregnant during her sophomore year in college. Not only did she have to contend with her parents' disappointment, she also had to come to terms with the fact that

she had to drop out of college. She thought that even though she would no longer be able to go to school, she would be able to start a life with her boyfriend. Her boyfriend stayed in and out of trouble. He was arrested for small crimes; however, shortly after the birth of his son, he was incarcerated. This brought additional shame to Contessa and she found herself isolating herself from her family for fear of being judged. For the sake of her son, she ended the relationship with her oldest son's father. She made sure that her son was able to see his father, but she had to close that chapter of her life. To make ends meet, Contessa applied for public assistance. By the time she had her second child, she made the decision to return to trade school to become an aesthetician.

While several of the mothers in the study had to overcome challenging situations, Kenya found herself in a different situation. In order to better provide for her son, she made the decision to return to school to earn her graduate degree:

While Jeremiah was in elementary school, I was working on my master's degree and then my doctorate. Because I was a single mom, I knew as an educator early on that I would not be able to provide for him the way I wanted to. I wanted to be comfortable and provide for him. This would not be the case with just a bachelor's [degree], I knew it, and so it was very important for me to push myself to do—to go back to school and pursue my graduate degrees, so while Jeremiah was in elementary school, I was in grad school. I remember many times staying up late at night, you know, so the typical day looked like this: I would wake up at five o'clock in the morning, and get him, you know, ready for school, I as a single mom, I always ironed clothes for the week, so I ironed on Sunday and I ironed for the entire week outfits, and so he knew what he was going to every day because I laid it out.

I would put affirmations on his mirror, he knew that after he got out of the shower he was supposed to speak his affirmation. We would say them together at the kitchen table and by 7 o'clock we were out of the door. He went to school and I went to work. While I took classes, Jeremiah stayed with his grandmother. I would pick him up about 8 o'clock and I would review his homework, then work on my assignments once he went to bed.

In Kenya's situation, perseverance would be a better description of the steps she took to provide a better situation for her son. She had to make sacrifices; however, the decision to return to graduate school was not forced upon her. She made the conscious decision to return so that she could be in a better position financially in order to meet the needs of her son and daughter.

Perseverance would also describe Vivian's efforts to provide for her son as a single mother. She shared, "I would describe myself as a strong woman. I am strong willed, so when I start feeling overwhelmed, I just remember why I am doing the things I am doing. Eva added, "I want to model for my son that when things get difficult, you can get through them by being focused and sticking with it."

Perseverance and resilience were traits that were possessed by the mothers that participated in this study. From losing both parents at a young age to getting pregnant in college, these mothers faced some daunting situations. They knew that the odds were stacked against them. Rather than succumb to situations, they were able to find the strength to overcome their circumstances. They wanted more for their children and were willing to do whatever it took to make this a reality.

Importance of Religion

The mothers in this study discussed the important role religion played in their lives and in the lives of their children. Frechia believes that a Christian upbringing has helped her family stay strong together. She explained:

I believe that being a Christian influences how my children behave and treat others. As a result, both children have been complimented ever since they were

little about having morals and the fact that they have not had any behavior issues at school or home. The other children at church look up to them.

Julissa also felt that being a Christian influenced her son's upbringing. Growing up she shared:

my parents had me and my siblings in church every Sunday. There was never a Sunday that we missed church. It was kind of difficult to miss...especially when your father is a deacon and your mother is a deaconess. Sunday school to church service on Sundays to Wednesday Bible study to Saturday morning choir practice, church was like a second home me. When my son was little, he loved going to church. He would sing on the choir and serve as an usher. As a pre-teen, he started serving as a youth leader. The praise he received from our church members made him take more pride in the way he lived his life.

LaShon began her interview by sharing that "I am a Christian, believer of Jesus Christ all the way." She shared her belief that it was easy for young boys to get caught in gang life if they did not have Christ in their lives. She asserted,

That's when you get into gangs, and you get into this group that wanna smoke weed. It's not because they wanna smoke weed. They lookin' for something that is bigger than themselves to click together and if they're not already believers in Jesus Christ, the Devil is out there waiting with all kinds of problems to attract them to.

LaShon is constantly reminding her children of God's grace and the importance of knowing the Word of God. She reiterates the fact that those with a weak mind are easily at the hands of the Devil. She believes:

We have to do something to encourage the minds of our middle school boys - our kids to let them know, 'No, you are strong. It's what's in you,' the tangible things that say they're strong. I would say that my son Adrian know he's strong for two things - because I tell him daily, and because he knows the Word of God. The

Word of God tell him he's good, so good, he knows that God will not leave him or forsake him. He knows that God - he knows, so, his strength is in the Word of God, but I am here as a reminder well God placed me to be an overseer of him to remind him even his friends get weak, and his spirit won't - can't hear he can't hear his spirit, that's when I come in next. God wanted me to be the overseer to remind him, 'Uh-h, that ain't what we do. That ain't how we do it. Let's go.' What does God say about that? Let's figure out what we doing wrong.

She continued by saying:

If we [parents] get back to the basics of loving our kids, nurturing them until they're fully grown. See, we oftentimes we give up too, which is exactly what I was saying, because of what? Weakness. Man, God's Word is so true. I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm getting excited. God's Word is so true. It manifests itself. It's so true, but again, there's also a thing called weak parents. A lot of parents don't want to discipline they kids because it's hard. I can't tell you all the times I've disciplined all three of my kids and went in the room and cried. You know, God disciplines us every day, and he lets us know, something might be hurting Him, He don't wanna do it, but He knows our ins and outs, our probably - what's in our heads. If he doesn't do it that way, that would never change who we are. We would never to be what he needs us to be.

Monique pointed that going to church allows both her and her children the opportunity to strengthen their relationship with God. When they are not in church, she and her children discuss their Christian journey. Felicia shared:

We are Christians and we go to church every Sunday. Now when he's with his dad he does - unfortunately he does not go. This bothers me but I can't say anything about it. When he's visiting his father, he doesn't take him [to church]. When he's with me, we always go. We talk about, you know, our Christian walk, and our Christian journey, and you know, whenever he's - one year for Christmas, was it Christmas or his birthday, I bought him a necklace that's a cross. He's got that up under his clothes all the time, even when he's playing baseball.

Unlike the other mothers in the study, Eva did not reference religion as the source of her strength. For her, she felt that her work ethic was the reason she was able to get

through difficult or tough times. When she was feeling down or she was having a hard day, she shared that “I would look at my children and that would not allow me to feel sorry for myself.” She continued by saying “Yes ~ there were times when I would worry about providing for my children but I would hear my father’s voice saying ‘pressure busts pipes’ and in this family we don’t give in to pressure.”

The reliance on their faith and their belief in God were themes that were expressed by the mothers in this study. Their Christian upbringing helped them to keep their families strong and provided them with a sense of purpose. For the mothers in the study, it was not merely about going to church. They wanted their sons to know God’s grace and constantly reiterated the importance of knowing His word. While most of the mothers felt their religion assisted them in overcoming difficulties they faced, one of the mothers felt it was her work ethic that was more critical than religion. She felt that her work ethic served as her strength as opposed to believing in a specific religious deity.

Barriers in the Son’s Academic Success

Barriers was a second theme that emerged from the interviews. The mothers in this study came from a variety of backgrounds yet they discussed many of the same barriers. Experiencing challenging relationships with their sons’ teachers, countering the negativity and stereotypes that were held about their sons, and teaching their sons how to advocate for themselves were themes that emerged.

Interactions and Relationships with Teachers

Teachers’ perception of African American males has a direct effect on how well they are able to achieve in the classroom (Robinson, 2007). When asked about her

interactions with her son's teachers, Contessa described her interactions and relationships as varied. She felt that when her son was in elementary school, the teachers took the time to communicate with her weekly. However, now that her son is in middle school, she felt middle school teachers were not communicating as frequently, because she did not hear from the middle school teachers unless it was about report cards or progress reports or conflicts with a peer.

Julissa recalled a situation where another student, who happened to be White had a conflict with her son. She felt that the teacher recommended a "lesser" punishment to the Principal than her on. She would have preferred that the teachers and administrators had pulled the students aside and talked to them when an issue emerged between them. Being that the school was about 85% Black, Julissa believed that the White students were treated differently since there was so few of them.

Felicia had to learn that in order to advocate for her son, she had to learn how to work with her son's teachers. She feels as an African American mother she had to avoid feeding into stereotypes.

I feel like some teachers have a misconception of Black mothers. I honestly feel like when they see some of us they probably think, "Oh, here we go again." They believe that we're going to get up there, and start cussing and fussing. I had to set one teacher straight because she told me in a parent conference that "she would not tolerate any yelling" during the conference. I was offended and asked to speak with the Principal. When I shared with him the teacher's comments, he quickly apologized. At a later date, the Principal met with me and the teacher. This exchange was very different from the first conference. I walked in with my notepad and copies of emails that I'd sent that were unanswered. Although I was still a little heated, I had to maintain my composure because I didn't want this teacher to take anything out on my son.

Angie described her interactions with her son's teachers as pretty good. She expressed that:

I try to be partners in his [my son's] educational experience. I think—well, as you know sometimes, it's difficult for parents to be—when the parent is also a teacher also because we know what is supposed to be done in the classroom. I try not to jump in and let the teacher kind of know that they need to do something different in the classroom. I have found it easier to offer suggestions once the teacher has shared the information she planned to share first. This has led to more positive interactions than negative ones.

She added that since tried to visit the school as often as she can on her days off, the teaching staff now knows who she is. She felt that this helped her to be viewed as a positive partner in her son's education.

Research on African American males suggests that they perform better academically when their single mother is involved in their schooling (Brody & Flor, 1998; Gant & Greif, 2009). Veronica not only advocates for her son, but she was diligent about getting him to speak up for himself.

Although my son is quiet, he advocates for himself in school. It is something that he is learning to do more. Yes. He definitely does. He will speak up, and if something is not right, or if he needs extra help he will talk to his teacher. Sometimes he does not like to ask for help because he says it makes him look dumb, and I told him "Well that's what the teachers are there for. They actually get paid to teach you, to help you succeed and learn." So he is slowly getting over that no like—not wanting to ask for help.

Eva felt that teacher communication was important because parents need to know what is going on in the classroom. Unlike elementary school, she felt that middle school teachers, administrators, and even the front office at her son's school communicated the

least and were often rude. She constantly found herself constantly reaching out to her son's school in order to get any communication on his academic and behavioral progress. She felt this is a barrier that could easily be addressed. Eva even gave suggestions that she observed with some of her son's teachers while he was in elementary school. Class Dojo and Remind 101 were two of the popular apps that were used to reach out to parents.

Navigating their interactions and relationships with their sons' teachers proved to be a challenge for some of the mothers in this study. Communication seemed to be more prevalent during their sons' elementary years and tapered off by the time they matriculated to middle school. This decline in communication added an additional layer of pressure for the mothers. Not only were they having to chart their course through this new terrain called middle school, they were having to do so with limited communication from teachers.

Stereotypes and Deficit Thinking

The mothers involved in the study shared the same sentiment that African American single mothers and their sons are viewed negatively which can cause challenges. Contessa believed that she and her sons were judged before teachers had the chance to really know them. She recounted an instance where her son's teacher tried to "diagnose him with ADHD." Contessa's countenance changed and I could tell that the label still bothered her. She passionately shared her feelings:

I was so offended when my son's teacher suggested that he needed to be put on medication. I didn't appreciate it. . . . not one bit. It pissed me off. Why is it that if a child has to move around that he has to have ADHD? She's not a medical

doctor. That isn't her area of expertise. I felt that if a child is showing issues in a certain subject . . . why not offer tutoring or extra assistance? Maybe even extra homework? Or why not work with me to figure out what we can do together? No—none of that happened. If I had a better relationship with her I may not have been as insulted. I just felt that she wanted to reach a quick solution . . . one that didn't require her to put forth any effort.

Felicia shared an incident that happened to her son that truly bothered her. Her son was having trouble in school. When she scheduled a conference with the teacher, she was surprised to enter the classroom and see her son's teacher, another teacher, and the assistant principal all seated around the table. She tried to maintain her composure but she was thoroughly disgusted. Once the conference started, she took out a notepad along with copies of the emails she had sent the teacher and her responses. She thought it was odd that the assistant principal did not offer much in the way of suggestions during the conference—just her son's teacher and the other teacher that was present. It finally dawned on her that they had the assistant principal present in case she started "acting ghetto." At the end of the conference, the teacher commented, "Wow that went better than I thought it was going to go. I honestly thought you were going to come in and be angry. We actually had a civilized conversation." It was at that point that Felicia excused herself from the room. Later that day, she contacted the assistant principal that was present and scheduled a one-on-one conference with him regarding the comments from her son's teacher.

While discussing this question during Angie's interview, I could tell that she was hurt by an incident that happened with her son. She explained that a similar situation

happened to her when she was in school and prayed that “times had changed” by the time her son entered school.

Early on, I knew that there was something special about him [my son]. When I left DCS school and started volunteering at his school, I had the chance to see my son in action. He was five at the time so seeing him in the educational setting was rewarding. Although I was a Mom, I also looked at him as if he were just a student. I noticed that he was much more advanced some of his peers. He had an inquisitive nature about him and even at five he could hold conversations about more advanced things than the other students in his class. He started getting in trouble and by the time we got to the bottom of the issue, we realized he was bored in class so he would do things to entertain himself.

She went further to say:

When I asked his teacher about providing him with more challenging work or having him sit in another classroom with other students, his teacher looked at me like I had three heads. She said, “Oh, he’s not ready for that. We don’t want to set him up for failure by pushing him too hard. He’s fine where he is.” Of course, this didn’t sit well with me. I asked her to challenge my child or we would need to find another class. I told her that when I was a child my teachers felt that I could not do harder work. Because of their preconceived notion of my intelligence, I often thought that something was wrong with me because they didn’t believe I could do harder work. Not having them believe in me was bothersome. Later my Mom told me that she learned from another teacher that they didn’t want me to “score better” or be smarter than the White students in my class. This bothered me for quite some time.

Kenya disclosed that one of her son’s teachers told her that he was “acting White” and didn’t like the same things the other African American students in the class liked.

Kenya was taken aback because he expected a child to be the one that made a comment about her son “acting White”—not his teacher. Over the course of the year, her son was teased and bullied by his classmates for not being “Black enough.” Rather than like rap, he loved Frank Sinatra. Not knowing how to handle the pressure, he started acting up in

class. He fell victim to the negativity until Kenya sat him down for a heart-to-heart. That is when she learned why his behavior had taken a turn for the worse.

Importance of Advocacy

Throughout the coding process, the notion of advocacy was one that kept recurring. Several of the mothers in the study expressed that they felt it was truly up to them to speak up for their sons. When Contessa was asked how she supported her son, she shared that:

I have to advocate for my son. I do that a lot for my son. He's very soft spoken and it is easy for his teachers to overlook him. He has great grades, is respectful but he still struggles with speaking up for himself. I honestly think he just doesn't really know how to speak up for himself. That is something that we are constantly working on. I told him that I would not always be around and that he needed to speak up for himself if I were not around.

Monique constantly reminded her son that he had to learn how to navigate two worlds as an African American male. It was not enough for him to know about his Black culture, he had to be able to navigate in White mainstream society. She told him:

There are going to be folks in the world who are not going to want the best for you. They are going to judge you . . . before they even get the chance to know you. You have to know your worth and know that there are going to be times when people will do you wrong. Those people may be your peers or even your teachers. You have to be able to make a sound argument without being disrespectful. There is nothing wrong with sticking up for yourself. You can't let folks walk all over you. If you let it happen once, they will continue to do it.

Advocating for their sons meant different things to each of the mothers. While some felt it meant standing up for themselves, a few of the mothers felt that advocating meant being your own cheerleader and your own motivator. Vivian was concerned that

she waited a little too late to teach her son this valuable lesson. There were a few instances where her son had negative experiences but did not tell her about them until years later because he did not want her to be upset with him. She had to remind him that “she was always going to be in his corner.” But at the same time, she let him know that it was her job to protect him and that was difficult if she was not aware of the things that were taking place at school.

Losing her parents at a young age made LaShon want to advocate for her son since she felt that no one did this for her when she was growing up. She was made to believe that if she was in trouble, it was “her fault.” Because of this, she would beat herself up – even if she knew she was in the right. Not having someone speak up for her made her grow up to believe that her voice did not matter and she did not want the same thing to happen to her son.

Support Systems

The mothers participating in this study acknowledged that it was not only their efforts that assisted in their son’s success but was aided by individuals they relied on. While grandparents assisted in some instances, a few of the mothers discussed the support they received from other single mother or friends that became family over time. These support systems allowed their mothers to enlist the help of those who shared the common purpose of wanting the best for their sons. The mothers in the study also discussed the need to have positive male role models in the lives of their sons. There were many things the mothers could teach their sons; however, they were concerned with

teaching their sons how to be young men in a world that judged them simply by the color of their skin.

Reliance on Extended Family

There is an African proverb that reads, “It takes a village to raise a child.” During her time as First Lady, Hillary Clinton published a book entitled *It Takes a Village to Raise a Child and Other Lessons Children Teach Us* which brought additional attention to the proverb. While many of the mothers in this study depended on other family members to assist them with the caring of their children, two mothers served as the sole caregivers for their children which presents a myriad of difficulties. Beyond herself, her father, and her boyfriend, Contessa also believes that her extended family has helped raise her son. She believes that her boyfriend, who is also the father of her younger son, has stepped up because her eldest son’s father was incarcerated. LaShon feels that it is definitely a family effort when it comes to raising her children:

Although I am the primary caregiver for my son, if it weren’t for my Mom stepping in I don’t know what I would do. Yes, my children’s father is active in their lives, but he lives out of state. My brothers also help out with my kids. Sometimes it’s as simple as taking them to a game.

Eva’s experience was quite different. She found herself in a new city with her children and no immediate family for several months. Until her mother was able to relocate to the city she was living in, Eva had to rely on her best friend to help her.

In this day and age, you can’t just try anyone with your children. I watch the news and I see the stories where children are touched by the people who were supposed to be watching them. It’s sad but sometimes it is even family members that touch the children. This made it difficult for me to leave my kids with people.

Babysitters cost too much so thankfully my best friend would watch my kids if I was running late from work or had to run an errand.

Monique's situation was different in that, like Eva, she had a best friend that helped her out with her children. In addition to her best friend, she and some other single mothers served as each other's support system. Not only was this assistance free of charge, Monique was able to return the favor for them when they were in need. She added, "My grandmother used to say 'it takes a village to raise a child.' That is the truth because no one can do it alone. Even if you have a partner or a spouse, everyone needs help."

LaShon also relied on her extended family to help her raise her children. "There is nothing like family" LaShon commented. She continued by saying "I know they love my children as much as I do and that means the world to me."

The mothers in this study realized that it would be more difficult for them to raise their sons without soliciting the help of their family members and friends. While many of the mothers were able to call on family members, one of the mothers moved to a city where she had no family. Paying for a babysitter proved to be costly; however, she was able to get support from her best friend.

Fictive Kin

Sussman (1976) defines fictive kin as individuals who regard one another in kinship terms although not directly related. Examples of fictive kin include godparents, church members, and peer groups (Chatters, Taylor, & Jayakody, 1994). Only a few of

the mothers who participated in the study felt comfortable having someone other than family members watching their children. Vivian felt torn in that:

I need help but I am not always sure of who I can trust. It would kill me if I ever put my child in harm's way. But I have to work. There are times that I wish my family lived in the area. Sometimes I don't know where to turn . . . I have to be Mommy . . . and Daddy. I finally had to ask one of my girlfriends to step in. If I am being honest, I felt that asking for help was a sign of weakness.

When I asked her to explain why she felt asking for help was a show of weakness, Vivian continued by saying:

You don't understand. As a single mother, I constantly feel judged. I feel judged by my family . . . by the teachers . . . by society. I felt that if I could handle everything on my own then I could prove that I was good enough. I know that may sound silly but it's how I felt. I think I am a great mother but . . . there are times when I put a lot of pressure on myself.

As confident as she appears to be, I was struck by her willingness to be vulnerable and share with me her true feelings.

Eva, a mother of four, tended to rely on her older children to watch the younger ones. During those times when she needs additional support, she reached out to her church members.

Over the years, my church members have become my family. With my children's father being incarcerated, it is not like I can ask him for help. My kids still have contact with him, but I can't rely on his family either. When my church family isn't available, my best friend pitches in. She doesn't have any children so the fact that she loves my children as if they are her own makes me feel less guilty about her watching them. The fact that she also attends the same church as me is a win-win as well.

Need for Positive Male Role Models

Several of the mothers in study referenced the need to have positive male roles models in the lives of their sons. Veronica shared that although “she could teach her son how to be respectful, she could not teach him how to be a man.” For her son, she relied on the positive males at her church to be a role model. Veronica felt that:

Raising my son is a community effort. Our pastor plays a part. My pastor constantly reminds son that ‘he might be the next President.’ Even though I can say that to him, he seems to stand a little taller when Pastor says it. Pastor also tells him to ‘watch out for those fast girls.’ It feels good to have someone else say those my things to him.

Julissa relied on her son’s coach to serve as a role model. She tried to have a positive co-parenting experience with her son’s father but found it more and more difficult once he remarried.

My ex-husband and I tried to get along for TJ’s sake once we divorced. Things were okay until he started dating and eventually remarried. I was crushed when that happened. I tried not to speak ill of his father but I was hurt. I am not proud of some of the things I said. We got TJ involved in sports because his teacher noticed that he would get extremely frustrated in class and felt that having an outlet would be helpful.

Julissa continued:

Turns out that football was just the thing that TJ needed to deal with his aggression. Coach Sam ended up being a blessing for my entire family. Yes, TJ could talk to his father but he honestly saw more of Coach Sam. As a only child, TJ’s teammates became like the brothers he always wanted but didn’t have. To see my son loved by his teammates and Coach leads me to believe that having them in his life helped my son succeed on the field as well as in school.

Unlike Julissa, Angie's son had fraternities that volunteered at her son's school. Angie, a member of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc. was thrilled to learn that the local chapter of Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc. served as mentors at her son's school.

As an AKA, I love that my son is exposed to good men through the Alphas the volunteer at his school. He's learning lessons about how to be a good student as well lessons on how to be a good young man. The fraternity is actively involved and my son loves being around them because he likes that they teach him how to step! He is always trying to show my something that he has learned. What I discovered was that while they are teaching him steps, they are sharing life lessons with him.

From coaches to church members to fraternities, the mothers in this study found that they could provide positive male figures for their sons without dating a series of men.

The themes that emerged from the in-depth interviews with the mothers participating in the study provided an important insight into the steps they have taken to ensure their son's success. The stories the mothers shared showed their remarkable strength and determination to do right by their children. Their comments regarding their interactions with teachers and the lack of communication from the school revealed the need for reform. Despite the negative stereotypes and deficit thinking their sons experienced, the mothers in this study still believed in the importance of their sons receiving a good education and were relentless in their efforts to

Summary

Throughout the study, the love these mothers had for their sons was evident. Regardless of whatever difficulty they were facing, their ultimate goal was to ensure that their sons were successful in school. Each of the mothers believed that education was the

way for their sons to have the opportunity to improve their life. They were willing to sacrifice their dreams, their own happiness in some instances, as well as their needs in order for their sons to have what they needed. The mothers who participated in the study used their lives as an example for their sons. Their challenges served as teachable moments. Rather than turn a blind eye to the difficulties they faced, they used those moments to talk to their sons and discuss the ways to persevere.

Although the literature suggests that single African American mothers do not impact their sons' educational journey positively, the findings of this study suggest otherwise. Single African American mothers can positively influence their son's academic success by serving as advocates for them while teaching them to advocate for themselves. The study revealed the important role religion plays in the lives of single African American mothers and how this belief plays out in the lives of their sons.

CHAPTER V

FINDINGS

This research study is a qualitative interview study of parental involvement specifically through the lens of single African American mothers. The purpose of this study was to investigate the approaches and methods used by single African American mothers to influence the academic performance of their middle school age sons. A review of the literature revealed that there have been very few studies of single mothers of young boys experiencing academic success in middle school (Griffin & Allen, 2006; Werblow & Robinson, 2012). Interviews with the mothers who participated in the study covered a range of emotions. From the pride expressed in the success of their sons to painful memories of their own childhood to feelings of empowerment, these women bravely shared their experiences. For some of the women who participated in this study, this was their first time sharing their stories. Their stories and words provided rich detail into their lives and the lives of their children.

After conducting research on parental involvement, African American single mothers and the educational landscape for African American males, I was unsure of what direction the data would lead me. My research study evolved from an initial story on African American male achievement to examining the approaches employed by single African American mothers to influence the academic achievement of their sons. This study focused specifically on middle school age young men in part because middle

school is the connector between one's primary and secondary educational experiences. As a former middle school principal, I am keenly aware of the critical time period that exists for students between sixth and eighth grade. Unlike elementary and secondary school, middle school is a pivotal time for students. Not only are they having to adjust to a new learning environment and more challenging curriculum, they are experiencing physical and hormonal changes as they enter puberty.

By conducting this study, my hope was to shed light on a segment of the population that has not always been portrayed in the best light. Stereotypes and deficit thinking were the lenses that African American boys and single African American mothers have previously been viewed through. The results from this study will hopefully expand the conversation to include the positive attributes these mothers bring to the table as they not only navigate the educational system but their lives as well.

Research Question 1

How do single African American mothers draw on their own life experiences to support their academically successful middle school age sons?

Each of the mothers who participated in the study shared that their upbringing influenced the ways in which they raised their sons. The role they played in the lives of their sons was shared by their experiences (Hoover-Dempsey & Sadler, 1997). Biographical factors such as modeling the importance of education allowed the mothers to show their sons firsthand the pathway to achieving academically. Each of the mothers in the study set high expectations for their sons and their words and actions were aligned to those expectations. The importance of having an education was instilled in the mothers

at an early age. They felt that having a good education would open doors for their sons that might otherwise have not been opened. Some of the mothers worked with their sons at an early age to get them interested in school while others advocated for them to ensure that they were receiving what they needed to be successful. Three of the mothers pursued advanced degrees and additional certifications at work in order to model for their sons that the learning never stops. In essence, they wanted to show that one's level of education will either hinder or help them achieve the type of life desired. When asked how she prepared her son for his educational journey, Angie discussed wanting to model educational excellence for her son.

Not only have I talked about the importance of education, I also modeled educational excellence for my son. I got my doctorate in 2012, so he, you know, he saw me going to school. So being somebody who has modeled by doing it, I'm trying to do something that's important, but you also see me doing it, so he's seen it. He saw me get my doctorate. He—and he saw me doing my work. Last year I did a certificate program in theology and again, he saw me doing my work. And he—he comes to work with me, so I'm a sociology professor, so he comes—he sees me teaching, he sees me interacting with my students. So he sees that I'm telling him to do something, but he also sees me doing it too.

For Angie, it was not enough to merely serve as an example for her son. She used her profession to provide him with an opportunity to see her interacting with her students. This reinforced the values and beliefs she held regarding education.

Additionally, the mothers knew that it was important for them to get their sons interested in education at an early age. Erica started working with her son before he entered school:

from the beginning, from like, I'd say starting pre-k from the beginning you know. Even before he entered into that, I used to, because him and his brother (he got older brothers). I will play games with them like to get them prepared for even pre-k . . . and how they like the little games I would play. And sometimes, it would be something like, playing for candy, different stuff, or little toys to like intrigue them more. I know that intrigued [him] and pulled them more in and then you know, as he got in there he's like "Mama, I like school and this," because I already know this stuff.

The mothers in this study realized that as their son's first teacher, they could not wait for them to fall behind before they started working with them. This study supports the research conducted by Stevenson, Chen, and Uttal (1990) that in addition to encouraging their children, mothers value their children's education. Realizing the importance of education, the mothers in this study raised the bar for their children (K. Jackson & Remillard, 2005; Seginer, 1986).

Being resilient and overcoming difficult situations was a common trait that the mothers in the study possessed. Wright (2003) asserted that resilient women, despite their circumstances, are still able to build external support systems and develop meaningful relationships with their children. Monique found herself wanting to harm herself after her husband filed for divorce while Veronica had to learn to come to grips with the loss of her parents that were murdered front in front of her. Those situations could have changed the trajectory of the lives of these mothers had they learned not to keep going and press forward. The mothers involved in this study helped their sons understand that in their educational journey and in life they would experience challenges and setbacks. Sitting idly by on the sideline or playing the victim was not an option. Kenya placed affirmations on her son's mirror as a way to encourage him.

Religion also plays a critical role in the lives of the mothers. Their faith in God is what sustained many of the mothers during difficult and trying times. The mothers in this study wanted their sons to know that they would face difficult situations and that it was important to depend on their religious beliefs. Felicia shared,

We are Christians and we go to church every Sunday. Now when he's with his father—unfortunately he does not go. We always talk about, you know our Christian walk, and our Christian journey and you know—one year for Christmas or his birthday, I bought him a necklace that's a cross. He's got that up under his clothes all the time, even when he's playing baseball. And I don't know if it's sentimental to him because I gave it to him or that it just reminds him of his walk or his relationship with God, you know, when he's going through different things. And that's kind of what I wanted it to be, you know, when he's not around me all the time, because that's what you hope when they group up, you know, that you know . . . that they remember those lessons that they learned.

Felicia valued her relationship with God and wanted to impart this same desire to her son. Knowing that he could rely on God when she was not around provided her with reassurance that she was placing him on the right path.

Research Question 2

What approaches do these mothers use to navigate the educational system?

A study by Brody and Flor (1998) revealed that African American single mothers valued the independence, self-reliance, social well-being, and academic achievement their sons displayed. The mothers that participated in this study shared a variety of ways they navigated the educational system in an effort to support their sons' academic success. From meeting with their sons' teachers to teaching their sons how to advocate for themselves enable mothers to support the academic success of their sons.

Teachers' perceptions of African American males have a direct effect on how well they are able to achieve in the classroom (Robinson, 2007). Rather than allowing their sons to get sidetracked by the myth that their race could prohibit them from being successful in the classroom, they were constantly providing them with positive affirmations about their abilities to achieve. The mothers would not allow their sons to play the race card with them. They did not automatically come to the defense of their sons if they were in the wrong in a matter.

The current educational system fails to take into account the diverse families which they are serving. It appears that schools are structured to meet the needs of students coming from a two-parent household. If one parent is unable to attend a parent conference, there is an expectation that the other parent will be able to fill in. In the case of single mothers, their work schedule may prohibit them from having as much flexibility as others may have. This is a time when teachers and schools need to be more understanding and offer alternatives to face-to-face conferences. Whether the conference occurs over the phone or through a teleconference feature such as Skype, the important thing is for the communication between home and school to take place.

Epstein's model of parental involvement (Epstein, 2002) references six types of parental involvement including:

- Type One: parenting or helping families establish home environments that support children as students
- Type Two: communicating or designing effective forms of school-to-home and home-to-school communication about school initiatives and student progress

- Type Three: volunteering or recruiting and organizing parents to help and support with school initiatives
- Type Four: learning at home or providing information and ideas to families about ways they can help children at home with their homework and other curriculum-related endeavors
- Type Five: decision-making or including parents in school decisions, developing parent leaders and representatives
- Type Six: collaborating with community or identifying and integrating resources from the community to strengthen school programs, family practices and student development and successes

Based on this study, the experiences of the mothers fall into three of the six types. The mothers participating in this study made no mention of being encouraged or recruited by schools to assist with schoolwide initiatives nor did they mention efforts from the school to develop them as parent leaders. Since the study participants were selected from a variety of Title I schools, I was surprised that none of the schools made efforts to encourage mothers to become more involved with schoolwide initiatives. This may have been in part to questions that were used during the interview protocol.

Advocacy was another category that emerged through the coding process. The mothers discussed their need to speak up for their sons but also the need for them to teach their sons how to advocate for themselves. Brody and Flor (1998) discuss in their study on maternal resources and parenting practices used by single Black mothers strategies that were utilized by mothers to support their sons. Talking to their sons on a regular basis in an attempt to keep their fingers of the issues and problems their sons were facing was key in teaching their sons how to advocate for themselves. It was important for the

mothers to teach their sons how to be assertive and not aggressive. No matter how busy the mothers in the study were, they expressed the need to stay connected to their sons.

Research Question 3

How do these mothers exercise acts of mothering to support the academic success of their sons?

Mothers, regardless of their marital status, play a significant role in the lives of their sons (Robinson & Werblow, 2012). One thing that stood out from the interviews that were conducted was that each of the mothers made a concerted effort to talk to their son. During these talks, the mothers not only wanted to impart wisdom to their sons, the conversations allowed the mothers to know what going on in the lives of their sons. Eva shared that she and her son were always talking about different things. Simply asking about his day led to finding out issues that her son was dealing with.

The conversations with their sons allowed the mothers that participated in the study to better prepare them for their educational journey. Felicia shared that having conversations with her son was critical to his success because she was able to see where he might have some missteps. At one point, her son felt that his teacher was singling him out in the class because of his race. Once she drilled down to the bottom of things, Felicia learned that her son needed help in math class but refused to ask questions for fear of looking dumb in front of his classmates. Had she merely believed her child, she would not have gotten to the root of problem. She reminded him “You’re going to be in someone’s corporation or you’re going to own your own business. Regardless of what you choose, you are going to have to speak up for yourself.”

The ten mothers who participated in this study appeared to have similar parenting styles. The manner they used to raise their sons incorporated an authoritative, no-nonsense approach. The mothers discussed giving their boys chores and responsibilities at an early age to instill a strong work ethic in them. Having chores in addition to having to do homework allowed the boys to learn about time management. The parenting styles of the mothers in this study supported the claims purported by Robinson and Werblow (2012). One of the mothers shared that although she could not teach her son how to be a man, she was able to impart to him the right way to treat women and how to respect himself. Two of the mothers in the story had partners who were incarcerated. Rather than shy away from this, the mothers used it as a teachable moment for their sons. They wanted them to understand that the choices they make as well as the friends they have can play a major role in their lives.

Research Question 4

What support do these mothers rely on to support their son's academic success?

There is a strong correlation between a mother's expectations and the academic performance of a child (K. Jackson & Remillard, 2005; Seginer, 1986). The mothers that participated in this study held high expectations for their sons. Having high expectations was not enough. The mothers also had to teach their sons to advocate for themselves. Support in a nurturing family and community enables African American single mothers to help their sons achieve academic success (Hubbard, Lewis, and Johnson, 2014). Several mothers shared that it was their family members that assisted them in caring for

their sons. In one instance, one grandmother served as her grandson's primary child care provider when her daughter fell into a deep depression following the end of her marriage.

Although the literature references fictive kin as a means of support for single mothers, very few mothers actually left their children in the care of friends that were so close that they were considered family. This came as a surprise based on the literature. Due to the current climate, some of the mothers felt uncomfortable leaving their sons in the care of others. One of the mothers expressed the guilt she felt not being able to handle everything herself. She felt that she was "being judged" as a single mother and because of that was initially unwilling to ask for her assistance. After a certain point, she had to ask for a help. The literature on fictive kin also mentioned the reliance on church members as well as their significant others.

There was some mention of mentors and positive role models but I expected the mothers to rely on the support of these individuals more than they expressed. In some instances, church members served as role models for the boys. The mothers who participated in the study did share that they created support systems with other single mothers. In addition to support, these mothers also created a social network where they could discuss things pertaining to their children. These social networks provided the mothers with a forum to discuss their hopes and fears pertaining to their sons as well as a safe haven to pose questions they may have regarding school procedures or structures. They felt that if they did not understand something, they had a group of mothers that were able to provide assistance.

The mothers in this study shared the need to create a support system. Some found this support in immediate family member while others reached out to their extended family members. In some instances, the mothers in the study had to rely on friends that became family members. The mothers acknowledged that trying to raise their sons alone was a difficult task.

Recommendations

As a result of this research study, there are several recommendations I would offer to single African American mothers, teachers and school leaders. Those recommendations are:

For Single African American Mothers

The results of this study revealed that it is important for single mothers to create a support system. The support can come from family members, church members, their child's school or even other single mothers. It is not uncommon for single mothers to shy away from asking for help for fear of being judged or looked down upon. Speaking with other mothers in similar situations will allow them to create a network where there is value in their shared experiences. It is important for these mothers to know that asking for assistance is not a negative thing nor will they be viewed as a bad mother not having all of the answers.

For Teachers

The relationship between teachers and single mothers is one that needs cultivating. Even before the school year begins, teachers may want to consider reaching out to their parents to introduce themselves. Make every effort to make the first contact

with mothers a positive one. In addition to sharing pertinent information about the class, it is important to remember to present the information in a format that is easily digestible. Far too often educators mean well and want to be thorough in the information they provide parents. However, the danger of being too thorough is falling into the trap of using educational jargon or acronyms that the mothers may not be familiar with. Whenever possible, provide parents with a reference sheet so that they feel empowered in conversations and as well as when they visit the school. Teachers must remember that in order to effectively meet the needs of their students, they must work to build positive relationships with the mothers of their students. This partnership is critical because of the vital role each group plays in the lives of the children they serve. When it comes to scheduling conferences, it is necessary for teachers to offer flexible meeting times and locations for single mothers that may not have flexibility with their work schedule. This may mean holding parent conference at a local recreation center or even at a local restaurant. Teachers must keep in mind that just because a student's mother is not able to attend school functions or conferences does not mean that they are not actively involved in the lives of their children. Ensuring that children have completed their homework and attend school on a regular bases are also **indicators** of parental involvement that have been undervalued.

Rather than write off African American single mothers or view them through a negative lens, a strengths-based approach should be utilized. These mothers have much to offer. This approach allows the assets and strengths that they have to be highlighted instead of focusing on the areas where they may be lacking.

For Administrators

Parental involvement has historically been viewed from the school perspective. In order to meet the needs of single mothers, it is important to view this phenomenon from their perspective. School leaders should review practices and procedures that might be deter single mothers from being more involved. Far too often, school leaders want to focus on the academic aspect of schools. Single mothers sometimes need their basic needs met. As a Title I school, additional funding is received from the federal government. A portion of the funding is specifically set aside for parental involvement. It is critical for school leaders to utilize these funds to meet the needs of the parents they serve.

Many Title I schools have parent liaisons that serve as a bridge between the parents and the school. From helping parents navigate the educational system to referring them to local agencies for assistance, the liaison is a designated point of contact for parents in addition to the teachers. Title I schools typically have a parent resource center. For those that do not have one, it is paramount that they establish one in their schools. The parent resource center can serve as a safe place in the school for the parents to visit. Due to their financial situations, it is not uncommon for some mothers to have very little technology in their homes. Title I funding will allow schools to purchase technology for their parent resource centers. In addition to having access to technology, single mothers can also use the resource center to improve or hone their computer skills.

School social workers also play a critical role in the assistance that can be provided to single mothers. Before a situation becomes dire, social workers can assist

mothers with receiving support from local agencies. Research has shown that single mothers experience a number of stressors. Social workers could provide them support in a non-threatening manner.

For Teacher Education Programs

As the next wave of future teachers is being cultivated, it is important for teacher education programs to help broaden the definition of parental involvement. Courses on cultural competence and cultural responsiveness should be integrated so that working in a school will not be the first time the teachers have experience with working with low-income families or families of color. Cultural competence is a concept that grew out of the medical profession. Doctors were able to improve their bedside manner and treatment of patients by learning more about them, their background, and not just their medical history. The same concept can be applied to the treatment of African American males and their single mothers. Medical students take the Hippocratic Oath. The oath, “primum no nocere” translates into “first, do no harm.” Pre-service teacher training should incorporate a similar principle. This same level of commitment will enable them to avoid educational malpractice and better meet the needs of the children they serve.

Along with recommendations from the literature and the researcher, the ten mothers who participated in the study offered suggestions of their own. Their heartfelt and sincere advice added another layer of depth to the study. At the end of the first two interviews, each of the mothers shared things they wish they could tell other single mothers, teachers, and school leaders. The information they shared was not only deeply personal but it offered a different perspective of how things could be done. As a result,

this question was added to the remaining interviews. When asked what advice she would give other single mothers, Veronica shared that:

I just feel like any single parent, whatever you're going to do, I just want them to know that they can push through, they can do whatever they want to do . . . I am my kids' best friend. I am their only friend. I let them know they have associates, you don't know who are friends.

She went further to share that she wished someone would have taken the time to share words of wisdom. Far too often, single mothers are trying to figure everything out on their own. There were times when she questioned whether or not she would be able to make it through the difficult situations she faced.

Angie echoed Veronica's sentiment regarding having a support system in place.

She expressed the fact that other single mothers keep her going and are supportive of her.

Single moms need to have a support system - I have a couple of girlfriends who are single moms. We talk, we share our frustrations and pain. We try not to take it out on our children. I think one of the main reasons why I'm not remarried - I've been divorced for seven years, but my focus is my children, and not all men understand that in terms of dating. So for single moms my advice would be to, you know, to have a support system of other single moms and think about your goals for your child, where you want them to be. Listen to what they want to do, and make a plan to help them get there. So, you know, supplemental enrichment activities, support their goals, and pray. That's about - also the number one thing is a support system. So guidance and support are important.

In addition to sharing about the support she receives and gives to other single mothers, she discussed the need to provide enrichment activities for her son. LaShon wanted to share with other single mothers the need to go back to the basics. She feels that

mothers need to remember that it is important to treat each of their children as an individual

I would recommend going back to the basics...show them [your sons] and teach them how to be the individuals that you want, because so many times we focus on everything else in life, and do not focus on the child, and if you lose focus on the individual child, you just may lose the child. Each child has their own individuality, so, as a Mom, you have to make sure you focus on that. Key in on it as much as you can, because in focusing on that, you gain so much as you can on the individual child. They need - love and nurturing.

Eva contends that being a single mother is difficult but not an impossible feat.

I would tell her [other single mothers] just pretty much you've got to have patience, regardless of what we go through and the struggles of life or whatever, you know, you still got to be in your child's life and let that child know it's going to be okay. Even with, you know, you know, even with me raising four boys, I'm not going to make it seem like it's just easy, but when I wake up I'm like okay, I know I'm doing this for y'all, I want y'all to do better than I have done and y'all keep on. So, when I give them that, that motivation, and a lot of times, looking over at them motivates me. Even as a single mom, you got to just keep on pushing.

Giving up is not an option as a single mother. Eva encouraged other mothers to keep pushing on.

In addition to offering advice to other single mothers, the mothers who participated in the study also wanted to share pearls of wisdom with teachers and school leaders. Felicia wanted to let educators know that it is important to have flexibility if they have students in their class who are being raised by single mothers.

I think just, yeah, definitely having that flexibility of, you, like you said, if you have a parent that can't come in for a conference, like my job is flexible, but I know everybody's is not—you know, some people are hourly, so if they have to

take off time, that's money for them, you know, so I think definitely the flexibility of being to have, you know a phone conference. Also, not - you know if there is a student that, you know, may be just really trying, or one that just doesn't seem to care - when I say waiting to the last minute to let a parent know, but if you're seeing a problem or an issue, you know, maybe just letting a parent know, you know, when you see it.

Vivian wants to encourage teachers to understand that each of her parents just want to be seen. Seeing someone means they are acknowledged. Vivian contends that

I think the first thing I would say to teachers is please understand a parent's circumstances, and I know, you know, teachers come from all different backgrounds and I know they are busy, and also the parents are busy, but I need for you to understand what is going on in my life (as a parent). If you understand that, then you can help my son.

Like Vivian, Monique wants teachers to acknowledge their existence but also recognize that their children are not just a number.

I mean teachers have a lot to look after. I know there is a lot of pressure on teachers to grade them . . . but you know, you just kind of want teachers to kind of still be connected to your kids—not just think your kid is a number, that you really do care about their education, too, you know you have a lot on your plate, but sometimes we just feel like, you know, they just have a number on their forehead and that's all they are.

Julissa wanted teachers and school personnel to know that understanding where a child is coming from can better assist them supporting that child. This sentiment goes hand-in-hand with the concept of cultural competence.

I'd pretty much say because some - every child is different and some are a little harder to reach because a lot of times you don't know what's going on in the household. And it don't necessarily mean it's a bad child, they just want somebody to really be there and support them and get that love that sometimes

they might not be getting at home, so you know, just keep on and keep supporting them and show them that you're truly there for them because sometime teacher minds are, you know, more of well "I'm just trying to get paid and if the child is a problem, they like, uh uh. So, just don't give up.

Kenya wished that school knew the struggles single mothers go through. It was her belief that educators may have a different perspective of single mothers if they actually took the chance to understand the sacrifices they make for their children.

I wish schools knew what we [single mothers] went through and I wish they make you understand, but I know that it's so many kids here that don't are for them kids, their kids the way because they rather go up to the club and stuff, it's a lot of—because I hear there's actually you know blood, sweat, and tears for their children and wish they knew that . . . there's a lot . . . because we know that the world will not understand us sometimes.

Having the mothers offer advice to other single mothers, school leaders, and teachers adds to the discourse on single African American mothers. Their words speak to the heart of what they wish others would have shared with them as well as lessons they had to learn on their own.

For Further Research

There is a need for further research to be conducted on single African American mothers and the impact they have on the academic performance of their sons. This research should take place not only in urban school districts but in rural communities as well. If educators are serious about all students having access to a Free and Appropriate Public Education, then measures need to be put in place to provide support for those families and for those mothers who may not be in a position to truly support their children as much as they want.

As referenced in the study published by Robinson and Werblow (2012), there are very few articles or studies that have been published on the positive effect or impact single African American mothers have on the academic performance of their sons. This study specifically focused on middle school age young men because middle school is the connector between one's primary and secondary educational journey; however, it could be viewed from the elementary or high school level. Rather than approaching the topic from a deficit lens or perspective, I would recommend approaching the topic from a strength-based approach. Doing so would offer a different perspective.

Reflections

As I sit reflect on this study, I find myself thinking of the single mothers that I had the opportunity to meet and interview. I have always considered myself to be a very open-minded person but hearing the stories of the mothers opened my eyes to things I never considered before—especially as a school administrator. Growing up in a two-parent household shaped my view of the education—the profession that I love so much. What I did not anticipate was how much that shaped my thoughts and perspective on parent involvement. These mothers forced me to reflect on my practices as an educator and as a person. The sacrifices these mothers made for their children were unbelievable. Rather than wallow in what could be described in some instances as dire situations, they dug deep within themselves and found the courage to continue always putting the needs of their children above their own. One of the mother's stories was particularly poignant. Imagine the impact of going from a two-parent household to seeing your parents murdered in front of you to sleeping on park benches. Experiencing trauma such as this

would have changed the trajectory of my life. Although it took her a few years to get her life back on track, this mother remained determined and was able to steady herself so she could move ahead.

Many discussed the power of religion in their lives and that had it not been for their faith, they may not have made it. In his poem *Mother to Son*, Langston Hughes paints a portrait of a mother explaining to her son the obstacles and trials that she had to overcome throughout her life. The words, “*Well son, I’ll tell you; Life for me ain’t been no crystal stair*” draws similarities to the mothers that participated in this study. These mothers poured their heart and soul into their children. Their example of resilience and perseverance is echoed in the words of the poem. The metaphors used by Langston Hughes reflect the sentiments that were expressed by the mothers who participated in this study. The love each of these mothers had for their sons was palpable. These women, many who had to overcome devastating life experiences refused to give in to their circumstances and continued to press towards the mark. These women are truly an example for their sons. The final lines of the poem are a reminder to young men to keep pressing on no matter how difficult things become.

So boy, don’t you turn back.
Don’t you set down on the steps
‘Cause you find it’s kinder hard.
Don’t you fall now -
For I’se still goin’, honey,
I’se still climbin’,
And life for me ain’t been no crystal stair.

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APPENDIX A
PARENT INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

(Pseudonym, Age, Highest Level of Education, Children, Other Personal Information)

1. Tell me a little bit about yourself.
2. Tell me about your son and the success he has experienced in school?
3. As a single mother, describe a typical day for you. For your son.
4. How have you prepared your son for his educational journey?
5. How do you help your son with his schooling?
6. What are your beliefs about education?
7. How would you describe your interactions and/or relationships with your son's teachers?
8. As a single mother, what are some of the steps you have taken to support your son's education?
9. Talk about barriers that you feel impacted your educational experiences or those of your son.
10. How would you describe your son's educational journey?
11. What or who influenced your son's academic success?
12. Who are the other individuals who help raise your son?
13. What non-family members support you in the raising of your son?

APPENDIX B

MATRIX FOR PARENT INTERVIEW GUIDE PROTOCOL

Research Questions	Interview Questions
<p>RQ1:</p> <p>How do single low-income African American mothers draw on their life experiences to support their academically successful middle school son?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tell me little something about yourself. • As a single mother, describe a typical day for you. For your son. • What are your beliefs about education? • Who are the other individuals who help you raise your son? • What non-family members support you in the raising of your son?
<p>RQ2:</p> <p>What approaches do these mother use to navigate the educational system?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tell me about your son and the success he has experienced in school. • How would you describe your interactions and/or relationships with your son's teachers? • Talk about barriers that you impacted your educational experiences or those of your son.
<p>RQ3:</p> <p>How do these mothers exercise acts of mothering to support the academic success of their sons?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How have you prepared your son for his educational journey? • As a single mother, what are some of the steps you have taken to support your son's education?
<p>RQ4:</p> <p>What strategies do these mothers rely on to support their son's academic success?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do you help your son with his schooling? • What role did you play in your son's academic success? • How would you describe your son's educational journey? • What or who influenced your son's academic success?

APPENDIX C

ALIGNING THE THEORETICAL/CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND THE RESEARCH QUESTIONS

	Element of Conceptual Framework #1 Biographical Factors	Element of Conceptual Framework #2 The System	Element of Conceptual Framework #3 Extended Family Network	Element of Conceptual Framework #4 Fictive Kin
RQ1: How do single low-income African American mothers draw on their life experiences to support their academically successful middle school son?	Tell me a little something about yourself. As a single mother, describe a typical day for you? For your son?	What are your beliefs about education?	Who are the other individuals who help you raise your son?	What non-family members support you in the raising of your son?
RQ2: What approaches do these mothers use to navigate the educational system?	Tell me about your son and the success he has experienced in school.	How would you describe your interactions and/or relationships with your son's teachers? Talk about barriers that you feel impacted your educational experiences or those of your son.		
RQ3: How do these mothers exercise acts of mothering to support the academic success of their sons?	How have you prepared your son for his educational journey?	As a single mother, what are some of the steps you have taken to support your son's education?		
RQ4: What strategies do these mothers rely on to support their son's academic success?	How do you help your son with his schooling?	How would you describe your son's educational journey?		What or who influenced your son's academic success?

	Element of Conceptual Framework #1 Biographical Factors	Element of Conceptual Framework #2 The System	Element of Conceptual Framework #3 Extended Family Network	Element of Conceptual Framework #4 Fictive Kin
	What role did you play in your son's academic success?			

APPENDIX D**CONSENT TO ACT AS A HUMAN PARTICIPANT****UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA AT GREENSBORO**

Project Title: *African American Single Mothers and their Influence on the Academic Success of their Middle School Age Sons*

Principal Investigator: Lori M. Bolds
Faculty Advisor: Dr. Carl Lashley

Participant's Name: _____

What are some general things you should know about research studies?

You are being asked to take part in a research study. Your participation in the study is voluntary. You may choose not to join, or you may withdraw your consent to be in the study, for any reason, without penalty.

Research studies are designed to obtain new knowledge. This new information may help people in the future. There may not be any direct benefit to you for being in the research study. There also may be risks to being in research studies. If you choose not to be in the study or leave the study before it is done, it will not affect your relationship with the researcher or the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. Details about this study are discussed in this consent form. It is important that you understand this information so that you can make an informed choice about being in this research study.

You will be given a copy of this consent form. If you have any questions about this study at any time, you should ask the researcher named in this consent form. Her contact information is below.

What is the study about?

This is a research project. Your participation is voluntary. The purpose of this research project is to examine the strategies used by single mothers to support the academic success of their middle school age sons.

There is a need to improve the educational opportunities for African American students, males in particular. More and more African American students are being raised in single parent households. Current literature indicates that these students are at risk for not performing well academically. However, there are still African American middle school males who are exceeding due in part to the support of their single mothers. This research will provide a platform for the voices of these mothers to be heard. Their voice is critical in assisting schools in addressing processes or procedures that may not only exclude

African American parents from being more involved in their children's education but could be hindering students from achieving academically.

Why are you asking me?

Participants being asked to participate in this research study were selected based on the following inclusion criteria: (1) having a son in middle school that is academically successful, (2) be a single mother serving as head of household, and (3) have a middle school age son that attends a Title I school. Academic success is defined as performance on report cards, no discipline referrals, and performance on formative and summative assessments such as end-of-grade tests.

What will you ask me to do if I agree to be in the study?

If selected as one of the subjects of this research, you will participate in interview sessions designed to collect data on the research topic. Each interview session will last approximately an hour to an hour and a half. A follow-up interview may also occur. You will be allowed to choose interview times and locations of your choosing. Data collection dates and times will be adjusted for your convenience.

If you have questions, want more information or have suggestions, please contact Lori M. Bolds (principal investigator) at lorimbolds@uncg.edu and faculty advisor Dr. Carl Lashley who may be reached at (336) 549-9163 as well as at c_lashle@uncg.edu.

Is there any audio/video recording?

The Principal Investigator (PI) would like to audiotape the interviews as well as take a few notes. A digital recording device will be used to capture what you say during the private interview. Because your voice will be potentially identifiable by anyone who hears the tape, your confidentiality for things you say on the tape cannot be guaranteed although the researcher will try to limit access to the tapes as described below.

What are the risks to me?

The Institutional Review Board at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro has determined that participation in this study poses minimal risk to participants.

If you have any concerns about your rights, how you are being treated, concerns or complaints about this project or benefits or risks associated with being in this study, please contact the Office of Research Integrity at UNCG toll-free at (855)-251-2351.

Are there any benefits to society as a result of me taking part in this research?

Research is designed to benefit society by gaining new knowledge. You will not benefit personally from being in this research study. However, the PI hopes you will enjoy discussing factors that can improve the academic outcomes for African American students. The PI's goal is to inspire readers to engage in a deeper conversation about factors that can improve the academic outcomes for African American male students.

Are there any benefits to *me* for taking part in this research study?

There are no direct benefits to participants in this study.

Will I get paid for being in the study? Will it cost me anything?

There are no costs to you or payments made for participating in this study.

How will you keep my information confidential?

Interview data will be collected in a setting that will maintain your confidentiality. The school your son attends will be identified in generic terms and the school district will not be named. This research is being led by a single investigator. Only the subjects and the Principal Investigator (PI) will have access to the data. Your name and other personal identifiers will not appear in the final draft of this research study or future publications and/or presentations.

All data will be kept secure and confidential. Your name, address, email, and phone numbers will be stored in a password-protected database. Interview data, audiotapes, and transcription materials will be stored separately. The PI's personal computers will be used for this research. Passwords will be placed on all study related files as an additional means of protecting your personal information.

A pseudonym of your choosing will be used in all data collected, narrative materials, and interpretation of data. Identifying names such as schools, your son's current and former teachers, and school district will be omitted from audio tapes and PI notes, and you will have multiple opportunities to review or remove data that may cause you concern. Data and identifying information will be stored separately and kept until the end of this research study. Documents containing analysis, synthesis, and interpretation of data will be password protected and stored electronically. Before destroying, the PI will offer the audiotapes and transcripts to you, if you are one of the chosen subjects.

Participants will not be identified in any report or publication about this study. All information obtained in this study is strictly confidential unless disclosure is required by law. Although every effort will be made to keep research records private, there may be times when federal or state laws require the disclosure of such records, including personal information. This is very unlikely, but if disclosure is ever required, UNC-Greensboro will take the allowable steps by law to protect the privacy of personal information.

Check the line that best matches your choice:

_____ OK to record me during the study

_____ Not OK to record me during the study

If you consent to audio recording during interview sessions, you may request the recorder be turned off if you feel uncomfortable recording your responses for any reason.

What if I want to leave the study?

You have the right to refuse to participate or to withdraw at any time, without penalty. If you do withdraw, it will not affect you in any way. If you choose to withdraw, you may request that any of your data, which has been collected, be destroyed unless it is in a de-identifiable state. The investigators also have the right to stop your participation at any time. This could be because you have had an unexpected reaction, or have failed to follow instructions, or because the entire study has been stopped.

What about new information/changes in the study?

If significant new information relating to the study becomes available which may relate to your willingness to continue to participate, this information will be provided to you.

Voluntary Consent by Participant:

By signing this consent form (used for an IRB-approved waiver of signature), you are agreeing that you read, or it has been read to you, and you fully understand the contents of this document and are openly willing consent to take part in this study. All of your questions concerning this study have been answered. By signing this form, you are agreeing that you are 18 years of age or older and are agreeing to participate, or have the individual specified above as a participant participate, in this study described to you by principal investigator Lori M. Bolds.

Signature: _____ Date: _____

APPENDIX E
PHONE CONSENT PROTOCOL

Lori M. Bolds
3725 Princeton Lakes Pkwy.
Apt. 2205
Atlanta, GA 30331

[Recipient Name]
[Street Address]
[City, ST, Zip Code]

[Date]

Dear [Interviewee Name]:

My name is Lori M. Bolds. I am a graduate student at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, and conducting research on successful African American middle school males and their single mothers. The purpose of the study is to identify strategies, approaches, and expectations utilized by single African American mothers to the support the academic success of their sons.

You were recommended as a potential candidate for this study because of your son's academic success. Participation would require your commitment to meet with me for an hour to an hour and a half to discuss the ways you support the academic success of your son.

The majority of interviews will be conducted in a public place such as the public library, but we will meet in a location where you feel most comfortable.

I sincerely hope that you will consider participating in this important effort to document what single African American mothers are doing to aid in the success of their sons.

Sincerely,

Lori M. Bolds
lmbolds@uncg.edu
(336) 509-5142

APPENDIX F

EMAIL RECRUITMENT SCRIPT

I am a doctoral student at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. The research study I have chosen for my dissertation is about low-income single African American mothers who are raising academically successful sons. My study seeks to identify and examine the strategies, approaches and expectations employed by low-income single mothers to support the academic success of their middle school age sons. I believe this research will assist school leaders, other single mothers, and African American parents in replicating practices that will increase opportunities for academic success for African American males and minimize the achievement gap between African American males and their peers.

I am asking single mothers of academically successful middle school age sons to participate in the study. Participants will be selected based on the following criteria: (1) having a socioeconomic status that would allow their child to receive free and/or reduced lunch at school; (2) a female of African descent born and raised in the United States who serves as the head of her household; and (3) having a middle school age son who is academically successful. For the purposes of this study, academic success is defined by performance on report cards and formative assessments, attendance records, and no disciplinary referrals. If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to participate in an interview of approximately 90 minutes to 2 hours in length and/or participate in a follow-up interview. The interview will be conducted at a time and location of your choice and convenience.

Your identity, your child's school, or district will not be used. Therefore, your responses in the interview will be confidential. Your responses will not be shared with your son's principal or anybody else. I will need to audio-tape interviews so that I may transcribe the interview at a later time. You will be allowed to view the transcription if you would like to do so to check for accuracy.

If you would be interested in helping me examine the strategies, approaches, and expectations employed by low-income single African American mothers to support their academically successful middle school age sons, please reply to this email and I will contact you to schedule an interview. I appreciate your consideration of participating in this study.

Sincerely,

Lori M. Bolds

APPENDIX G

ORAL RECRUITMENT SCRIPT

I am a doctoral student at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. The research study I have chosen for my dissertation is about low-income single African American mothers who are raising academically successful sons. My study seeks to identify and examine the strategies, approaches and expectations employed by low-income single mothers to support the academic success of their middle school age sons. I believe this research will assist school leaders, other single mothers, and African American parents in replicating practices that will increase opportunities for academic success for African American males and minimize the achievement gap between African American males and their peers.

I am asking single mothers of academically successful middle school age sons to participate in the study. Participants will be selected based on the following criteria: (1) having a socioeconomic status that would allow their child to receive free and/or reduced lunch at school; (2) a female of African descent born and raised in the United States who serves as the head of her household; and (3) having a middle school age son who is academically successful. For the purposes of this study, academic success is defined by performance on report cards and formative assessments, attendance records, and no disciplinary referrals. If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to participate in an interview of approximately 90 minutes to 2 hours in length and/or participate in a follow-up interview. The interview will be conducted at a time and location of your choice and convenience.

Your identity, your child's school, or district will not be used. Therefore, your responses in the interview will be confidential. Your responses will not be shared with your son's principal or anybody else. I will need to audio-tape interviews so that I may transcribe the interview at a later time. You will be allowed to view the transcription if you would like to do so to check for accuracy.

If you would be interested in helping me examine the strategies, approaches, and expectations employed by low-income single African American mothers to support their academically successful middle school age sons, please record your name and contact information on the cards provided and I will contact you to schedule an interview.

(At this point, I will ask the mothers if they have any questions about anything I have shared.)

APPENDIX H
LETTER OF RECRUITMENT

Greetings,

I am a student at UNC-Greensboro working on my doctorate in Educational Leadership and Cultural Foundations. My dissertation is examining the strategies, approaches, and expectations employed by low-income single African American mothers of successful middle school age sons. Your input is valuable and I am very interested in hearing your thoughts and experiences on raising a son that is academically successful. I am asking single African American mothers of academically successful middle school age sons to participate in the study. I will interview participants for approximately an hour and a half to two hours in length, with the possibility of a follow-up interview. Your identity will be confidential and your responses will be not shared with anyone at your son's school or anybody else. If you would be interested in helping me examine the strategies, approaches, and expectations employed by low-income single mothers of successful middle school age males, I will go over an adult consent form with you and schedule an interview with you at a time and locations of your convenience.

Sincerely,

Lori M. Bolds
lbolds@uncg.edu
(336) 509-5142

APPENDIX I

DATA ANALYSIS CODES, CATEGORIES, AND THEMES

Codes	Categories	Themes
Financial Strain Advice Parenting Style/No Nonsense/Authoritative Importance of Education Perseverance Resilience Morals/Values Expectations Marital Status Religion/Spirituality/Christianity	Modeling Belief in Education	Biographical Factors
	Resilience	
	Importance of Religion	
Relationship with Teachers Interactions with Teachers Stereotyping/Deficit Thinking Race Barriers & Challenges Perception of Single Mothers Communication Advocacy/Advocate	Interactions & Relationships with Teachers	Barrier in the Son's Academic Success
	Stereotypes & Deficit Thinking	
	Importance of Advocacy	
Extended Family Members Support Non-Family Members Male Role Models Partnerships Advice	Reliance on Extended Family	Support Systems
	Fictive Kin	
	Need for Positive Role Models	