FACTORS THAT CONTRIBUTE TO THE ACADEMIC SUCCESS
OF AFRICAN AMERICAN MALES WHO COME FROM
FATHERLESS SINGLE-PARENT HOUSEHOLDS

by

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Abstract

The school-to-prison pipeline has become a reality that is all too familiar in the lives of African American males. Many of these males come from fatherless single-parent households in which their mothers are the sole providers. Academically, many African American male students in the United States are struggling. Poor academic success is often the antithesis to behavioral problems, truancy, juvenile delinquency, and can even lead to criminal behavior.

This study will examine historical and contemporary literature that focuses on societal and familial problems African American male students have been forced to deal with in the United States. These problems will be highlighted in an effort to explain how many of the negative beliefs concerning African American males were prevalent in the past and continue to persist in today’s society. These negative beliefs will be debunked through interview data from three mother-son dyads that were successful in defying the odds and producing academically successful African American male students.

The purpose of this study is to examine the factors that lead to the academic success of African American males who come from single-parent households headed by mothers.
CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, EAST BAY

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FACTORS THAT CONTRIBUTE TO THE ACADEMIC SUCCESS
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DEDICATION

When I decided to pursue the laborious undertaking of achieving a doctoral degree I must admit I never had a doubt that at some point I’d finish it. In dedicating this work, I must begin by thanking God almighty! He is primarily responsible for the confidence that I have because, through his grace and mercy, I feel that if I give my own personal best, I can and will finish what I start.

I credit my mother, Bernadette Clark, with raising me to strive for achievement and to always try to be the “bigger man.” My mother taught me to value education and learning at an early age. Her tenets have created a lifelong learner in me, which I have shared with my children. My sisters Gretchen, Brenda, and Sabrina have all played an important part in my life as well. Their love and well wishes have meant the world to me in all of my endeavors. I want to thank each of them for raising me and letting me fall on my face only to watch me get up and fight harder to stay upright. You three are the best sisters a man could ever hope for.

The CLARK’s consisting of Breanna, Charisma, Brian II, Orion, Kion, Talon, Ben, and my wife, Tamara, are of the utmost importance to me. I feel that attempting this difficult task stemmed from wanting to make you all proud of me. You children have been and always will be the best thing that’s ever happened in my life as well as the most important people in my life. Thank you all for helping the family, taking care of me, and striving to be the best people you can be. Whether it’s Breanna making me one of her famous salads, Shug rubbing my feet and watching westerns, Brian shooting hoops, having deep discussions, or laughing at my corny jokes, Orion making me his special peanut butter and jelly sandwich or playing chess with me, or Kion traveling with
me or giving me one of his big hugs. Talon, grandpa enjoys your energy and loves you dearly. Ben, I’m proud of the hard working young man you have become. Each of you has enhanced my life. Being your father is and always will be one of the biggest blessings that the lord has bestowed upon me. Thank you for being mine. I want to thank my wife Tamara Clark for helping me raise all of our children and giving care and concern to us all.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Statement of the Problem

The plight of African American males in the United States is dire. So much so that many believe that they are indeed in a state of crisis, leading some to view them as “endangered species” (Bush, 2000a). The plight of African American males can be seen in various areas in American life. Ongoing problems historically facing African American males are apparent in the areas of (a) income, (b) education, (c) criminal justice and its correlates, (d) the child welfare system, and (e) self-esteem (Bryant, 2000; Gantt & Greif, 2009; Harvey & Hill, 2004; Kunjufu, 2001). In the area of income, median income for a Black female-headed household with one or more children and no husband was $22,158, which is barely above the poverty level for a family of three (Children’s Defense Fund, 2011). Income level is significant because it represents access to resources that could assist Black male students in reaching higher levels of academic achievement. According to the Children’s Defense Fund (2011), African American students are twice as likely as White students to be held back in their grade levels. The Children’s Defense Fund also stated that 37.4% of all students suspended were African American in 2006. This statistic is alarming because only 17% of students in public school during that time were African American. Educationally speaking, more Black male students are placed in special education classes due to emotionally disturbed behavior or mental retardation (Children’s Defense Fund, 2011). African American males have fared far worse than their
male counterparts as well as African American females. In education, African American males have the highest rates of detention, suspension, expulsion, and placement into special education (Gantt & Grief, 2009; Harvey & Hill, 2004). The overall performance of African American high school students is lower than that of White students and is lower for African American males than for African American females (Gantt & Greif, 2009). African American males are less likely than White males to complete high school (21.5% vs. 11.5%) and, if they do complete it, to not earn a bachelor’s degree (16.4% vs. 31.7%, respectively) (Gantt & Greif, 2009). The strong correlation between single-parent households headed by mothers and African American males who go awry must be addressed. National data strongly supports the notion that the two go hand in hand. According to the National Urban League (2004), in 2002, African American men had the highest rates of unemployment, 11.9%, almost twice that of non-Hispanic Whites and 2% higher than African American women (Gantt & Greif, 2009). These statistics are devastating to an oppressed group. African American mothers have often been blamed for the problematic behaviors and characteristics of their sons (Bush, 2000b; Gantt & Greif, 2009; Hill, 1999). In the Moynihan Report (1965), single African American mothers heading fatherless households greatly contribute to the cause of the breakdown of the African American family. Moynihan (1965) indicated the number of single-parent households in the African American community headed by women contributed to the woes that existed (and continue to exist) in our communities. Some of these “ woes” refer to high rates of crime, drug use, incarceration rates, and low academic performance among school-aged African American students, specifically males.

This qualitative study examines how African American (AA) males who come from single-parent households that are headed by African American mothers overcome challenges and experience academic success. This study will consist of a commentary and review of the societal notions regarding the “nuclear family” and perceptions regarding
single-parent households headed by African American mothers such as perceptions conveyed by Daniel Patrick Moynihan (1965) in his report entitled, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*. The study will also examine national data regarding the historical and present conditions of school-aged African American males and how they fare or have fared in schools. Lastly, there will be an in-depth examination of factors that lead to academic failure for some African American males while other African American males are able to persevere and experience academic success.

The concept of family, and what being a “traditional” family consists of, has evolved over the years in the United States of America. Many Americans define the ideal family as being the “nuclear family.” Traditionally, the “nuclear family” consisted of a group of people who were united by ties of partnership and parenthood and who consisted of a pair of adults and their socially recognized children (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2015). This familial structure was thought by many to represent the ideal format of American and European life. The “nuclear family” still represents a large section of society in the United States, but not as large as it once was. According to Livingston (2014), just under 50% of American families resemble the traditional composition of mother, father, and progeny. The number of single-parent households has increased across the races, but no single race group in the U.S. has a higher rate of single-parent households headed by females than African Americans. According to the United States Census Bureau (2010), three in ten Black or African American alone households were female heads of household, with no spouse present in families. This is three times as high as White alone households (9.9%) and Asian alone households (9.5%) (United States Census Bureau, 2012). The proportion of female-headed households stood at a resounding 30.1% (United States Census Bureau, 2012). This data indicates the number of African American families headed by female single parents is substantially higher than Whites, Hispanics, Asians, etc.
Since the 1960s, the percentage of African American children living with one parent has risen to 63%, with 92% of these families headed by a female (Battle & Scott, 2000; Hill, 1999). Because African American families have changed the most from the “traditional” model of the two-parent family, much of the literature in this regard is focused on the extent to which African American structure is either a cause or a consequence of poverty and other social problems in the African American community (Battle & Scott, 2000; McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994; Wilson, 1987).

The dramatic increases over the past two decades in the number of economically disadvantaged households headed by females have also sparked renewed scholarly interest in the relationship between persistent poverty and family structure (Battle & Scott, 2000; Jarrett & Burton, 1999). According to Wilson (1987) and others (Battle & Scott, 2000; Mare & Winship, 1991) more research links poor African American female-headed families to a number of social issues including low academic achievement, school dropout rate, and delinquency. Common belief is that two-parent households function much better than those households run by a single parent. This ideology may be directly associated with the fact that households headed by single parents primarily have lower annual incomes and increased poverty levels (United States Census Bureau, 2013). More specifically according to Battle and Scott (2000), if only by implication, it is assumed that (a) two-parent families, headed by men are inherently “better” than one parent families; (b) that single African American women are somehow deficient in parenting skills, particularly when it comes to raising their male children; and (c) that African American female-headed families are destructive in that they hold deviant cultural values, aspirations, and psychological characteristics that they transmit to their children that keeps them in a state of perpetual pathology. This ideology has been apparent in the United States for decades. The idea of the self-destruction of the Black family due to the absence of fathers became the widely accepted theory largely due to the scathing
report written by Daniel Patrick Moynihan entitled, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* (1965). In this report, Moynihan essentially stated that rising crime rates among young Black males, poor educational success, and high unemployment in Black communities was largely due to the disintegration of the Black familial structure (Moynihan, 1965). Moynihan also believed that the matriarchal structure of Black culture weakened the ability of Black men to function as authority figures. This research drew a great deal of angst and criticism in Black communities. Many African Americans believed that Moynihan was blaming the victim for the horrific conditions young Black males living in poverty had to endure. According to Hortence Spillers (1987), Moynihan’s research was inaccurate in that it could not explain away all of the social woes faced in Black communities by merely blaming the destruction of the Black family on generalized ideals focusing on poverty and the absence of African American fathers in homes. Spillers (1987) stated that Blacks in the 1960s were suffering from the results of slavery and due to harsh realities of slavery such as families being bought and sold at will, causing a constant break up of families which destroyed and eliminated any possibilities for nuclear family structures. Research shows that households run by single mothers tend to have access to lower income. Research also indicates that single parents tend to be less able to support their children’s schooling through supervision and monitoring of their school work (Zill, 1996) and they may have lower expectations regarding their children’s school achievements (Entwisle, Alexander, & Olson, 1997). All of this information leads to harsh perceptions of the single-parent household headed by Black women. Despite the harsh perceptions that has been reality in mainstream America, there are still young Black men who manage to experience academic success in spite of all the negative aspects that surround them. This paper will examine the success of African American males raised in households of single African American mothers.
Purpose Statement

The purpose of this study was to discover key factors that contributed to the academic success of African American males who came from single-parent households headed by mothers. With prevalent thoughts regarding the African American, female-headed, single-parent household being so negative and seemingly hopeless, this researcher became interested in other interesting aspects associated with this phenomena. If the Moynihan Report was accurate in 1965 and continues to be accurate today, how can the academically successful young African American males who come from single parent households headed by African American women be explained? According to Dudley-Marling (2012), the problem with deficit model ideologies, in which cultural and linguistic differences are constructed as deficiencies, is detrimental to African American males who come from single-parent households headed by females because it discounts the importance of the student’s primary language and culture. Their research shows discounting the behaviors related to cultures students enter schools, which can prove problematic for the academic success of students. A belief that poor and minority students must be remade or fixed by learning the appropriate or correct cultural and linguistic practices of the middle class is antithetical to fundamental principles of a participatory democracy (Dudley-Marling, 2012). The negative perceptions of African American males across the United States have been well documented and many African American males have accepted the negative images, but some do not. Some African American males who come from the same problematic environments rise above it all and become successful individuals. Considering the fact that the majority of African American young men coming out of households headed by single mothers are socio-economically disadvantaged, achieving academic success is seemingly more difficult. Interestingly, more African American males are academically successful than general consensus and
media publicly portrays. For instance, in their article *Challenging the Status Quo*, Ivory Toldson and Chance Lewis (2012) stated that much of the data regarding the academic success of African American male students in high school and in college is at times not accurately portrayed. They explain the often rhetorical statements utilized in popular media that lends itself to negative social views of African American students such as terms that refer to African American males as a dying breed or extinct. The examination of why these African American males are academically successful is the focus of this study.

**Significance of the Study**

This research is significant for four reasons. First, the importance of looking into research that will possibly explain how some African American males who come from poverty and also come from single-parent households headed by mothers, that manage to achieve academic success, can certainly benefit African Americans as well as the American society as a whole. Currently, the plight of the African American male is not only detrimental to the African American community, but to the entire country. In the area of education, there are many young Black men who are not thriving in school resulting in some of them choosing to involve themselves in deviant or criminal behaviors. Research shows that school-aged juveniles who involve themselves in deviant behaviors affect the system negatively due to participation in criminal activity (Dukes & Stein, 2001).

Second, due to the lack of academic success and a feeling of not belonging in schools, many African American young men turn away from school. Irregular school attendance and truant behaviors are precursors to deviant and disruptive behaviors. According to Teasley (2004), numerous studies correlate truancy with sexual activity, alcohol and drug use, violence, daytime vandalism, burglary, and other forms of
delinquency. Absenteeism and truancy both result in students missing valuable academic instruction. According to Hocking (2008), absenteeism affects a student’s ability to pass to the next grade and the risk for a student dropping out is extremely high. Research shows the likelihood of a student being academically successful is diminished immensely if the student is not attending classes regularly. Truancy is a stepping-stone to delinquent and criminal behavior (Garry, 1996).

This phenomenon has generated concerns in not only education, but in communities as a whole. Research conducted by the Children’s Defense Fund (2011) indicated that Black males age 18 and over in 2008 represented around 5% of the total college student population, but 36% of the total prison population. Researchers believe that students who are truant are more likely to participate in unfavorable behaviors during school time. Research also shows that by decreasing the number of truant students, instances of criminal activity will decrease as well, proving that absenteeism is a social issue deserving full attention. Reflecting on how some African American mothers of single-parent households are able to create and maintain a sense of urgency for regular school attendance in their African American male students is imperative. Learning strategies and techniques that these single mothers use to keep their sons on track academically can be extremely significant.

Third, juvenile arrests and incarceration rates of many African American males is extremely high while the percent of African American children of work age is extremely low. African American children are twice as likely as White children to be arrested. According to a study by the Children’s Defense Fund (2011), at ages 10-17, an African American youth is five times as likely as a White youth to be arrested for a violent crime. This is in direct reference to the fact that things like increased crime rate and teen pregnancy often occur during school hours. Also, one in three African American males between the ages of 16 to 24 are unemployed (Children’s Defense Fund, 2011).
Based on prevalent data, the state of the African American male youth is urgent. Through exploration of educational data and researching other pertinent societal data, this study could yield information that would help to deter young African American male students from truancy and the deviance that statistically comes with it. According to Teasley (2004), research findings from the National Center for Education Statistics as recently as 1996 show that low-income and inner city school districts experience high levels of absenteeism as well as truancy when compared to that of rural and suburban school districts. This information coincides with higher truancy rates of African American males as well as higher rates of juvenile delinquency. Simply put, youths that are truant are more likely to involve themselves in detrimental behaviors during school time.

Last, researching the factors that contribute to the academic success of African American male students who come from single-parent households headed by females, will give insight to those strategies utilized by African American single mothers who help their sons achieve academic success. Once discovered, those strategies could serve as a blueprint of success for African American male students who come from single-parent households headed by mothers.

**Research Question**

The primary focus of this study and the main research question is, “What key factors contribute to the academic success of African American males who come from single-parent households headed by mothers?” The factors will be identified, examined, and explained. The goal is to gain a deeper understanding of what makes some African American single mothers more successful at raising African American young men who graduate from high school on time despite possible educational and societal obstacles.
Another research question is, “What are the child rearing strategies that single African American mothers use when raising their sons to be academically successful?”

Lastly, “How does the concept of resilience theory apply to the academic success of African American males who come from homes headed by single mothers?” This question will examine possible effects self-efficacy may play in the lives of African American male students who manage to overcome all social obstacles and achieve academic success. Academic success is being measured by achieving a high school diploma on time. This benchmark of the attainment of a high school diploma is being used because the current national data indicates only 52% currently meet this goal which means 48% of African American males do not achieve high school diplomas.

Definitions

Below is a list of some of the terms that will be recurring throughout this study.

- African American (AA)
- African American male (AAM) - key to this study.
- Academic success - for purposes of this study this is defined as graduation from high school on time.
- Resilience theory - refers to a phenomenon that enables people to overcome adversity and/or crises while continuing to thrive (Seccombe, 2002).

In Chapter 2, the three key research questions will be revisited. Also the roles that protective factors such as familial resilience, self-esteem, and outside support systems have in the raising of African American males by single African American women are examined through existing literature. In Chapter 2 discussion of societal views, popular beliefs, and prejudices regarding AAMs are discussed. The next section in Chapter 2 focuses on resilience and familial influences. This provides information regarding how
family affects the academic success of AAMs as well as the effects it has on single mothers’ ability to raise academically successful AAMs. Lastly, extra-familial resources are the focus. This section will offer insight into the ways extra-familial entities affect AAMs. Various theorists and researchers provide data to explain theories and concepts regarding factors that contribute to the academic success of AAMs.
CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

In 1965, sociologist Daniel Patrick Moynihan, in a report entitled, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*, proclaimed that the state of the Black family was cause for national concern. Moynihan (1965) argued that the decline of the Black nuclear family would significantly impede Blacks’ progress toward economic and social equality (Acs, Braswell, Sorenson, & Turner, 2013). High non-marital birth rates among Blacks and the large share of Black children raised in female-headed households created a matriarchal society that undermined the role of Black men (Acs et al., 2013). Because of diminished authority within the family, Black men would abdicate their responsibilities as husbands, fathers, and providers, and the pattern would repeat from one generation to the next (Acs et al., 2013).

Over the ensuing decades, the report has been hailed by some as prophetic and derided by others as a classic example of blaming the victim (Acs et al., 2013). The idea that female-headed single-parent households produced young Black males that by and large are destined for lives filled with deviance and disenfranchisement is accepted by many Americans partly due to Moynihan’s report as well as the numerous negative images of Black males that are prevalent in the media today. These negative images also begin to take a toll on the African American males’ own self-image. Nihilism and entropy are present in the African American male population as well (Gantt & Greif, 2009).
Nihilism refers to feelings of worthlessness, which is most often expressed through homicide and suicide (Gantt & Greif, 2009). Entropy exists when African American males “cause havoc and chaos in the larger community” (Kunjufu, 2001, p. 58) as a result of feeling unproductive and lacking capital (Gantt & Greif, 2009). This literature review will address claims from the Moynihan report (1965) and offer research-based insight that provides alternate perspectives on African American males who grow up in matriarchal single-parent households.

According to Waller (2001), for African Americans, resilience is reflected by a sense of control, self-esteem, self-efficacy, coping, and spirituality. West-Olatunji, Shure, Garrett, Conwill, and Rivera (2008) felt some identified familial resiliency factors include support, role models, close family bonds, mutual aid, involvement, warmth, and consistency. Factors that must be present in the lives of underprivileged students to beat the odds and achieve academic success are numerous. Different support systems as strong family, consistent outside influences such as sports/athletic teams, and churches have always been difference makers in lives of at-risk youth. Despite the obvious benefits of having these support systems, these factors become much more prevalent in the lives of African American males who come from backgrounds that consist of a single-parent household that is run by a mother.

This researcher assumed that in examining research and information from experts in the field of African American male academics, single-parent households headed by African American women, and resilience theory, core factors would be revealed that could explain how these students who may lack resources, basic needs, and certain privileges still managed to be motivated and not succumb to hopelessness. The objective of this study was to highlight several areas (factors) that result in making a drastic change in the lives of AAM students who come from single-parent households. These areas include the role of the family, specifically the mother heading the single-parent
household, and the roles of support systems outside of the family. Examples include churches, athletics, clubs, loving and caring teachers/other school staff, and the recurring constant resilience that involve a child’s own drive, determination, and ability to overcome adversity.

**Societal Views (Status) of the Young African American Male in the United States**

In order to even begin to reverse the problems African American males face in their communities, we must first examine perceptions of the young African American male in American society. The challenges of reversing the negative circumstances facing African American males is daunting and requires working on the plight of the individual and transforming a broad array of social, political, economical, psychological, and educational issues that are deeply rooted in the very power structure of America (Jenkins, 2006). Unfortunately, oppressive acts are usually built into the infrastructure or systematized. In order to help frame the situation currently faced by African American males in schools, this researcher will refer to Critical Race Theory. According to Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995), Critical Race Theory analyzes the roles of race and racism in perpetuating social disparities between dominant and marginalized racial groups. This perpetuation of social disparities in education primarily refers to systemic racism that is not always obvious, but is increasingly damaging to those marginalized groups who are victims of it. At the earliest ages, African American male students in the United States make up the highest deficit group when compared to White students of the same age and grade. They are deficit in cognitive development, school readiness, and high school graduation rates (Children’s Defense Funds, 2011). The area in which African American males show no deficit or represent the higher percentage (per capita) is grade retention rates, dropout rates, and juvenile incarceration rates (Children’s Defense Fund, 2011).
These negative statistics, coupled by rhetoric, is regularly cited and quoted, giving the impression that there is nationwide concern. This implies a strong need to address these issues. On one hand, society espouses rhetoric of concern and desire to elevate males, but on the other hand, society practices a policy of oppression, prejudice, and disregard (Jenkins, 2006).

Black males experience a high level of underachievement in the higher education arena, an over-involvement in the criminal system, and high rates of unemployment, poverty, and dying via homicide (Jenkins, 2006). It is projected by the year 2020 two out of every three African American males age 20-29 will be incarcerated (Jenkins, 2006; Kunjufu, 2001). More disturbing is the fact that more African American males are incarcerated today than are enrolled in colleges and universities (Jenkins, 2006). Academically speaking, African American males are disproportionately represented among those students who are forced to withdraw, have low academic performance, and report negative college experiences (Jenkins, 2006). The high rates in which AA male students drop out are staggering. The high school dropout rate for Black males is high with 20% to 30% of urban Black male youth leaving school prior to graduation (Noguera, 1997). Within this same study Noguera (1997) estimated that 44% of all Black men are functionally illiterate.

**Resilience and Familial Influences**

The odds of a child born into a single-parent household and into poverty becoming a successful student and citizen are quite low. In particular, African American boys in public schools continue to be recipients of deficit-focused remediation (McMillan, 2003; West-Olatunji, Shure, Garett, Conwill, & Rivera, 2008). Deficit-focused remediation is instruction that focuses on subjects in which students are not
functioning on grade level. This model of remediation tends to direct resources to the perceived needs area. This deficit-focused remediation does little to address actual grade level requirements while addressing deficit needs. The possibility of African American male students achieving academic success is made much more difficult when the household of the African American male is headed by a mother. The majority of research into the effects of African American males coming from single-parent households that are headed by mothers negatively depicts the parenting skills of those single mothers. In his (1965) report popularly referred to as “The Moynihan Report” to President Lyndon B. Johnson, Daniel Patrick Moynihan examined the social and educational issues faced in the Black community. Moynihan surmised that the breakdown of the Black family and the absence of a father in Black homes was the primary cause of the most pervasive problems faced in the Black community (Moynihan, 1965). Although more difficult to find, there is literature in existence that contradicts Moynihan’s report. In 1971, William Ryan’s work entitled, Blaming the Victim, stated that African Americans in the United States, the victims of slavery and an oppressive system, have frequently been blamed for the negative living conditions in which many of them live. According to Julia Schoellkopf (2012), racism against Black people has created false stereotypes such as that they are dangerous, untrustworthy, lazy, and aggressive. Schoellkopf believes these stereotypes have led to and validated victim blaming when Black people have been oppressed and abused. Although at times supporting ideas with substantial data, The Moynihan Report (1965), does not adequately address the concept of victim blaming and how it could lead to the very living conditions that could have caused single Black mothers to have to raise sons and families by themselves.

Of all the factors leading to African American males coming from single-parent households becoming academically successful, many researchers have concluded that the most important factor is the males having a good, strong, and loving family support
system. In a study of young African American males who have graduated from college, participants were asked to describe the single most influential factor they believed attributed to their academic success. The AAM participants in the study stated by far that the influence of a strong family with high academic expectations was the primary reason for their academic success (Toldson & Lewis, 2012). This sentiment was the same regardless of socio-economic status of the AAMs. The fact that the individual has behind him and surrounding him proud family history and connection serves as a stimulus to help him to overcome obstacles when striving for success (Boyd & Allen, 1995; Jenkins, 2006).

In 2008, the American Psychological Association described the term resilience in the following vernacular

Resilience as currently understood is a dynamic, multidimensional construct that incorporates the bidirectional interaction between individuals and their environments within contexts (family, peer, school and community, and society). (p. 2)

According to Benard (1991), resilience refers to the capacity people have to recover from or adapt to difficult, life-changing circumstances. Resilience consists of the ability to succeed academically, or in life, in spite of having to endure extreme and sometimes traumatic conditions. When striving to understand resilience as it relates to the educational success of AAMs, the negative stereotypes as well as the lack of self-confidence regarding being a successful student, greatly contribute to academic failure. The capacity of a student to succeed in school, despite exposure to personal and environmental adversities, is referred to as education resilience (Gordon & Wang, 1994). Resiliency theory (Seccombe, 2002) provides a useful lens for investigating the challenges and strengths influencing the educational achievement of low-income African
American male adolescents because of its focus on risk and protective factors (West-Olatunji et al., 2008). The American Psychological Association, Task Force on Resilience and Strength in Black Children and Adolescents (2008) stated that in order for African American children to be resilient, they must develop self-motivation for critical thinking, engage with academic material, demonstrate flexible thinking, and give their expertise back to the community.

What is evident from nearly all the research into the family environments of resilient children is

Despite the burden of parental psychopathology, family discord, or chronic poverty, most children identified as resilient have had the opportunity to establish a close bond with at least one person [not necessarily the mother or father] who provided them with stable care and from whom they received adequate and appropriate attention during the first year of life. (Bernard, 1997, p. 2)

Research into why some children growing up in single-parent households still manage to be successful in school and in young adulthood has identified rigorous parental expectations as a contributing factor (American Psychological Association, 2008). This was true across the board in a study of several AAMs who received college degrees. When asked about what had the biggest impact on their educational success, those interviewed unanimously stated it was the support and high expectations of parents that made the difference. Although some had little or no firsthand experience with higher education, these parents cultivated within their children a belief that college was the only allowable next step after high school (Harper, 2012). Furthermore, Benard (1997) stated families that establish high expectations for their children’s behavior from an early age, played a role in developing resiliency in their children. The idea of increased expectations rather than accommodation and low expectations is the key. All too often
in U.S. society, educators and parents become enablers who make every excuse in the world for impoverished students. According to Williams and Bryan (2013), the key is high expectations, not enabling and no excuse making. Another related aspect of high expectations is that of faith.

A number of studies of resilient children from a wide variety of socioeconomic and ethnic backgrounds have noted that their families have held beliefs that provided stability and meaning to their lives, especially in times of hardship and adversity. (Benard, 1997, p. 2)

The families of resilient children share a strong faith in the capabilities of their child. Resilient children adopt this faith. According to Harper (2012), many of the AAMs he interviewed while conducting non-deficit research into the academic success of African American males believed they were destined to be academically successful due to the influence of God. Harper (2012) referred to the belief that their lives, academic accomplishments, and destinies were pre-determined by God as a “spiritual locus of control” (p. 16). This belief stemmed from the teachings of family and rituals of regular church attendance that were embedded into the lives of these academically successful AAMs. This concept greatly contradicts Moynihan’s 1965 report and makes evident the power of resilience in the homes of African American single mothers. AAMs that had the spiritual locus of control did not dwell on what they lacked and, because of that, they begin to believe in their own capabilities despite not having access to enough resources.

In the context of academic success, due to the high expectations of families and other characteristics such as structure, discipline, and clear rules and regulations (Benard, 1991), resilient children do not see themselves as being at a disadvantage. The familial structure gives resilient children responsibility and focus that require the child to understand the value of hard work and dedication. Williams and Bryan (2013) have found
In spite of adversity, high achieving African American students from low-income, single-mother-led households experienced these specific school-related parenting practices and considered them some of the most important factors contributing to their academic success: verbal praise for good grades; high, but realistic expectations; monitoring academic progress in school; supervision of and help with school work; and the use of physical discipline in response to bad grades and behavior in school. (as cited in Williams, Greenleaf, Albert, & Barnes, 2014, p. 11)

The natural outcome of having high expectations for children is that they are acknowledged as valued participants in the life and work of their families. The family background of resilient children is usually characterized by many opportunities for the children to participate and contribute in meaningful ways. Benard (1991) argued that when children were given responsibilities, the message was clearly communicated that they were worthy and capable of being contributing members of the family. This trust of responsibility and belief in the child’s ability translates into trust. The family trusts the child to do the right thing, which in turn helps the child feel as if they are a part of the integral functions of the family.

The concept of the “normal” family has undergone redefinition with the social and economic transformations of recent decades (Walsh, 2002). Although changing gender roles and a multiplicity of family arrangements have broadened the spectrum of families, the persistent myth that one family form is essential for healthy child development (i.e., the idealized 1950s intact nuclear family, headed by a breadwinner father and supported by a homemaker mother) continues to stigmatize other family forms and make them look abnormal (Walsh, 2002). According to Kerpelman, Eryigit, and Stephens (2008), family, and particularly the parent adolescent relationship, provides one of the most
important social contexts for adolescent development. The relationship an adolescent has with parents is a determinant of the adolescents’ success regardless of familial make-up. In fact, family diversity is common throughout history and across cultures and a growing body of research reveals that well-functioning families and healthy children are found in a variety of formal and informal kinship arrangements (Walsh, 1996). Research shows that what matters most are family structures, which entails the quality of caring and solid relationships. Studies of parental support of academic achievement among African American students indicated the parents played an important role in encouraging adolescents to perform well in school (Kerpelman, Eryigit, & Stephens, 2008). The existence of consistency and high expectations in the lives of these children increased the chance of them becoming resilient people who are capable of withstanding tragedies that they may face in life. This is not dictated by who is a member of the child’s familial circle. Moreover, the characters of the people who are in the child’s familial circle tend to be the key determinant of how the child is acculturated to deal with difficulties and/or daily stresses. Family resilience is fostered by shared beliefs that help members make meaning of crisis situations, facilitate a positive, hopeful outlook, and provide transcendent or spiritual values and purpose (Walsh, 2002). Beliefs that the families share are very important in predicting whether a child will become resilient. Through their support for academic achievement, parents communicate the importance of education to their adolescents (Kerpelman et al., 2008). If the normal thoughts and beliefs of a family are hopelessness, despair, and resorting to criminal acts to cope with life’s problems, a child will emulate those thoughts and beliefs, thus perpetuating the cycle. Drawing out and affirming family strengths in the midst of difficulties helps to counter a sense of helplessness, failure, and despair as it reinforces pride, confidence, and a “can-do” spirit. According to Williams and Bryan (2013), African American males reported words of encouragement from parents and guardians kept them focused on
school and away from outside distractions. Walsh (2002) specified that encouragement of family members worked to bolster efforts to take initiative and persevere in enabling the ability for children to overcome barriers. In schools, encouraging families tend to be more active in their children’s education. Often asking more questions and being very visible play an enormous role in not only a student’s outlook on the importance of school, but also the perception of teachers and other school staff. Educators who see supportive families involved in PTA, attending school functions, and volunteering time have a different outlook of those students. Committed parents hold educators accountable for their child’s education. They support their child’s academic and social needs, they support school efforts more, and they help in the process of holding their students accountable. This recipe will yield a more resilient and dedicated student more often than not. The familial factor as part of the whole concept of child resilience is major. A conclusion of the research regarding resilience is that single-parent headed families led by a mother that is supportive and has strong beliefs and values in place can be the ultimate deciding factor in an AAMs ability to succeed in life - academically and as a citizen (Gantt & Greif, 2009).

Extra-familial Support Systems

Many people accredit non-family members as having a great impact in their lives. Across the board, people acknowledge educators who have positively impacted their lives. Just as in the family arena, the level of caring and support within the school is a powerful predictor of positive outcomes for youth (Benard, 1991). Only a few studies have explored the role of teachers as protective buffers in the lives of children who overcome great adversity, these few do provide moving evidence of this phenomenon (Werner, 1990). According to Werner (1990), resilient children find a great deal of
emotional support outside of their immediate family. According to Williams and Bryan (2013) supportive school-based relationships were characterized by warmth, concern, openness, and understanding that contributed to students’ academic engagement and school performance. Quite often, these extra-familial supports come by way of counselors, coaches, college recruiters, etc. (William & Bryan, 2013). Werner (1990) specified that a favorite teacher could become an important model of identification for a resilient child whose own home is beset by family conflict or dissolution (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980). Again, the presence of caring individuals who love and respect an underprivileged child can make a vast difference in their academic lives. Those schools that create an atmosphere of love, high expectations, and support will foster more success from all students than those schools that do not. The whole idea of a home away from home makes it clear that schools share a large responsibility in the lives of children and making sure they are prepared for life as an adult.

Among the qualities that characterized the more successful schools were the setting of appropriately high standards, effective feedback by the teacher to the students with ample use of praise, the setting of good models of behavior by teachers, and giving students positions of trust and responsibility (Werner, 1990). Children who attended such schools developed few, if any, emotional or behavioral problems despite considerable deprivation and discord at home (Pines, 1984). Participation in sports and clubs served to help deprived youth as well. Support that derives from caring coaches coupled by the discipline required to actively participate in sports help children understand the importance of hard work ethic and determination. This translates into academics for many resilient children. Interestingly, resilient older youth and adults often become those loving and caring mentors who try to give back to their communities by providing encouragement and mentorship to underprivileged youth. This is significant because it serves as proof that if a resilient single mother is able to raise academically successful
African American males, there is a good chance those males will give back to their communities, thus helping to break the cycle of negativity that permeates African American communities.

**Self-Determination**

Of all protective factors given regarding child resilience, a child’s ability to have faith in him or herself seems to be the most difficult to explain. Individual characteristics such as strong verbal and communication skills, an easy temperament, problem solving capacities, humor, empathy, perspective taking skills, and spirituality are critical components of resiliency and resistance to involvement in health-jeopardizing behaviors (Resnick, 2000). Having high self-esteem and self-efficacy is a trait of resilient people. Students who participated in a longitudinal study in Kauai developed a sense that obstacles were not insurmountable and they believed they had control over their fate (Seccombe, 2002). Self-esteem is a powerful attribute to being resilient and able to perform well academically in adverse environments. In their study about Indians in the Midwest, La Fromboise, Oliver, Hoyt, and Whitbeck (2006) indicated risk factors or predictors of resilience at the individual level. The researches stated characteristics that included gender, positive self-esteem, and an active engagement in one’s culture contributed greatly to a person’s resilience (La Fromboise, Oliver, Hoyt, & Whitbeck, 2006). Youth with high self-esteem and sense of self-efficacy reported positive feelings about themselves, their social environment, and their ability to deal with life’s challenges (Werner & Smith, 1992). The ways in which people cope with adverse circumstances is a source of resilience and it protects children against debilitating circumstances that might impair development (Barbarin, 1993). Self-discipline and the ability to lead rather than follow allow resilient children to excel in school. A negative sense of self can lead
to significant risks so the importance of a positive self-image for AA male students and adolescents is essential (American Psychological Association, 2008). Negative racial identity in African Americans has been theoretically and empirically linked to low self-esteem, problems with psychological adjustment, low school achievement, school dropout, teenage pregnancy, gang involvement, eating disorders, drug abuse, and involvement in crime (American Psychological Association, 2008). Further, emotional regulation and self-control are fundamental to and basic components of coping (Barbarin, 1993).

The social justice implications refer to the need for school-aged African American males to have the ability to exhibit resilience in their academic endeavors. Resilience can help African American males adjust to adverse situations and a biased educational system. From a social justice perspective, it can be perceived as unfair that students from difficult backgrounds are held to the same standards as affluent students who have all the resources necessary to succeed in school. Through the resilience of many successful African American male students, on time high school graduation is a reality that is achieved under difficult circumstances. This is largely due to a positive self-image and the determination that stems from all the factors mentioned throughout this treatise.

**Conclusion**

There are many theorists who have ideas about factors that lead to children being resilient and able to flourish in the harshest of situations. Whether it is familial protective factors, extra-familial factors, or sheer self-determination, one thing is for certain, there are students that overcome the odds. Belief in a higher being plays a part in the success of resilient children. A strong belief system can be evident in the resilience of people from
various socio-economic backgrounds. In sum, the resilience paradigm seeks to identify protective, nurturing factors in the lives of those who would otherwise be expected to be characterized by a variety of adverse outcomes (Resnick, 2000). The beauty of the resilient child lies in their ability to see adversity as an obstacle to overcome rather than with hopelessness.

The goal of our schools is to do our part in helping to create more resilient children by providing the caring and nurturing that many are missing at the schools, the “home away from home” for most students. Although we as educators cannot necessarily have as strong an impact on the student’s home and family lives as we would like, we can certainly do more to treat students with the love, respect, and caring that may help trigger their own resilience and result in them beating the odds. Helping students reach self-efficacy and self-actualization will create a cycle as statistics show those resilient children grow up to become mentors of students who may come from similar backgrounds (Kerpelman et al., 2008). The resiliency of a child who never gives up because of the high expectations of the family and love of themselves serves as proof that self-determination and a strong family can and often does mean the difference between success and failure in school.

In Chapter 3 the methodology used to conduct the research will be discussed. Throughout Chapter 3, a description of the phenomenological research strategy that was implemented in order to give a personal outlook from participants will be provided. The questions selected for the interview were created with the purpose of examining ideas and theories that were discussed in the literature review in Chapter 2. The questions that will be part of the interview will focus on the three sections mentioned in this chapter. The data will focus on resilience and familial influences, extra-familial support systems, and self-determination.
CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Introduction and Purpose

The purpose of this study was to discover key factors that contributed to the academic success of African American males who came from single-parent households headed by mothers. Also, a primary goal for conducting this research was to identify strategies that single African American mothers, who are heads of their households, utilized in order to make academic success an obtainable goal for their African American sons.

Using a qualitative research design with phenomenology as the guiding principle, the researcher brought to light practices and events that would clearly explain specific attributes such as familial influences, extra-familial influences, and protective factors that exist in the homes of the AAMs that participated in this study. The qualitative research method allows for specific detail-based accounts from individual perspectives. Qualitative research methodology enables the researcher to examine participants in their natural environment. The outlook of the participants, and the way in which they gain understanding, make sense of, respond to, and handle themselves daily is the focus of the qualitative research method (Miles & Huberman, 1984). In the research design, three mother-son dyads were interviewed. Each dyad consisted of a single mother and an academically successful AAM. Factors such as life experiences by way of familial support, involvement in extracurricular activities, and the effects factors such
as counselors, teachers, coaches, etc. on the life of the academically successful AAM were examined. Dyad participants answered questions regarding their actions, coping mechanisms, and their journey that led to the academic success of the AAM. Academic success is defined as on time graduation from high school. This method allowed the researcher to detail specific back-stories from interviewees that they believed led to the success of the single parent and her AAM student experiencing academic success as determined by achieving an on time high school diploma. The open-ended questions gauged factors leading to resilience and self-efficacy that may have led to the AAMs academic success. This design allowed for personal reflection from participants in this study as well as provided a deeper understanding of factors that contributed to the AAMs academic success. This research is a qualitative analysis using phenomenology as the foundation.

**Research Questions**

1. What key factor contributes to the academic success of African American males (AAM) from single-parent households?
2. What child rearing strategies do single African American mothers use to raise academically successful AAMs?
3. How does the concept of resiliency theory apply to the academic success of African American males who come from homes headed by single mothers?

**Research Design**

The qualitative method of research that was utilized is phenomenology. Phenomenology shows real life experiences and events of those individuals participating
in the interviews. Phenomenological research works to highlight details of experiences of participants. A phenomenological study gives credence to the myriad phenomena of everyday life that compose one’s life experiences (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Each subject’s life experiences help researchers in rendering various effects and sundry occurrences that are recognizable as particular types of objects or events (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Phenomenology has been selected as methodology in order to examine factors that contribute to the academic success of African American males who come from single-parent households because phenomenological methods are effective at gathering the experiences and perceptions of individuals from respective points of view. According to Clark Moustakas (1994), empirical phenomenological research is based on the experiences of participants. The primary information consists of basic descriptions that came from questions that were open-ended. The researcher then describes the format of the experience based on reflection and interpretation of the research participant’s story (Moustakas, 1994). The aim was to determine what the experience meant for the people who have had the experience (Moustakas, 1994). According to Moustakas, organizing the life experiences into apprehensible form, the experiences then become meaningful, thus allowing those experiences to virtually have a more significant impact from a sociological perspective. The important point of a phenomenological study is to describe the meaning of a small number of individuals who have experienced the phenomenon (Creswell, 1998). In this study, the life experiences of the African American male and mother will be used to manifest the “apprehensible” necessary to make their story, beliefs, and experiences valid through exposing the shared experiences that made each dyad successful. This research design, according to van Manen (1990) allows the focus to be on the description of events, but also serves to help the researcher interpret or decipher the meaning of the participant’s shared experiences (p. 26).
Participants/Population

Participants consisted of individuals participating in the six person (three group) dyads. Interviewing dyads is most often used when the topic of research is a shared experience (Bell & Campbell, 2014). In order to identify key factors and gain a deeper understanding of what makes some African American single mothers more successful at raising African American young men, three dyads consisting of single AA mothers and sons will be interviewed. The dyads consisted of a mother and son who were considered to be in poverty or socio-economically disadvantaged. The mother must be African American and the head of a single-parent household. The son to be interviewed must be African American and must have graduated from high school on time (during his anticipated graduation year). The reason for using mother and son dyads is to obtain the varying perspectives from the mother and the son.

This research design will help to clarify the reasons and opinions of both individuals, while also helping bring to light important contributing aspects to the academic success of the son. All male participants must identify as AAM. They must have graduated high school on time, meaning completion of high school during their official year of expected completion. Participants must be at least 18 years of age. Participants will offer feedback that provides their account to the open-ended interview questions. The interviews will be conducted using a structured 20-question survey (see Appendix A). The questions will examine resilience theory and what affect (if any) self-efficacy played in the lives of AAM students who managed to overcome obstacles and graduate from high school. In conducting this research, the intent is to discover key factors that make academic success a realizable goal for these AAM students. The researcher determined that using a phenomenological study to delve into the meaning of data given by the three dyads should provide information that brings insight into the
experiences of all participants. Three single African American mothers and three of their academically successful African American sons will be interviewed.

**Instrumentation and Data Analysis**

The researcher conducted one-on-one interviews with individual members of each dyad. The phenomenological data was collected via recorder and each interview was recorded individually. Once all interviews were conducted and recorded, the audio recording of the interviews were sent to an outside source for transcription. Using the qualitative data analysis methods to organize data, the researcher took the data that was yielded from the interviews and coded information based on similarities and differences. Interviewing all participants proved challenging at times. Due to proximity of four participants, phone interviews had to be initiated. In one case, a male participant was attending school on the East Coast and was preparing to graduate with his bachelor’s degree. The three-hour time difference made it more difficult to secure interview times that would be conducive to the schedules of both the interviewee and researcher. Other interviews took place in the researcher’s office.

**Limitations of the Study**

Due to the fact that the number of participants selected for the dyads was only six, the data may not be statistically significant. Also, interview participants have their own natural biases and thoughts. Lastly, the personal biases of the researcher serve as a limitation. Due to the researcher himself being a product of a fatherless, single-parent household, some biases regarding effective child-rearing strategies may have influenced the researcher’s perspective. The researcher consciousness of these factors helped him to
be diligent in monitoring his analysis through reflection as he reviewed the transcripts. Each of these potential limitations could alter findings, yet the study itself yielded solid information and data that will serve as helpful to other single mothers trying to raise academically successful AAMs.

Educators may experience limitations in dealing with aspects of the research that focus primarily on familial factors that contribute to the academic success of AAMs. This is primarily due to the lack of control that educators have on what is going on in the homes of students. Educators do not have the same impact in the private homes of students, therefore, lack of control of the home environment serves as a limitation for educators looking to implement strategies to help AAMs experience academic success.
CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

This study’s primary focus was to address the negative perceptions many researchers tend to emphasize regarding educational struggles of African American males who are from fatherless, single-parent households. The purpose of the study was to address perceived struggles and highlight factors that contributed to the academic success of those African American males. This study is important for several reasons. It is significant because the importance of looking into research that will explain how some African American males who live under adverse situations manage to achieve academic success can be beneficial to African Americans and U.S. society in general. These findings can thwart negative ideologies and perceptions regarding African American male students that are pervasive in the educational and societal landscape of the United States of America. There are currently thousands of young Black men who are not thriving in schools, which affect society negatively. Secondly, due to the lack of academic success and a feeling of not belonging in schools, many African American young men turn away from the school system. Thirdly, the juvenile arrests and incarceration rates are high among AAMs while the percent of those employed is the lowest in the country (Children’s Defense Fund, 2011). Lastly, by researching the factors that contribute to the academic success of AAMs who come from single-parent households headed by mothers, effective strategies utilized by AA single mothers to help their sons achieve academic success will be identified. Thus, possibly serving as a blueprint for African American mothers who may be struggling to support their sons academically.
Chapter 4 addresses the findings for the three research questions that were posed. The questions were as follows (a) What factors contribute to the academic success of African American males who come from fatherless, single-parent households?, (b) What are common beliefs and child rearing strategies that single African American mothers use when raising their sons to be academically successful?, and (c) How does the concept of resilience theory apply to the academic success of African American males who come from homes headed by single mothers?

This chapter will entail descriptions of those who participated in the interviews. Responses given by participants have been analyzed and shared themes will be part of the discussion. Direct quotations from participants will be utilized throughout this chapter. The researcher will summarize quotations in order to synthesize and explain the meaning of findings. A phenomenological approach was utilized in an effort to afford those who were interviewed an opportunity to give meaningful perceptions by way of their own life experiences. This study was conducted using qualitative research methodology and consisted of six interviews, three African American single mothers and three African sons (one per mother). Each dyad member was interviewed individually. The researcher decided to interview members of each dyad individually rather than in the true dyadic interview format (in which dyadic members are interviewed simultaneously). This interview strategy allowed for interview confidentiality and helped avoid any potential discomfort that could occur by having participants interviewed together. An example of potential discomfort could be varying opinions regarding how an interview question should be answered. Again, this was avoided by interviewing dyad members individually.
Participants

The process for selecting participants consisted of the researcher purposefully selected individuals who fit criteria and were interested in the research. Purposeful sampling was used to identify the final participants. Those to be interviewed had to be African American, a single mother, or a male who had completed high school on time. Through this process, the researcher received some interest, but not a great deal. Several potential interviewees did suggest possible participants based on the desired criteria for participation. Three mother-son dyads were agreed upon. The age of the male participants was broad ranging from early 20-40 years of age. The hope was to offer varied perspectives from academically successful African American men of multiple ages. The researcher explained to participants the purpose of the interview and why they were selected. The procedures of the interview were explained to each participant as well. Participants were informed that the interviews would last approximately one hour each. They were told that the interviews would be audiotaped in order to ensure accuracy in reporting their statements. Convenient location of interviews was addressed as well as accommodations, if participants needed them. Lastly, the researcher stated that interviews were to be 100% confidential and their real names would not be shared with anyone. The researcher made it clear that it may be necessary to contact participants after the interview if clarification was necessary for answers they gave during the interview. The researcher discussed potential risks of the interview and specified that only the researcher would have access to research data. Once all pertinent information was discussed participants gave their written consent to be interviewed.
Participant Profiles - Mothers

Ms. C. Ms. C is a single mother who is now 66 years of age. She has four children, three girls and one boy. Ms. C was married twice and her children have separate fathers. The three girls share a father and the boy, who is the youngest, has a different father. Both fathers were virtually out of the picture during pre-teen years for all the children. Ms. C worked as a Certified Nursing Assistant for about 12 years before getting injured on the job. Ms. C struggled to make ends meet while raising her children, but managed to make sure her children’s basic needs were met. Ms. C stated her highest level of education completed was twelfth grade, but admitted that she did not complete high school until her youngest child was in high school. This was primarily due to having children at an early age. Her feelings regarding education were

I always wanted to go further in education, but raising a family at the time was more important than my education. I consider education to be a very, very important part of anybody’s life. I wanted my children to have the best. (Ms. C., personal communication, May 7, 2015)

Ms. M. Ms. M is a single mother who is 47 years of age. She has four children, two boys and two girls. Ms. M stated that the children’s father left when the children were young. Ms. M has worked as a recruiter for Head Start for about 10 years. She admits struggling financially to raise her children. Heading a family of five, Ms. M classifies herself as functioning at “government poverty level” (Ms. M., personal communication, May 5, 2015). She brought in roughly $21,000 dollars a year when raising her children. Ms. M attended school while raising her children. She has achieved a Bachelor’s Degree in Liberal Arts. Her feelings regarding education are, “I totally agree with traditional education. Whether it’s high school, college, or vocational school, the needs of each student can be met through education” (Ms. M., personal communication, May 5, 2015).
Ms. W. Ms. W is a 48-year-old single mother. She has five children, three girls and two boys. Ms. W has worked as a school registrar for 15 years. When asked about her socio-economic status, Ms. W associated herself with being upper middle class. The father of her children did well financially and supported her children after the divorce. Ms. W stated that it was difficult at times without her children’s father in the home, but thinks she managed to persevere. The highest level of education Ms. W achieved was an associate degree and is currently completing her bachelor’s degree. When asked about her feelings regarding education she stated, “I think education is fundamental. It is the most important thing that drives our young people and it is the key to success” (Ms. W., personal communication, May 3, 2015).

Participant Profiles - Sons

Mr. C. Mr. C is 40-years-old and a product of a fatherless, single-parent household headed by his mother. He has worked in education as a teacher and administrator for 15 years. The youngest of four children, Mr. C stated that things were difficult when he was growing up. When asked about his family’s socio-economic status, he says they were poor. He stated that sometimes his mother struggled to keep food in the house. All other basic needs were met, but sometimes he recalls being hungry and there being no food in the house. Mr. C credits his mother with his academic success. The highest level of education he has completed is a master’s degree. When asked about his feelings regarding education he stated the following

My feelings are that education is definitely a life changer. It changed my life. It is one of the best ways for an individual to pull themselves out of poverty. Realistically, without education, I can clearly say I would not be living the lifestyle that I’m currently living. Although hard work always pays off and I acknowledge there are other ways to achieve socio-economic success, for
me, education was my way out of poverty. (Mr. C., personal communication, May 7, 2015)

Mr. M. Mr. M is a 20-year-old. He too is the product of a household headed by a single mother. He is one of four children and remembers growing up poor. Mr. M stated that the highest level of education he has completed is twelfth grade in which he earned his high school diploma. He acknowledged that his mother was the driving force behind him finishing high school. He also credits his uncle with being influential regarding education citing that his uncle always encouraged him to finish high school. He has taken some college courses and attended a trade school. He is currently waiting to be contacted by the Navy regarding when he can begin basic training. Mr. M does not look at public education in a favorable light. When asked about his feelings regarding education, he stated

As far as the education system, I think there’s a lot of things that can be fixed as far as picking teachers and stuff like that. I never really liked school; I just wanted to get it over with. Many of the teachers only seemed to be there to collect a check, nothing more. (Mr. M., personal communication, May 5, 2015)

Mr. W. Mr. W is 22-years-old and was raised by his mother in a fatherless household. He is one of five children and when asked about his family’s socio-economic status when he was growing up, he stated that they were “working class” (Mr. W., personal communication, May 3, 2015). Mr. W works for a company that specializes in the selling and distribution of household toiletries in Philadelphia, PA. Mr. W recently graduated with his bachelor’s degree from Penn State University. His mother laid the foundation for his educational success. He also stated that he believes that the most impactful person in his life regarding his outlook on education is his aunt. He stated because she was the first to go through undergrad, graduate, and then get a specialized
degree and on to law school, she understood and helped to push him to further his education. When asked about his feelings regarding education, he stated, “I think education is one of the most important things that can determine success in an individual and I think that begins from the kindergarten level. I think it’s huge!” (Mr. W., personal communication, May 3, 2015).

Themes

Analyzing data from interview transcripts as well as closely examining the passionate manner in which participants responded to questions has led the researcher to identify three themes that proved dominant throughout all interviews.

The themes are

1. Mother’s belief in the importance of education.
3. Influence of supportive extended family and extra-familial resources.

The aforementioned themes were constant throughout each interview with both mothers and sons. When answering various questions, participants gave responses that were very similar and in some cases exactly the same as other respondents. Despite coming from various parts of the country and households, participants of both sides of the dyads shared similar views regarding what helped them achieve academic success.

Mother’s Belief in the Importance of Education

Each dyad member participating in the interviews showed a great amount of enthusiasm when discussing their sentiments regarding a mother’s belief in the importance of education. The African American mothers, as well as their sons, told stories of struggle, discipline, and hard work regarding their educational paths. Many
of the mothers interviewed went on record as saying they felt that they knew their boys needed to see them as role models and would look to them as examples to follow, which is why several of them chose to attend school while raising their families. The mother’s discussed ways they would motivate their boys for academic success as well as ways they would be punitive if a child did not concur with academic expectations set at home as well as in school.

Ms. W.

I was involved with his educational experience. Early on I was able to be home with my children. I was a classroom mom. I went on field trips. I was able to pick my children up from school. I stressed that education was important. We always went to the library. They had library cards at young ages. We went to Barnes and Noble and another store, but it has since closed. Books were in the house. We had quiet time. We read to each other. We went on different trips to the museums and they experienced different cultures.

Because I was not able to finish my education, I stressed that my children needed to graduate from high school as well as college. It was important for them to know that was important to me and once I became a single parent, it was more important to me to make sure that they finish that high school degree and it wasn’t necessary that they had a college degree, but they needed to have some type of trade. It was important for them to have something to do. I have my associate degree and I am in the process of earning my BA even though there has been a delay. I probably am about a year away from doing my bachelor’s degree and have most recently decided to go back and get my master’s degree. (Ms. W., personal communication, May 3, 2015)
Ms. M

I totally agree with traditional education. High school, college, or vocational school if the traditional school was not effective all were appropriate expectations. There was always a push for my son to at least finish continuation high school. Being a single mother, I always wanted my son to be able to take care of himself and to always do better than I did because I always had to struggle. I continued to push him and encourage him. I wanted him to broaden his horizons rather than just sit and wait for things to happen. I attended school when I was raising my son. It was something I needed to do so I could raise him and my other children better. You know, because of my schooling, I was able to move up the pay scale at work. I thought I was actually helping my family but you know, in hindsight, I see the time I missed being away from them while I attended school. Well, pluses and minuses, I was setting an example showing my son the importance of continuing my education and being a role model to him, but I was also away from him while attending school. (Ms. M., personal communication, May 5, 2015)

Ms. C

When my son was a baby, a toddler, no, not even a toddler. When he first started showing signs that he was very smart, I read to him. He learned to talk quickly and walk before his other siblings did. To me, he was showing signs, he was reaching out for higher learning then. It was important to me that he learn all that he could. I made sure there were books that he could read and magazines. I went to the first two years of preschool with him every day. I made sure that school was just as important to him as it was to me. I think that’s why I went back because I showed him that learning was important to me because I was there with him every day.
When a child achieves a certain level they receive recognition. My son was very small and he was bringing home all kinds of certificates and special recognitions. I just really enjoyed receiving them. I let him know that it was important that he receive these. He used to bring six or seven home at one time. There was a time when he was asleep on the bed and I took all of his certificates and covered them all over him. I took pictures of him. He really liked that. It did let him know that I was totally concerned about his achievements, getting a higher education. That had a lot to do with his grasp of his education. (Ms. C., personal communication, May 7, 2015)

The boys reported that if it were not for the constant support, consistent discipline, and high expectations of their mothers, they would not have been able to get through high school.

Mr. W

I’m in the process of completing my bachelor’s of science degree at Penn State and I owe that largely to my mother. I think education is one of the most important things that can determine success in an individual. That’s what my mother taught me. I think it begins in the kindergarten level with very early education. My mother made sure I had reading books. As I got older, I had to write book reports on them. Early in the process, I tended to get grounded or punished by my mother. She would take things away from me so I’d have to stop watching television, or have curfew enforced, or lose my cell phone. If I got bad test scores, I would lose some of the things that I wanted. In high school, my mother stopped babying me and didn’t monitor me so closely. She left it up to me to do the right things. She said, “This is where you will build your future.” She told me if I didn’t want to do something, it was on me. She put things in perspective for me and made it
I understood I needed to do well in high school in order to get into college. I also realized I had to do well in college in order to get a good job. (Mr. W., personal communication, May 3, 2015)

Mr. M

When I was younger, I remember my mother reading to me. She read a lot of “Box car Children”, Dr. Seuss books, and stuff like that. My mother tried to be active. She did what she could, but because she had to go to work and school to support us, she wasn’t always able to come to my school. She was there when she could be. This is partly why I struggled in school at times. Although my mother instilled the importance of school in me, I wasn’t always receptive of those ideals. I really didn’t attend school very often, but I got my work done. I know it hurt my mother that I was missing school, but I just thought there were other things that were more important at the time. I would miss school because I didn’t have the clothes I wanted or those shoes I wanted. This was largely due to my mother not being able to afford these things. I knew she was working hard to provide for us, but I was rebelling and selfishly thought of myself. I skipped school sometimes, got in trouble, suspended, and didn’t get good grades. My mother tried to get me to change my behavior. I was put on punishment and got restrictions while in high school, but I did what I wanted to anyway. This was very hurtful to my mother, but she never gave up on me. When I was in the eleventh grade year, I began to turn it around. I started credit recovery classes because my mom constantly spoke with my counselor asking for ways I could make up high school credits in order to graduate on time. Sometimes she took me to classes after school and waited for me to get done. Even though she was tired from work, my mom did this just so I would get through high school. I graduated on time, and I give my mom most of
the credit. She never stopped believing in me. (Mr. M., personal communication, May 5, 2015)

Mr. C

My mother was by far, the most impactful person in my educational life. This was primarily due to the foundations she laid at an early age with me. She made it clear that education was an important thing and she seemed to be most interested in my educational success. When I was younger, I received many educational accolades. I would receive honor roll certificates, perfect attendance, and sometimes good citizenship awards. This would make my mother so proud of me. My mother was more prone to appreciate the good things that education brought like awards, certificates, and good report cards. I remember my mom bragging to her friends about my academic success, telling me she was proud of me, and giving me the best kisses and hugs. I don’t remember receiving a great deal of physical rewards from my mother, like okay, you’ll get this new bike or you’ll get this dollar amount for getting good grades. These were not more valuable to me than her approval. She was always involved in my school when I was in the early grades. I remember knowing at an early age that academic success was an expectation. Nothing made me prouder than to bring home awards because it greatly pleased my mother. She was always so proud. She made me feel like the smartest boy in the world, despite us living in poverty.

As I got older, school was more difficult, but my mother already imbedded the ground of high expectations in me. My mother was not as involved in school when I got to middle and high school, but she had such a strong influence on me that I knew what she expected. She also punished me if I got into trouble at school. Even as I got older and struggled academically at times, my mother
continued to convey a sense of urgency. She would paint negative pictures regarding life as a person who didn’t graduate from high school. She would ask me if I wanted to end up a bum. My mother did not complete high school until I was in my eleventh grade year. I remember her working to complete her high school education. I was proud of her and had the chance to motivate her to finish. She finished before my senior year. How many people can say they were able to attend their mother’s high school graduation. She showed me how to never give up on my goals. Even though we were poor, I never felt that there was an excuse for me not to try my best. I thank my mother for that. The best gift she ever gave me other than life was a sense that no matter what I’m dealing with in life, I can be successful if I try. If you can convey that to a child, he or she will feel as if they’re unstoppable in spite of life’s circumstances. (Mr. C., personal communication, May 7, 2015)

Positive Impact on Early Education

Mothers

The dyad participants all looked upon early education as being beneficial to achieving academic success. Each of the African American mothers exposed their sons to early education both at home and at school. They each shared a strong belief that early education gave their sons an academic edge and they also believed their sons needed to be challenged.

Ms. W

My son participated in pre-school and went to an all-day kindergarten. I think him attending these programs was beneficial because it gave him structure. It got
him used to going to school all day and being away from parents. It also gave him a head start in what he needed to know for public school. If you don’t have that head start, I personally think you are lost. I work in education and I see the difference with students that went to head start or participated in early education. They tend to excel more academically and seem well rounded. For my son it was beneficial because he enjoyed going. It made him want to come home and show me what he learned and then he could engage with his siblings and play school. The learning was always considered a good thing. (Ms. W., personal communication, May 3, 2015)

Ms. M

He was already reading sight words before he went to head start. He knew simple math, sign language, and roman numerals. He knew part of the periodic table for science. Just picked up a lot of everything. He was very good at picking up an object and being able to make up a story about it. So when he was at head start, he did very well. He completed two years. Because I was a housewife, as far as concepts go, I was able to teach him all those colors, shapes, numbers by sight, and letters on sight words. Like I said, he was already reading before he began head start, but the social motivation was available and it also helped him with socio-emotional issues when he was there because he knew people were different, different colors. There were children with special needs in his classroom. It just helped to round him. The things I didn’t catch or didn’t know to teach him, he picked up at head start. (Ms. M., personal communication, May 5, 2015)
Ms. C

When my son was three we lived on an Air Force base. They had parent’s participation preschool at the base school. I started him there, which was when he was three. When he was four we had moved to another area. When we moved there, they had a pre-school there, so my son went to preschool twice. He went for two semesters, when he was three and when he was four. He was very ready for pre-school and kindergarten. In fact, he was ahead of the class.

I think early education was very beneficial to my son. The earlier you start educating a child, the more successful that child can be. It’s proof with my son. I tried to expose him from the cradle and he had shown signs of high achievement. I think that early education, like preschool and education at home, like sitting with your child and working with them prepares them for learning. By the time they get to kindergarten, especially in these times, they’re adding and subtracting, reading and doing all sorts of stuff. If they’ve missed preschool, they seem to be behind. To me, it’s very important the earlier their education starts, the more successful in life that child is going to be. I feel that way wholeheartedly. (Ms. C., personal communication, May 7, 2015)

Sons

The three African American young men interviewed each had a hard time remembering aspects of their early education, but they all believed that it was important to their development as students. The young men remember reading, writing, and playing with their mothers and siblings. When asked about early childhood programs such as head start, they remember participating, but were not always clear on specific subject matter that was learned or interaction with the teacher or teacher’s aides. Despite the
limited memory as to what they accomplished in early education, memories they shared of early learning and school seemed to be pleasant to them.

**Mr. W**

My earliest memories are of pre-school and it was maybe like a day care preschool kind of cross. That was when I was living in Pennsylvania and then after that, we went into kindergarten and followed the normal progression that students do nowadays. I absolutely think early education was a positive thing, but I’m slightly biased because I study psychology and you understand that neurotransmitters in the brain start to develop at a very young age. I’m a little biased on that because I know the impact of early stimuli for very young children. They are ready to learn sooner than people think. (Mr. W., personal communication, May 3, 2015)

**Mr. M**

I can’t remember a great deal about going to school like pre-school or anything. I know my mother did read to me and taught me colors, numbers, and stuff. She read to me sometime and I think my dad did before he left. I know I went to preschool because my mother told me I did. I think going to school early is important because it gets students prepared for when they go to regular school. I remember being in school in like the first and second grades and some kids didn’t know their colors, or how to read or count. I know how to do those things so I felt like I was better prepared than they were. I think when you start school sooner you increase your chance of learning more, if you can stay focused and have good teachers. (Mr. M., personal communication, May 5, 2015)
Mr. C

Yes, I attended head start and pre-school according to my mother. I don’t remember because I was very young, but I do know that my mother told me I was reading at a very early age. I was advanced and I certainly benefitted from those programs. Early education is a benefit, but just like anything else, it’s contingent upon or depends upon who the educator is. Who’s doing the early education? Realistically, if you place a student into a classroom, I don’t care if they are five or fifty-five. If the person that is educating them or attempting to educate them doesn’t have the ability like classroom management and doesn’t have a passion for teaching students, if they don’t have the desire to teach and belief that all students can be academically successful, then early education could be a waste of time. It’s not simply early education itself, it’s early education taught by highly qualified and highly motivated teachers that make the biggest difference in the lives of all students, specifically the very young. Again, I certainly realize the benefits of early education having experienced it, firsthand. The sooner you get young people learning and excited about learning, the better the results will be in their academic futures. (Mr. C., personal communication, May 7, 2015)

Influence of Supportive Extended Family and Extra-familial Resources

As impactful as the African American mothers with strong beliefs regarding the importance of education is in influencing their sons to become academically successful, the influence of supportive extended family and extra-familial resources is strong as well. Although the levels of support from extended family and extra-familial resources varied, the mothers who were interviewed all acknowledged the importance of something or someone other than themselves in helping their sons become academically successful.
They spoke to some of the difficulties they felt about not having their son’s father helping out in the home. Whether speaking of help from uncles, aunts, or grandparents, mothers and their sons credited other family for helping play a positive role in the lives of their sons. When discussing positive extra-familial resources such as teachers, coaches, athletic teams, and church involvement, mothers and sons who were interviewed unanimously appreciated the support they received. They acknowledged feeling supported due to contact with or membership in the various extra-familial groups.

Mothers

Ms. W

Trying to raise my son alone was difficult especially when I didn’t have his father to reinforce what I was saying sometimes. As my son got older, he would try me. I don’t think if his father was there he would have tried to test me. I have a sister that is younger than I am and my son looks up to her. He was able to see her graduate from high school, college, get her master’s degree and then get her juris doctorate degree. My son went to all those events and really admired his aunt. He also had uncles, his grandfather, his godfather, and sports to keep him occupied. He also participated in church so he had a lot of positive men and positive environments to learn from. He played baseball and other sports from the time he was in kindergarten. He participated in Little League, vacation bible school, and summer programs. He was surrounded by positive male role models. I think him seeing my uncles and grandfather run a car body shop was beneficial as well. My son would go to the shop and help them. There the men in my family would talk to my son about hard work and the importance of school. Just being around positive men that were hard working and cared about him helped keep him on track academically. They would always ask him about his grades and ask him
what college he would attend. Just seeing those positive male family members have to get things done and know they had to go to school to secure high school diplomas, trade certificates, and college degrees made my son understand that education was of the utmost importance. Also, the church had a lot of positive programs he was exposed to. They ran little basketball camps and the young men in the church were constantly reiterating the importance of school and good behavior. Without that support from the men in my family and those involved in coaching and church, I don’t think my son would have been as motivated to continue his education and seek a college degree. I’m thankful for how they encouraged my son. (Ms. W., personal communication, May 3, 2015)

Ms. M

My frustration level was high trying to raise my son with no father in the home. I always felt that I couldn’t raise him to be a man because I didn’t know, you know, what it took to be a man. I knew what a man meant to me and how I would perceive a man for me, but I didn’t know how to raise him to be a good man. The best thing I could do is teach him how to be courteous, mannerable, hopeful, and productive. I just wanted him to stay out of trouble. Don’t cause any trouble or start fights. I didn’t want anything to happen to him because of what I was hearing on the news. The news was always negative about African American men not doing well in college, committing crimes, and going to prison. I didn’t want to be a failure raising my son.

I was fortunate to have a few positive male role models on both sides of the family that were successful in school. I tried to use examples of positive men in the family who worked hard to be successful in school and life. Of the three men in the family that were successful, all worked in education. They would talk to
him and tell him the importance of staying in school, they’d ask about his grades, and they would give him encouragement. The most impactful male in his life is my brother, his uncle. When my son was doing poorly in school, I moved him to the school my brother worked at and he put him in line. My brother checked on my son to make sure he behaved, talked to his teachers, and he got my son involved in the baseball team he coached. I really saw my son turn things around in school. I supported my son’s baseball team and the team coaches, along with my brother who was head coach, really worked to keep the young men on that time positive about school and sportsmanship. My son really enjoyed playing sports and spending time with the coaches and his teammates. He also played basketball, but he loved skateboarding most of all. When he got to high school he began to do poorly. His uncle and a counselor at the high school he attended really took time to be positive role models in his life. The counselor was a lady who would check his grades, call him out of class to talk to him, and she always kept me informed about his grades. She was an important part of him graduating on time. He almost didn’t make it. I’m thankful for the extra help they gave my son. (Ms. M., personal communication, May 5, 2015)

Ms. C

I had frustrations raising my son alone because he had his father in his life early on. His father was active in sports and I think that had to do with why my son liked playing sports. I wasn’t very sports minded, I was more into his education. I couldn’t be at his games and I know that really bothered my son. There weren’t many family members who helped my son educationally, but I remember several teachers who really thought my son was capable and a good student. He really respected those teachers. I think when we moved and I took him to a particular
school, some of the teachers always encouraged him. Other than a few teachers, my son didn’t have very many role models. I made sure that my son knew that God was his role model. I made sure he was in church on Sundays, even when I wasn’t there, my mom and step-father was there. They made sure he was in service. I would like to say that his positive role model was God. I didn’t really have much support from my family raising my son. I believed I was the parent and I raised my sons and daughters the best way I could, by myself. Although I was independent, I give all the credit to having Christ in my life. (Ms. C., personal communication, May 7, 2015)

**Sons**

**Mr. W**

My aunt was the single most impactful person in my educational life. My mother’s sister was the first to go through undergrad, graduate, and then get a specialized degree and go on to law school. She understood education and pushed me to go further than my high school diploma. I was frustrated not having my father around, but it had little to do with school and more to do with just not having a dad around to understand what I was feeling. Again, I had my aunt and because she was able to do things for us financially because she took school seriously, I began to appreciate that. She would take time from her job to come visit us. She’d buy us school clothes and things like that. Once, I remember her saying, “How much do you make?” I told her minimum wage and she told me how much she made an hour and told me that is why I need to stay in school. She let me know that if I wanted to be able to take care of myself and my kids in the future that I needed to get a college degree. She really put me down that right
path. I always believe my grandparents were role models to me. Every time I spoke to my grandparents, over a holiday, they asked, “How is school? What are you having difficulty in? What do you like the most?” They just kind of gauged my interests and made sure I was still thinking about education in a productive manner. As far as role models are concerned, my track coach was definitely a role model. In college, I ran division three cross-country. I was able to build some great relationships, but the best relationship was the one my track coach and I built. I consider him to be my mentor to this day. We speak on a weekly basis, he always gives me advice about school and searching for jobs. If I hadn’t run cross-country in college, I would not have had the insight and accessibility to him like I do now. (Mr. W., personal communication, May 3, 2015)

The other sons made similar statements regarding influential extended family members as well and extra-familial resources that proved vital in their educational pursuits.

Mr. M

I always felt that not having a father in the home difficult for me. There’s honestly a lot of things you just can’t learn from your mother. I believe being raised by a single mother has affected my judgment and my decisions. I knew right from wrong, but just with certain things. I felt that if my father was there, things would have been a little better. A positive role model in my life is my uncle. My uncle always told me the right thing and encouraged me, no matter what. He made it clear that going to school was the right thing to do and he believed I could get my high school diploma. He got me into sports and was on me when I was in school and stuff. That allowed me to get through middle school and getting my mind set for high school. It took me a while to see it, but my uncle’s faith in me helped a
lot. I also had a counselor in high school that helped me graduate. She worked with my teachers to help me get assignments completed. There was a teacher that helped me become more patriotic. She broke government down in a way I could understand, she helped me pass my class. I appreciate the help I received from my uncle, my counselor, and my government teacher. They all helped me finish high school. (Mr. M., personal communication, May 5, 2015)

Mr. C

As a student who was angry at times, partially due to not having a father around and not having all the basic needs met. I really could have benefitted from outside support. I was the only boy in my family, so I remember times in which I felt alone when my mom and the girls would be in my mom’s room having girl talk with the door closed. It would have been nice to have someone to relate to and support me from a male perspective. To help me understand as a young man the struggles that Black men have in the world and how to overcome them. I lived a bit of a sheltered life because my mom was pretty strict about what we could and couldn’t do. I can’t really recall very many influential people that served as role models. I do remember two teachers who took an interest in my education during the middle school and high school years. One was an English teacher in middle school who helped me believe I could be a fantastic writer. The other was an English teacher in high school who saw beyond the rough football player and treated me with respect as a scholar. Other than that, my involvement in sports helped me deal with my anger issues, but I can’t pinpoint a specific coach who inspired me to do well in school. Other than sports, I was deeply involved in church. I sung in the choir, was an usher, and attended most Sundays when I was in high school. I always appreciated and acknowledged God’s influence
in my life. God was my biggest role model. (Mr. C., personal communication, May 7, 2015)

Summary

After analysis of the data, three prominent themes arose

1. Mother’s belief in the importance of education.
2. Positive impact on early education.
3. Influence of supportive extended family and extra-familial resources.

While interviewing the mothers of the academically successful African American males, one clear and common belief that they shared was a strong belief that education was of the utmost importance. Whether the mothers that were interviewed barely graduated from school or went on to obtain college degrees, these mothers each laid strong foundations in their sons regarding education. Each of the mothers spoke favorably of concepts like hard work, determination, and perseverance. They all seemed to make it a point to model the desired behaviors. According to most of the mothers interviewed, reading to their children daily and making sure their sons saw them read for leisure helped them convey the message that words were valuable. Each of the mothers talked about ways they contributed to their sons’ grades by making sure they completed assigned homework prior to allowing the sons to participate in any extra-curricular activities. They also made sure they asked about test dates and encouraged their sons to study. Some went as far as securing tutors for their sons. The level of buy-in the mothers showed conditioned the sons to know the importance of school, even when some of them faltered from time to time. They understood completion of high school was a realizable end goal.
All interview participants, both mothers and their adult sons, unanimously agreed upon the positive impact of education. Each of the male participants reflected on the memories of learning basic concepts that helped them such as learning letters in the alphabet, learning to read basic sight words, and counting. They each appreciated the foundational benefits gained from learning these concepts before entering kindergarten.

One of the male participants could not recall very much about pre-school but stated he knows he attended because his mother told him. He did recall being highly successful in early grades. Each of the mothers also said they made sure to be active in their son’s early education by attending school with them and teaching at home. Some of them also tried to reinforce what their sons were learning in head start. All participants discussed feeling that there was an advantage to receiving early childhood education.

The influence of supportive extended family members was another area in which the mothers and sons all agreed upon. The perspectives of the mothers regarding those family members that assisted them in raising their sons by serving as role models, pseudo disciplinarians, and even confidants for their son’s were appreciation and gratitude. The mothers all cited the influences of positive role models made their jobs as single parents easier. Some of the mothers became emotional speaking about the appreciation they have for those extended family members.

The importance of extra-familial resources such as schoolteachers, counselors, coaches, and involvement in different groups provided necessary outlets for the sons according to mothers. Each of the sons mentioned receiving encouragement and support from these resources. Although the degrees of influence varied between the young men and each of their individual influences, they all acknowledged the vital roles of their association with the various groups and people. Two of the sons reported very negative interactions with some of the teachers they encountered in schools. They cited disrespect and at times racial prejudice they experienced at the hands of some of the teachers and
coaches they came in contact. Despite those negative interactions, the young men were still able to acknowledge those positive teachers that helped them achieve in school. One of the young men credited a high school counselor with being integral in him actually finishing high school. This was primarily due to the level of support the counselor provided him. A common factor or trait of the most appreciated teachers, coaches, or counselors was that they went above and beyond the constraints of their job requirements in order to make a positive impact in the lives of the males who were interviewed. One of the males focused on his involvement with church as having a positive effect. He credits his participation in various church departments with helping him to want to do the right thing in school and in life. The common threads that point towards the positive effects extra-familial resources can have reveal the importance of exposing African American males who come from single-parent households to positive groups led by good people who care.

In this chapter, interview data was analyzed and categorized in order to highlight pervasive themes that are pertinent to the research. The next chapter, Chapter 5, will examine findings from the study and reveal how they relate to each of the research questions. Also, Chapter 5 will entail implications for practice and give rise to recommendations for improvement in practice. Lastly, the next chapter will address implications for future research and suggestions for further research will be discussed.
CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The purpose of this study was to examine factors that contributed to the academic success of African American males who came from fatherless, single-parent households. These three research questions were developed for this study:

1. What factors contributed to the academic success of African American males who come from single-parent households headed by mothers?
2. What are the common beliefs and child rearing strategies that single African American mothers use when raising their sons to be academically successful?
3. How does the concept of resiliency theory apply to the academic success of African American males who come from homes headed by a single mother?

This research paper began with a historical overview of social problems faced by African Americans. The state of the African American family, both past and current, was examined. The purpose in examining the AA family was to give context to the present state of many AA male students and highlighted the factors that were contributing to problems they face in society and in school. Popular beliefs regarding perceived factors that contributed to the poor conditions in which many AA families must deal with were discussed in the report written by Daniel Patrick Moynihan (1965). This study examined Moynihan’s perception of the negative societal effects of single African American women being forced to raise families alone. His research delved into what he called the breakdown of the AA family, his theory about too many AA families being headed by single mothers, and focused on the negative perceptions many people in mainstream
American society had towards African American families. Moynihan examined data regarding joblessness and incarceration rates and showed how African American males represented the highest numbers in both categories. Also, data that discussed the deficits many African American young men who are failing academically was examined. The over-arching concern was that due to all the negative societal factors that African Americans must endure such as increased rates of poverty, joblessness, higher rates of incarceration, and higher instances of living in or having been raised in a single-parent household, it is not plausible to judge them the same academically. In fact, it can be seen as unfair. It becomes a matter of equity. Considering that data supporting all the deficits in which African American youth are faced with in American society, it defies all odds that some AA males who come from the exact negative conditions that Daniel Moynihan pointed out in his 1965 report have managed to achieve academic success at all. The researcher believes that by highlighting a few of those instances in which single mothers who raised their sons under some of the harsh conditions mentioned in Moynihan’s report were able to produce AA males who achieved academic success as defined by on time high school graduation. It is the hope of the researcher to extract effective strategies used by single African American mothers. That information would then be shared with other single mothers, as well as with school districts and policy makers, in an effort to approach African American male academic and societal deficits in a more positive and proactive fashion.

Using qualitative methods, the researcher interviewed three dyads that consisted of one mother and one son in each group. The interviews that took place were one-on-one in order to increase comfort level and allow for confidentiality. Some of the interviews took place by phone call and others were face to face. Participants were alerted that none of the information they gave would be shared using their real names. The researcher employed a phenomenological method of research in order to garner information from
members of each dyad. The researcher opted to use the phenomenological approach because it allows for a small number of interview participants who have first-hand knowledge of or who have experienced a phenomenon to give their perceptions and opinions based on those life experiences (Creswell, 1998). The participants shared personal accounts and experiences in an effort to bring insight into factors they believed helped them achieve success in education.

**Discussion of Findings**

Each research question was designed to explain how the phenomenon of single parent African American mothers were successful in raising African American male students who became academically successful.

**Research Question 1**

1. What key factors contribute to the academic success of African American males (AAM) from single-parent households?

The first research question delved into the factors that led to the academic success of African American males who come from single-parent households. According to the information purged from interviews, the key proponents of success for the AA male lies first and foremost in a strong belief in the importance of education by the single mother. What the researcher found in interviewing participants was that each mother, regardless of their own level of education obtained, made it clear at a very early age to their sons that education was important. There were some differences in the manner in which AA mothers who were interviewed for this study conveyed the importance to AA males. Ms. M, one of the mothers interviewed, tended to use punitive measures rather
frequently with her son Mr. M. According to Ms. M, she felt as if she needed to make sure Mr. M understood early on that there were consequences for not following through with academic expectations. She would check with teachers for poor behavior and if confirmed, Mr. M would lose privileges or receive punishment. Mr. M reported that this was difficult for him as sometimes he felt as if his mother did not try to understand what he was struggling with in school. He stated that Ms. M had expectations and if they were not adhered to, she would consistently employ punitive measures. Mr. M stated that sometimes this method made him rebel, but he still acknowledged that he knew his mother was serious about his schooling.

Ms. W’s methods of conveying the importance of education contrasted to those of Ms. M. Ms. W’s approach seemed to change as Mr. W progressed in age. Mr. W reported that as he got older and begin to have academic struggles his mother sat him down and had a very mature conversation with him about the choices he was making. Mr. W stated that by this time in his life he was rebelling because his father was not in the home. Ms. W told her son in that conversation that his future is in his own hands and no one else’s. She went on to specify how a quality education and college degree would make a difference in his life. Instead of penalizing him for poor academic performance, she appealed to his own understanding of life’s ups and downs. She stated that setting goals was the key to not becoming stagnant. This approach worked with Mr. W because he knew his mother was serious about his education, but he chose to do better because it was what he felt he needed to do in order to do well in school, not out of fear of discipline.

As mentioned in analysis of recurring themes of the research for this study, it should be specified that regardless of socio-economic level, these single mothers were able to make educating their sons a priority in their lives. Of the three mothers interviewed, Ms. W reported having the highest income level. Although it should be noted that this enabled her to help her son participate in more extra-curricular
activities, there was no evidence that her higher income level gave her son academic advantages. Based on the evidence from the interviews, the single most powerful factor that contributed to the academic success of the African American males interviewed was their mother’s belief that educational success was a priority. Based on the belief of the mothers, each of the dyads lived their lives in a way that made academic success a possibility for the AA male students. Findings showed that each mother took their sons to school regularly, checked homework, and stayed in contact with school regarding their son’s academic performance. Each parent addressed student needs when they arose and celebrated their son’s academic accomplishments when they did well. Each of the AA males were adamant that their success in school all began with their mothers setting a tone that school was imperative to their success in life, so they all bought into that mindset. That buy-in undoubtedly resulted in the AA males who were interviewed being able to graduate high school on time.

**Research Question 2**

2. What child rearing strategies do single African American mothers use to raise academically successful AAMs?

**Early Education**

This research question focused on child rearing strategies that African American single mothers used to raise academically successful African American males. During interviews, single mothers specified various practices they participated in that they assumed would help their sons educationally. Each mother admitted to the strategies being purposefully used. First of the strategies employed was exposing their sons to
education early. Each of the mothers interviewed spoke of how they began reading to their son’s as early as during pregnancy. Each mother stated that she either was told of the benefits to this or practiced this with other children and saw the effectiveness. Despite Moynihan’s (1965) belief that high poverty rates greatly contributed to poor conditions for Blacks in America including low academic achievement, it should be noted that the strategy of reading to children during pregnancy or getting them involved in head start programs generally does not cost much at all. The mothers believed in early education because they believed that it gave their sons an advantage in preparation to attend K-12 school, as well as college. Each of the mothers who were interviewed reported that because they taught their sons academic basics at home such as the alphabet, colors, number sense, etc., they were advanced in comparison to other students attending class along with them.

Parent Involvement

The data given by the mothers also show that each of them were involved in their child’s schools. Primarily during K-5 school years in public education, each of the mothers reported being very involved in their son’s schools and activities that were conducted at school. Some of the mothers reported that they served as volunteer classroom aides while others stated they were on the PTA and helped create activities. Each mother gave a similar account stating that their son enjoyed seeing them at school. They also reported a level of respect from teachers and other staff due to their constant presence at school. Several of the mothers attributed their constant presence early on at schools to why their son’s academic progress went pretty smoothly. Another important finding was that in each case, once their sons reached middle school, there was a slight
decline in parental school participation. Mothers usually attributed the decline in work and other life responsibilities.

Extended Family

During the study, it became evident to the researcher that the impact of involving positive male family in the lives of AA males was important. Those mothers who had brothers, fathers, or uncles who were good role models made sure to involve them in the lives of their sons. According to the findings, not only did this exposure to good male role models help the sons academically via words of encouragement and advice, it also gave the young men a male they could trust and confide in when dealing with problems in school, at home, or in their lives. Of the three males interviewed, only one of them stated that he did not have a consistent male figure that was positive and helped him substantially. The whole concept of helpful extended family went pretty much undiscussed in the Moynihan Report of 1965 regarding the supposed decline of the Black family. According to the interview findings, exposing AA males to positive extended family, both male and female, had a positive effect on their sons’ ideas regarding the relevance of school. Ms. M and Ms. W both had successful brothers that they made sure their sons spent time with. These positive role models consisted of educators, business owners, and family men. The role models willingly imparted knowledge, advice, and concern to the young men. The young men, in turn, learned the relevance of how a good education could affect their futures. When interviewing Ms. C it was evident that lacked the same type of extended family, specifically positive male role models, which made it difficult to expose her son to upwardly mobile men who cared for her son. Despite the lack of access, Ms. C acknowledged how beneficial having supportive extended family would have been in her son’s life.
Extra-familial Resources

Exposing African American males to resources beyond the home was something that each single African American mother did. Interview findings showed that each of the mothers believed that if they were going to be able to raise an academically successful son that was well rounded they would have to make sure he was able to participate in various activities. The mothers made sure they involved their sons in a myriad of activities. Each of the young men interviewed participated in athletics. The mothers hoped that by involving the sons in sport they would learn about things such as fair play and working with a team in order to reach a shared goal. Each of the AA males interviewed stated that involvement in team sports proved helpful to them. Mr. W cited finding a coach that would one day become his mentor and Mr. M stated that he really appreciated and learned a great deal from the team camaraderie and fun. He said it made him feel as if he belonged to something special, something positive. Mr. C stated that he really enjoyed the cathartic effect sports participation gave him. He stated that the outlet that sports provided helped him do better in school because he knew his mother would not let him participate in sports unless his academics were in good standing. The mothers also cited other resources that would prove paramount in helping sons succeed. Ms. C stated that her son’s involvement in church was most responsible for his success. She stated, and Mr. C concurred, that belief in an almighty good that loved him and would never forsake him gave Mr. C the best role model he would ever need in order to be successful.

The findings also showed that being exposed to positive supports within school helped their sons as well. Each son mentioned school personnel that were helpful in their academic journeys. Mr. M spoke of a school counselor that constantly went above and beyond helping him to graduate. He stated the counselor would call his mother daily as
well as keep in contact with his teacher in order to make sure he stayed on track with homework and other assignments. Mr. W spoke of an economic teacher who was so passionate about the subject it made him as a student excited about going to his class and participating. Mr. C spoke of several English teachers who helped him most by believing in his abilities as a student and pushing him to challenge himself to produce better writing samples because they could tell he had the potential to do so. Each of the teachers were credited by the African American males who were interviewed as being good teachers because they were caring and showed interest in the students. As the readers can see from the comments of mothers and sons, as well as from the research presented in Chapter 2, much of the literature that cites problems in the African American communities rarely gives clear options to ways in which AA males can break deficit cycles and achieve extraordinary academic acts.

**Research Question 3**

3. How does the concept of resiliency theory apply to the academic success of African American males who come from homes headed by single mothers?

This research question examined the role resilience and self-efficacy has on African American males who live in poverty yet manage to overcome social obstacles and achieve academic success. The findings indicated that members of each dyad exhibited a level of familial resilience. The resilience shown by mothers to provide for the son’s basic needs while also managing to protect them from outside risk factors indicates its importance. During interviews of the mothers, they were asked about the most difficult aspects of raising their sons as single parents. Here are a few of the quotes.
Ms. M

I didn’t know how to raise my son to be a good man. I didn’t want to fail my son and this made me believe that I had to be a little tougher on him. The frustration of having to be the bad person in regards to discipline and making sure homework got done was hard but I knew it was necessary. (Ms. M., personal communication, May 5, 2015)

Ms. C

The most frustrating part about raising my son alone was not always being able to be there. As my son became older, I wasn’t always there to keep him on top of his schoolwork. I feel that having his father there would have helped him get the full support that he needed. My son always responded well to positive words and encouragement. It saddened me that I wasn’t always able to be both mother and father to give him what he needed. (Ms. C., personal communication, May 7, 2015)

The self-efficacy of the African American males is evident in their own responses to interview questions. It is important to note that when asked about the most difficult aspects of growing up in a fatherless home, the males mentioned experiencing feelings of confusion and loneliness. Each of them talked about moments in which they rebelled against their mothers in their own ways. Mr. C discussed getting into trouble sometimes in school for poor behavior and being rude to teachers. Mr. M mimicked those sentiments and spoke of behaving like a classroom clown in order to get attention. Mr. W discussed having poor attendance early in high school and talking back to his mother. Each acknowledged that these behaviors were basically ways of acting out due to having angry feelings about not having fathers in the home. The resilience displayed
by these young men came out in decisions they chose to make regarding school. The AA males interviewed spoke of friends who were doing poorly in school. They spoke of their friends who chose to miss school regularly and those who began to experiment with drugs, alcohol, and sex. Each of these young men did not claim to be perfect or always innocent, but the general consensus was that they chose to avoid the truant and illegal behaviors because they felt by partaking in the negative behaviors they would become the African American male statistic that they had been warned about all their lives. They spoke of friends who ended up in juvenile hall for committing crimes. They also shared stories of promiscuous classmates that engaged in sex and had children on the way before their senior year in high school. The young men spoke of temptation, but based on their own personal restraints and resilience, they were able to avoid succumbing to those temptations.

Implications of Practice

After examining the data yielded by the interviews of both mothers and their sons, this researcher extrapolated the following recommendations from participants. Those interviewed made the following suggestions for positive changes in practice. The researcher decided to cite the following suggestions because the mothers and sons who participated felt strongly that the suggested points were integral to them raising successful African American male students. The researcher agrees that the following points, if followed, can yield academic success.

Mothers to Mothers

1. African American single mothers should seek help from people they can trust.
2. Utilize family resources and engage with outside support systems such as churches and other groups.
3. Constantly keep an eye on your child, no matter what.
4. Listen to your child. Allow your child to learn at his own pace.
5. Let your son know you are proud of him often.

**Sons to Sons**

1. Go out and seek knowledge in books.
2. Develop a dream/goals and make sure you see them through no matter what.
3. Always believe that you can accomplish great things in spite of your circumstances.
4. Involve yourself in positive things and avoid the negative.
5. Believe in God. It is good to know there is something more powerful than yourself looking out for your best interest.

**Implications for Future Research**

This study gives an alternative perception of African American mothers who are tasked with raising their African American sons to be academically successful. This research dispels generalizations given regarding African American male students failing academically largely due to who is heading the family in which they belong. The firsthand accounts and perceptions of mothers and sons who have actually lived in difficult social conditions, yet managed to strive for success, show that academic success is possible for anyone given the right circumstances and effective strategies. Although the researcher agreed with some of Daniel Patrick Moynihan’s tenets (1965) regarding how a portion of the African American population fare worse financially due to the absence
of African American fathers from many homes, it is important to point out positives that come from resilient families that were able to not only endure, but achieve academically.

This study should be expanded to entail more mother-son dyad interviews. By interviewing a larger group of mothers and sons who share the same criteria, results could yield even more strategies that could serve to assist single African American mothers with more information and data regarding raising academically successful AA males.

Future research of this area must specify the roles of schools and school districts. From the perspective of policy, there is a higher need for educational officials to redefine their roles in helping each child succeed. There must be a deeper examination into the importance of creating wraparound services that address some of the academic needs faced by African American males. The value of the data that focuses on African American male educational deficits is that the very data should serve as a starting point of where policy can be changed and created to improve conditions. This research shows a strong need for schools and communities to support single mothers with resources designed to help them expose their sons to positive role models. These role models can be in the form of business owners, coaches, teachers, and other people in the community. Also, arranging city-wide mentor groups and having a database with information regarding those willing to volunteer gives mothers an opportunity to link their sons to potential mentors.

A stronger focus on potential remedies for negative perceptions of African American male students needs to be the focus. Everyday society is inundated with negativity such as AA males representing the highest levels of poor assessment scores, dropout rates, joblessness, and incarceration rates. Regardless if the data is accurate or not, is not the most important concept, what can be done to correct the deficits and create solutions should be the primary foci. Future research into factors that contribute to the academic success of African American males who come from fatherless, single-parent
homes should consist of state or Federal task forces that address the importance of early
intervention in schools as well as create classes for single mothers that teach key factors
they can utilize to help their sons succeed.

Limitations of the Study

A significant limitation acknowledged in this study was the relatively small
number of participants that were interviewed. There were only three dyads consisting of
three mothers and three sons. Due to the small number of participants some researchers
may choose to deem the interview data statistically insignificant. Also, interview
participants have natural biases and those could come out in their responses. These biases
could skew data used in findings. The personal connection the researcher had to this study
could have created biases that caused important data to be ignored. Lastly, depending on
primary findings that solely come from interviews may be seen as a limitation as well.

Summary

The study examined factors that contributed to the academic success of African
American males who came from fatherless, single-parent homes. The first chapter of
the study consisted of purpose of the study as well as its significance. Background
information was provided in order to specify historical context of negative perceptions
of African American males in the United States. Chapter 2 examined literature that
addressed popular thought and perceptions regarding the framework of deficit research
information supported by Daniel Patrick Moynihan (1965) regarding what he believed
to be the reasons behind the declining Black family. Chapter 3 established the qualitative
methods that were employed and highlighted the phenomenological approach used.
Chapter 4 used findings and direct quotes of dyad members to present pertinent data regarding the research that was conducted. Chapter 5 offered a summary of the research and provided recommendations regarding implications for practice, which highlighted strategies offered by interview participants. This chapter also addressed future research and offered suggestions in order to further the research.

This phenomenological study does not present any new ideas. However, it does support the notion that involved parenting is the significant factor that supersedes all other factors as they relate to race, socio-economic background, and familial composition. The beauty of this study is by using a phenomenological approach, three success stories were shared and the ways in which those single parent, female-headed families endured social and educational difficulties were revealed. Moynihan’s (1965) report has been contested and strategies for how African American males who are the products of fatherless, single-parent homes achieved on time high school graduation have been shared. The influence of the strategies that came from this study could serve to help many single-parent mothers who are trying to raise academically successful sons. The advice given by the academically successful sons in this study can be uplifting to young men who find themselves without fathers and without the support of real positive role models.
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Appendix A

QUESTIONS FOR AA MOTHERS

1. Describe your socio-economic status as a single woman raising a family.
2. Describe your feelings regarding education? What was your highest level of education achieved?
3. How many siblings did your son have living with him in your home when he was school-aged?
4. How would you describe your impact on your child’s educational experience?
5. Feel free to describe issues and events that you believed molded his outlook on education.
6. Did you utilize punishment and/or rewards systems within your household to affect your child’s focus on learning? How?
7. Did your son participate in headstart, preschool, or any form of early education? Please describe.
8. In your opinion, is exposure to early education of benefit or a waste of time? Please explain.
9. Please describe any frustrations you felt with trying to raise a son alone.
10. Were there any outside influences that played a role in your son’s outlook on education? Please describe.
11. Did you involve your son in any extracurricular activities that may have exposed him to positive role models? Please describe.
12. Did you receive any support from extended family in raising your son? What effect did they have on his academic success?

13. Did you attend school/college while raising your son?

14. How often did you read for personal benefit, both scholarly and leisurely?

15. Did you read to your son when he was a child? If so, what types of literature and how often?

16. Were you active in your child’s school? Please describe.

17. Gauge the impact that educators had on your son’s educational journey.

18. Do you recall specific educators who were most impactful to your son?

19. Were you able to meet your own basic needs? Were all your son’s basic needs met as a child (i.e., food, clothing, shelter, love, etc.)?

20. What advice would you offer a single AA mother with a young child that would help her raise an academically successful man?
Appendix B

QUESTIONS FOR AA MALES

1. Describe your family’s socio-economic status.

2. Describe your feelings regarding education? What was your highest level of education achieved?

3. How many siblings did you have living with you when you were school-aged?

4. Who would you describe as being most impactful on your educational experience? Why?

5. Feel free to describe issues and events that you believed molded your outlook on education.

6. Describe what tactics your mother used to affect your focus on learning? How did they help or hurt?

7. Did you participate in head start, preschool, or any form of early education? Please describe.

8. In your opinion, is exposure to early education of benefit or a waste of time? Please explain.

9. Please describe any frustrations you felt being raised in a fatherless household.

10. Were there any outside influences that played a role in your outlook on education? Please describe.

11. Were you involved in any extracurricular activities that may have exposed you to positive role models? Please describe.
12. Did you receive any support from extended family (uncle, aunts, grandparents, etc.)? What effect did they have on your academic success?

13. How was your attendance in school?

14. Did you have behavioral problems in school? If so, how often, if not, why?

15. Did your mother read to you as a child? If so, what types of literature and how often?

16. Was your mother active in your school? Please describe.

17. Describe your experiences with most educators you encountered during your educational journey.

18. Do you recall specific educators who were most impactful to you? Why were they?

19. Were all your basic needs met as a child (i.e., food, clothing, shelter, love, etc.)?

20. What advice would you offer a young AA male that would help him become an academically successful man?