

SHIFTING THE DISCOURSE: AN EXPLORATION OF ACADEMIC SUCCESS AMONG  
AFRICAN AMERICAN HIGH SCHOOL SENIORS FROM SINGLE-MOTHER HOMES

by

NICOLE A. CORLEY

(Under the Direction of Patricia Reeves)

ABSTRACT

Most research on African American students has explored the causes and consequences of academic failure. This fixation on negative outcomes has perpetuated deficit views of African American student achievement. Consequently, far less is known about the successful academic outcomes of African American students, generally, and those from single-mother homes, specifically. The purpose of this study was to explore academic success as perceived and experienced by African American high school students and their single mothers.

This qualitative study utilized a narrative inquiry approach that used in-depth, semi-structured interviews for data collection. The sample of seven African American high school seniors (four girls, three boys) and their single mothers were selected using purposeful sampling methods. Four research questions guided this study: (1) How do African American students and their single mothers understand and explain the protective factors and underlying processes contributing to academic success? (2) What do African American students and their single mothers report as potential barriers (risk factors) to academic success? (3) How has family structure influenced the academic success of African American high school students from single-mother homes? and (4) In what ways can existing and/or future social structures help support and facilitate academic success for African American students from single-mother households?

Data analysis occurred in two stages. The first stage, narrative analysis, used poetic transcription techniques to create found poems for each of the individual participants. The second stage, analysis of narratives, identified themes across participants' narratives. Data analysis revealed protective factors contributing to success included students' inherent drive toward success, a deeply invested mother, and assistance from social-relational supports. The potential barriers to academic success were described as "challenges of the streets," and the responsibilities associated with single parenting. The influence of family structure on academic success involved students being motivated to "go harder" and mothers acting strategically. Lastly, findings related to how social structures can support the academic success of Black students from single mother homes included participants' expressing the need for "a community that has our back" and a recognition of their success. Recommendations for practice and future research are included.

**INDEX WORDS:** Black Students, African American Students, Academic Success, Academic Achievement, Black Mothers, African American Mothers, Single Mothers, Social Work, Narrative Inquiry, Qualitative

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated in loving memory to my mother

ZULA MAE CORLEY (nee' KIMBLE)

1949 – 2002

and to my children

JALEN and ZURI

you mean the world to me.

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*"I hated every minute of training, but I said, 'Don't quit. Suffer now and live the rest of your life as a champion.'" - Muhammad Ali*

The truth is, there were many times I wanted to quit, and I came pretty close to doing so. I must give thanks to many people who "held space" for me, supported/ lifted/ encouraged/ motivated/ pushed and walked alongside me as I journeyed this doctoral road. They loved me through one of the most challenging, yet rewarding, times of my life. I could not have done it without them.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER	Page
1 INTRODUCTION .....	1
Background of the Study .....	3
Statement of the Problem.....	12
Purpose of the Study and Research Questions.....	14
Conceptual Framework.....	14
Overview of the Method .....	16
Significance of the Study .....	18
Definition of Terms.....	19
2 REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE .....	21
Introduction.....	21
The Deficit Gaze .....	22
What is Deficit Ideology.....	23
Black Single-Mother Households .....	35
Defeating Deficit Ideology .....	47
Resilience .....	50
Resilience as a Process.....	53
Academic Success Defined.....	55
Mechanisms of Resilience: Risk and Protective Factors .....	56

Individual Contributions to Academic Success .....	63
Family Contributions to Academic Success .....	68
Resilience: Cautions and Considerations .....	77
Theoretical Frameworks: PVEST and BFT .....	80
Phenomenological Variant of Ecological Systems Theory .....	80
Black Feminist Thought.....	85
Chapter Summary .....	99
<b>3 RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY .....</b>	<b>101</b>
Introduction.....	101
Researcher as a Multicultural Subject.....	102
Theoretical Paradigms and Perspectives.....	110
Epistemology .....	110
Theoretical Frameworks .....	113
Narrative Inquiry.....	120
Methods of Data Collection and Analysis .....	124
Sample Selection, Site of the Research, and Ethical Considerations .....	124
Data Collection .....	129
Data Analysis and Interpretation .....	135
Art, Practice, and Politics of Interpretation and Evaluation .....	142
Validity .....	142
Reliability.....	144
Limitations of the Study.....	145
<b>4 RESEARCH FINDINGS: NARRATIVE ANALYSIS .....</b>	<b>147</b>

Introduction.....	147
Family 1 .....	148
Family 2 .....	152
Family 3 .....	155
Family 4 .....	158
Family 5 .....	163
Family 6 .....	169
Family 7 .....	173
Chapter Summary .....	176
<b>5 RESEARCH FINDINGS: ANALYSIS OF NARRATIVES .....</b>	<b>177</b>
Introduction.....	177
Protective Factors and Processes Contributing to Academic Success .....	180
Potential Barriers (Risk Factors) to Academic Success.....	204
The Influence of Family Structure on Academic Success .....	214
Ways Social Structures Can Help Support and Facilitate Academic Success .....	219
Chapter Summary .....	226
<b>6 CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND</b>	
<b>RECOMMENDATIONS .....</b>	<b>230</b>
Introduction.....	230
Summary of Findings.....	231
Conclusions and Discussion .....	232
Implications for Social Work Practice .....	249
Recommendations for Future Research .....	253

Chapter Summary .....	255
REFERENCES .....	257
APPENDICES	
A Recruitment Flyer .....	306
B1 Telephone Eligibility Screening Consent Script.....	307
B2 Screening Interview .....	308
C Student Consent and Assent.....	310
D Mothers Consent and Permission.....	313
E Interview Guide .....	316

## LIST OF TABLES

	Page
Table 1: School Characteristics .....	126
Table 2: Participant profiles .....	128
Table 3: Participant profiles .....	178
Table 4: Categories and properties .....	179

## LIST OF FIGURES

	Page
Figure 1: Cycle of social conditioning for compliance with deficit ideology .....	27
Figure 2: Cycle of social conditioning for compliance with deficit ideology related to Black student achievement.....	27
Figure 3: Example of the layers of the assets and protective factors that facilitate resilience.....	61
Figure 4: Phenomenological variant of ecological systems theory .....	82

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

#### Genius Child

This is a song for the genius child.  
Sing it softly, for the song is wild.  
Sing it softly as ever you can -  
Lest the song get out of hand.

*Nobody loves a genius child.*

Can you love an eagle,  
Tame or wild?  
Can you love an eagle,  
Wild or tame?  
Can you love a monster  
Of frightening name?

*Nobody loves a genius child.*

*Kill him* - and let his soul run wild.

-Langston Hughes

“Genius Child,” written in 1937 by African American poet and social activist Langston Hughes, captures an era in United States history when White mainstream society explicitly and incessantly marginalized the intellectual and cultural expressions of African Americans. It was wrong both socially and politically to be African American and a “genius child.” To be a “genius child” countered the socially constructed belief that African Americans were intellectually inferior. Seemingly, “nobody loves a genius child” because this child threatened White mainstream norms and values, negating one of the fallacious reasons why African

Americans were oppressed (Spruill, 2002). So, what becomes of this “genius child” who threatens the fallacy of racial inferiority? “Kill him.”

Today, nearly 80 years later, education research, practice, and policy continue to “kill” African American genius—academically successful—children by seldom acknowledging their existence. The recognition and praise, or what Hughes refers to as “song,” for the African American genius child remains “soft” and whispered, as the large body of literature documenting the schooling experiences of African American children tends to focus on negative academic outcomes. Scholarship documenting their academic successes is scant, their achievements are seemingly relegated to the margins. Research has the potential to advance culturally-responsive approaches that recognize, encourage, and support the academic achievement of African American youth. However, to achieve this end, a Kuhn-inspired (1962) paradigm shift must occur in educational research—a shift that departs from “disparity data” focused on underachievement, toward an understanding of the attitudes, behaviors, and processes that contribute to the strengths and assets of African American students (American Psychological Association Task Force on Resilience and Strength in Black Children and Adolescents [APA Task Force], 2008).

Across the United States there are millions of African American students who achieve academic success and, like other racial and ethnic groups, many do it while overcoming seemingly insurmountable odds. In fact, many of the problems African American youth encounter throughout the course of their development are manifestations of an oppressive, socially-stratified system. Yet, despite structural conditions that create vast inequalities and impose limitations to their experiences and choices, there are high-achieving African American students who persevere and succeed in school, and many do it as an act of resistance (Andrews,

2009; Brayboy, 2005; Carter, 2008; Gayles, 2005; Solorzano & Bernal, 2001). This study aimed to illuminate the shadowed spaces where the stories of Black academic achievers reside, by centering on stories of agency that make Black students and their families experts of their own experiences. As Langston Hughes would have it, this study set forth to provide an opportunity for African American students and their families to have their freedom and sing their songs of success LOUDLY!

To better understand the experiences of African American students, this research explored academic success among African American high school students and their “single”<sup>1</sup> mothers. By investigating their stories of success, lessons can be learned and approaches developed that support and enhance the academic well-being of *all* students, especially those from socially disadvantaged, marginalized backgrounds.

### **Background of the Study**

For many students of color, located at the intersection of race, gender, socio-economic-status (SES), and family structure, is an all-too-familiar term, “at-risk.” The term “at-risk” originates in the field of epidemiology where it was used to identify the conditions that increase the probability of disease among populations, and the application of targeted approaches for prevention of those conditions (Jackson, 1999; Placier, 1993). Yet, after the National Commissions on Excellence in Education’s 1983 report, *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform* used “at-risk” to call attention to the United States’ educational crisis, the term quickly went from describing the nation to describing certain children (Ladson-Billings, 1999). Within a short time “at-risk” became the new buzzword, replacing previous descriptors

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this study, the use of the term “single” describes a family structure in which the mother is unmarried. Also acknowledged is the term “single” does not mean the mother is solely responsible for child-rearing. In other words, though the child resides in a single-mother home, it does not mean the father (or other family members) is not involved in child rearing.

for the same stigmatized group: poor, students of color (Jackson; Ladson-Billings, 1999, 2007; Placier; Swadener, & Lubeck, 1995). This new educational policy “buzzword” positioned student failure within an epidemiological framework (Placier). The assumption was “the backgrounds of certain students (risk factors) made them susceptible to school failure and criminality (diseases that threaten the rest of the population)” (Placier, p. 385).

The concept of risk was further developed by social theorist Niklas Luhmann (1993) in his seminal text *Risk: A Sociological Theory*. In it, Luhmann recognized that risk awareness is evidence of society’s fascination with “deviant circumstances” and of “extreme improbabilities” (p. x). He questioned:

[W]hat understanding of rationality, of decision, of technology, of the future, or of time per se is presupposed when we use the term risk? How do we comprehend our society if we turn the concept of risk...into a universal problem neither avoidable or evadable?  
(p. x)

Luhmann observed the language of risk associates particular behaviors and circumstances as disastrous with decisions to “fix” the disaster at the discretion of the person arguing those terms. Examining the concept of risk is especially important given its application to African American students, because it helps contextualize the processes and methods used to create educational and social policies that attend to them. The risk paradigm in education has systematically indicted many poor and minority children with its “disease-model” concentration (Franklin, 2000). For African American students, the risk focus further perpetuates their stereotyped *misrepresentations* as being violent, lazy, and stupid. These notions are intensified when applied to Black students from single-mother homes given the patriarchal assumptions underpinning the traditional family “ideal” (Collins, 2009). Consequently, the primary

educational goal becomes compensatory or on correcting youth problem behaviors, not learning through positive youth development (Brown, 2001; Hill, 2011).

Against a backdrop of risk, how can *balanced* decisions be applied to address the academic potential of African American students? How does research recognize and celebrate African American students who are academically successful when “at risk” is presumed a personal attribute (Hill, 2011; Jackson, 1999)? If research and policy frequently use risk to frame African American student achievement, how are successful academic outcomes fostered when these students are persistently viewed as being in jeopardy for school failure? With “at-risk” being the term to define certain groups of students considered in danger of not meeting specific education-related goals, studies increasingly began to focus their attention on the negative academic experiences associated with students of color, further advancing an already pervasive deficit model (Brown, 2004; Dudley-Marling, 2007; Ladson-Billings, 1999).

Arguably, the academic *underperformance* of African American students became one of the most discussed and examined phenomena in education (Cokely, McClain, Jones, & Johnson, 2011; Hill).

Literature abounds with reports emphasizing the academic shortcomings of African American students. This body of work commonly reports African American students have lower grades, lower standardized test scores, higher drop-out rates, and are overrepresented in school disciplinary and special education services when compared to their European American counterparts (Gutnam, Sameroff, & Eccles, 2002; Hill, 2011; U.S. Department of Education, 2015). Reasons cited to explain the existence of the achievement gap are numerous and include structural conditions such as racial residential and school segregation (Condrón, Tope, Steidl, & Freeman, 2013; Massey & Denton, 1988, 1993). The inequalities Black students face in the

classroom begin long before they set foot into kindergarten (Kozol, 1992, 2005). As a result of structural forces, African American children disproportionately face challenging obstacles such as poverty, unemployment, high incarceration rates, and crowded urban environments (Condrón et al.; Peters, 1985). These conditions create circumstances that do not foster academic or economic success.

The work of Massey and Denton (1988, 1993) described how racial residential segregation, or the spatial isolation of Blacks, create conditions in which Black people are concentrated in areas that are under-resourced, have fewer jobs, poor public services, poverty, and higher crime rates. Students residing in these environments are more likely to attend schools with fewer resources, high teacher turn-over, and inadequate school facilities (Condrón et al., 2013; Crosnoe, Wu, & Bonazzo, 2012); poor relationships between parents and school personnel (Barton, Drake, Perez, St. Louis, & George, 2004; Ford & Grantham, 2003; Thompson, 2003a,b); low parental involvement (Brandon, 2007; Hayes, 2012; Trotman 2001); teacher bias and low academic expectations (Alvidrez & Weinstein, 1999; Brophy, 1983; Cooper, 2003); increased exposure to violence (Caldwell, Sewell, Parks, & Toldson 2009; Glickman & Scally, 2008; Patton, Wooley, & Hung, 2011), and curricula that lack cultural relevance (Baker, 2005; Ladson-Billings, 1994, 1999). Largely, youth who live in racially-segregated and economically-disadvantaged communities are often cut off from the social and information networks that help facilitate positive academic outcomes (Condrón et al.; Crosnoe et al.; Massey & Denton, 1988).

Notwithstanding the prevalence of systemic conditions, other explanations of African American student underachievement have emphasized the presumed “cultural” responses to structural barriers (Allen, 2015). For example, studies have examined the impact of “Black culture” on academic achievement (McWhorter, 2000, 2005; Ogbu, 1992, 2003, 2008; Ogbu &

Simon, 1998). The works of Ogbu (1985, 1992, 2003, 2008) and Fordham and Ogbu (1986) have been influential in describing African American underperformance as a result of cultural resistance and mistrust toward the dominant group's culture and social institutions, including schools.

Using Cultural Ecological Theory (CET), Ogbu (1985, 2008) explained that due to racism, Black American students may develop an oppositional identity that resists behaviors, values, characteristics, and styles associated with middle-class, White dominant culture (Allen, 2015). For example, behaviors that enhance school learning (e.g., studying, going to the library, doing homework) are opposed because those behaviors, and the attitudes that underlie them, are judged as "acting white." Consequently, the dilemma for these students is to choose between adopting "appropriate" attitudes and behaviors equated with "acting white" or maintain the behaviors perceived to be appropriate for their minority group identity, but not favorable to school success (Ogbu, 1992). However, as O'Connor (1997) and other scholars noted, many minorities succeed in school without losing their cultural identities or their ability to interpret their subjugation (Andrews, 2009; Diamond & Huguley, 2014; Marsh, Chaney, & Jones, 2012).

Similarly, McWhorter (2000, 2005) claimed that a culture of "anti-intellectualism" within the Black community is responsible for underachievement among African American students. McWhorter (2005) argued that "the achievement gap" is not the fault of class or race, but rather "a culture factor: a facet of black peer culture that senses school as something separate from black culture" (p. 261). Cokley (2003) pointed out that McWhorter's notions of anti-intellectualism are "simply restatements of Fordham and Ogbu's oppositional identity thesis" (p. 526). Rooted in deficit-ideology, both "anti-intellectualism" and "acting white" have become common explanations for the underachievement of African American students (Cole, 2011).

Unlike literature that points to structural conditions, “anti-intellectualism,” “acting white,” and the rationale behind “at-risk” attribute the causes of underachievement to maladaptive behaviors and attitudes (Cole, 2011).

Cultural factors related to academic performance also include a significant body of research focused on family structure variables such as household composition, parental monitoring (Murry, Bynum, Brody, Willert, & Stephens, 2001) and parenting styles (Anton, Jones, & Youngstrom, 2015; Mandara, 2006; McLoyd 1998). The majority of African American youth are birthed to unmarried mothers (71.5%), and 55% are raised in single-parent homes, namely single-mother (Martin, Hamilton, Osterman, Curtin, & Matthews, 2015; Vespa, Lewis, & Kreider, 2013). Single-mother households have long been framed within a cultural deviant paradigm that casts them as inferior, deficient, dysfunctional, and a moral dilemma (Allen, 1978; Dickerson, 1995; Mandara, Johnston, Murray, & Varner, 2008). Ellwood and Jencks (2004) noted:

When Americans talk about the breakdown in traditional moral norms, they usually emphasize three forms of behavior: premarital sex, out-of-wedlock births, and divorce. Those who see such behavior as immoral often claim that it has costly social consequences, but their moral judgments seldom depend on claims about consequences. (pp. 5-6)

The association between non-resident fathers and family and community dysfunction among African American communities was advanced 50 years ago in Daniel Patrick Moynihan’s U.S. Department of Labor 1965 report, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*. Moynihan argued that the growing economic and societal problems experienced by Blacks were largely due to family structure, namely single-mother households. In the report, Moynihan

stated: “At the heart of the deterioration of the fabric of Negro society is the deterioration of the Negro family. It is the fundamental source of the weakness of the Negro community at the present time” (p. 5).

Although Moynihan (1965) described a “tangle of pathologies” (p. 29) that included unemployment, housing segregation, concentrated neighborhood poverty, discrimination, dysfunctional communities, and crime at the center of these “pathologies,” he saw the breakdown of the nuclear family as the fundamental source of weakness in the Black community (Acs, Braswell, Sorensen, & Austin-Turner, 2013). Moynihan claimed Black single-mother households, despite inequitable social conditions they did not create, will be “the principal source of most of the aberrant, inadequate, or antisocial behavior that...serves to perpetuate the cycle of poverty and deprivation” (p. 29).

At the core of this perspective is the structural-functionalist paradigm, which insists that the two-parent nuclear family is “complete” because it contains the full set of role relationships by gender and power (e.g., father-son, father-daughter, mother-son, mother-daughter) (Mandara, et al., 2008; Parsons & Bales, 1955; White, Marshall, & Wood, 2005). From this standpoint, African American female-headed households, perceived to be lacking the associated function of fathers, are the primary cause of many of the societal issues facing African American youth (Dickerson, 1995; Gonzalez, Jones, & Parent, 2014).

Generally, studies capturing the experiences of single-parent families are also guided by a deficit model that primarily focuses on their problems, while ignoring their strengths and capabilities (Ford-Gilboe, 2000; Phillips, 2012; Richard & Schmeige, 1993). Studies have shown that children from single-mother homes score lower on standardized tests, report poorer grades, view themselves as having less academic potential, are less likely to attend college

(Sigle-Rushton & McLanahan, 2004); more likely to drop out of school (Astone & McLanahan, 1991; McLanahan, 1999; McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994); have lower cognitive ability (Lang & Zagorsky, 2001); experience higher levels of emotional distress (Amato, 2005; McLanahan & Sandefur); and, are more likely to use drugs and engage in delinquent and violent behaviors (Amato; Carlson, 2006; Mandura & Murray, 2006; Matsueda & Heimer, 1987). Overall, research suggests that children and adolescents who spend time in single-parent households fare worse on indicators of well-being during childhood and adulthood than do those who spend their entire childhood living with both of their biological parents (Amato; Langton & Berger, 2011).

African American youth from single-mother homes, in particular, are shown to be at an increased risk for internalizing and externalizing behavior when compared to their European American and two-parent family counterparts (Goodrum, Cuellar, & Parent, 2012; Sterrett et al., 2015; Sterrett, Jones, & Kincaid, 2009). A primary reason cited for the overrepresentation of behavioral difficulties among African American youth from single-mother homes is the compromises that may occur in maternal parenting and mental health due to the challenge of balancing the competing demands of both work and family (Goodrum et al.; McLoyd, Jayaratne, Ceballo, & Borquez, 1994; McLoyd, Toyokawa, & Kaplan, 2008; Sterrett et al., 2015). Externalizing<sup>2</sup> difficulties, such as aggression, delinquency, and inattention to parents and teachers in adolescence have been linked to poor academic outcomes (Brady, Winston, & Gockley, 2014; Hinshaw, 1992) with lasting effects into adulthood (Dubow, Huesmann, Boxer, Pulkkinen, & Kokko, 2006; Sterrett et al., 2015).

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<sup>2</sup> As Mash and Dozois (2003) examined, although externalizing problems have been reported to be more common among African American children, this finding is likely an artifact related to SES. Externalizing disorder is associated with both ethnicity and SES, and since there is an overrepresentation of minority status children in low-SES groups in North America, caution must be exercised in interpreting the relationships among SES, ethnicity, and aggression (p. 16).

While the aforementioned studies are important to an understanding of academic outcomes, concentrating on negative experiences alone provides only half the story. Gaps in achievement do exist; however, centering the discourse on risk, shortcomings, and disparities keeps research and societal perceptions locked in a deficit paradigm (Ladson-Billings, 2007). The tendency to focus on the academic failures of African American youth from single-mother homes overlooks those who, despite perceived and experienced “risks,” achieve academic success. Less is known about the various cultural and social forces at play that contribute to the successful academic outcomes of African American students from single-mother homes (Ungar, 2005). As Barbarin (1993) described,

one rarely sees the terms competent, altruistic, resourceful, creative, aspiring, motivated, and spiritual used to describe African American youth. Unfortunately, there seems to be little media interest in or research efforts devoted to understanding African American children who live in nurturing but poor households and who experience emotionally supportive and stable personal relationships in —broken homes; who develop a positive ethnic identity in spite of rampant denigration of their race; who steadfastly pursue education even though its relationship to gainful employment is uncertain; who abstain from addictive substances even though drugs are ubiquitous and life is unkind; and who avoid gangs, illegal activity, and incarceration in spite of pressure to belong and to make the fast buck. (p. 479)

Over the last two decades a small, but emerging body of scholarship has diverged from the deficit-informed orientation of African American student achievement toward a focus on their assets and strengths (e.g., Allen, 2015; Brown, 2011; Bryan, 2005; Ford & Grantham, 2003; Ford, Harris, Tyson, & Trotman, 2001; Kim & Hargrove, 2013; Williams & Bryan, 2013;

Williams & Portman, 2014). Much of this emerging literature has a recurring theme of resilience (Kim & Hargrove, 2013). Resilience commonly refers to “patterns of positive adaptation during or following significant adversity or risk” (Masten, Cutuli, Herbers, & Reed, 2009, p. 118). This study is consistent with this shift, as it aimed to explore the behaviors, approaches, motivations, and the interplay of contextual factors contributing to the academic success among African American students from single-mother homes.

### **Statement of the Problem**

*“[W]hen it comes to black students, African American students trail not only almost every other developed nation abroad, but they badly trail their white classmates here at home—an achievement gap that is widening the income gap between black and white, between rich and poor.”*

- President Barack Obama, 2010

The above statement comes from President Barack Obama’s speech during the National Urban League Centennial Conference (The White House, 2010), where he and Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan, detailed the Administration’s plans for new education reform. President Obama’s speech highlighted key issues that needed to be addressed if the United States is going to “out-educate” (para. 18) the rest of the world. He chided the United States’ current state of education, calling it "morally inexcusable" and "economically indefensible” (para. 21). His remarks, reminiscent of *A Nation at Risk*, drew immediate attention to the academic *underperformance* of Black students when compared to their White counterparts. More problematic, the President’s statements extended the achievement gap beyond the United States and placed it within an international context.

On July 26, 2012, two years after his speech at the Urban League, President Obama made similar statements in the White House Initiative on Educational Excellence for African Americans Executive Order (U.S. Department of Education, 2012). In it, the President stated:

African American student achievement not only lags behind that of their domestic peers by an average of two grade levels, but also behind students in almost every other developed nation. Over a third of African American students do not graduate from high school on time with a regular high school diploma, and only four percent of African American high school graduates interested in college are college-ready across a range of subjects. (para. 3)

Although the President's remarks emphasized the need for programs that will address academic disparities, his statements are emblematic of the deficit-focused orientation commonly found in literature. While understanding the causes and consequences of lower academic performance are important, focusing on underperformance ignores the experiences of African American students who are academically successful (William & Bryan, 2013). Overall, high school and college graduation for Black students have steadily improved (U.S. Department of Education, 2015, 2016) despite systemic inequities that create gaps in achievement. Studies highlighting the various contextual experiences that encourage and facilitate academic excellence are few. Thus, greater attention is needed regarding the factors and processes (Cicchetti & Curtis, 2007; Masten, 1994; Masten, Cutuli, Herbers, & Reed, 2009) that contribute to the academic success of African American students from single-mother homes. Understanding Black student success requires attending to the significance of these factors and their impact on academic performance. Exploring how African American students and their single mothers express and make meaning of academic success can encourage the development of culturally responsive approaches and interventions that help foster achievement in other students facing similar circumstances.

## **Purpose of the Study and Research Questions**

The purpose of this study was to explore academic success as perceived and experienced by African American high school students and their single mothers.

The following research questions guided this study:

1. How do African American students and their single mothers understand and explain the protective factors and underlying processes contributing to academic success?
2. What do African American students and their single mothers report as potential barriers (risk factors) to academic success?
3. How has family structure influenced the academic success of African American high school students from single-mother homes?
4. In what ways can existing and/or future social structures help support and facilitate academic success for African American students from single-mother households?

## **Conceptual Framework**

This research was concerned with understanding better the experiences of academically successful Black students from single mother homes. Using academic resilience as a conceptual guide offers a fundamental shift in the way research examines Black students by steering it away from what is “wrong” toward what is “right.” Academic resilience refers to an individual’s ability to succeed in school despite adverse conditions that create challenges for success (DeBaca, 2010). Resilience researchers agree that the success of a person is likely to result from the convergence and interaction of a number of different factors related to individual characteristics, the environmental contexts of one’s development, and the situational context in which the success occurred (Gordon & Song, 1994). Therefore, educational (or academic)

resilience is understood as more than individual traits. It results from the assemblage of ecological factors, to include family, school, and community dynamics.

The main assumption underlying this study is that Black students and Black single mothers interpret their experiences remarkably different than what is presented in prevailing social science research and mainstream discourse (Collins, 2009). The interactive oppressions that define their lives provide a distinctive context for exploring academic success. Given this assumption, the frameworks guiding this study emphasized the complex interactions of social, political, cultural, and historical contexts and the role of race, class, and gender as a means to gain insight into the varied experiences of academically successful Black students from single-mother homes.

The ability to recognize and increase positive outcomes among Black youth requires an understanding of the relationships between the environments they encounter, their perceptions and reactions to these environments, and their resulting developmental trajectories (Swanson, Spencer, Dell'Angelo, Harpalani, & Spencer, 2002). Ecological frameworks are useful because they go beyond viewing groups as “at-risk” and “disadvantaged” toward critically examining the student and the environmental interactions (Franklin, 2000). Spencer's (1995) Phenomenological Variant of Ecological Systems Theory (PVEST) emphasizes the associations between identity and context. It examines normative human development framed through the interaction of identity, culture, and experience (ICE) (Spencer, Fegley, Harpalani, & Seaton, 2004; Spencer et al., 2006). PVEST builds from Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems Theory by including a phenomenological approach, which examines *how* individuals make meaning of their experiences. For this study, PVEST explicates how African American students and their single mothers made sense of academic success despite the real and perceived

environmental challenges.

A critical social framework is also vital to understand better the dynamic structural forces impacting African American student achievement. Using a Black feminist framework places the experiences and ideas of African American single mothers and their children at the center of analysis. Black Feminist Thought (BFT) provides a lens for understanding how dominant perceptions of African American youth and mothers have informed a deficit orientation that has caused research to focus on the academic underperformance of these youth. By centering the lives, experiences, and identities of Black women, BFT contends that race, class, and gender intersect in a “matrix of domination” (Collins, 2009, p. 26). affecting the lives and experiences of Black women

The goals of a Black feminist approach are: 1) self-definition, or the power to name one’s reality and reject denigrating images of those within and without the Black community; and 2) self-determination, or aiming to have power in deciding one’s own destiny (Collins, 1998, Guy-Sheftall, 2000). By invoking *their* authority of experience, mothers and students not only reclaim their humanity, they also simultaneously empower themselves by giving new meaning to their particular experiences (Collins).

### **Overview of Methods**

Understanding the factors and processes that contribute to the successful academic outcomes of African American students raised in single-mother homes necessitates an exploration into the family’s unique circumstances and attention to the meaning they make of their own experiences. A qualitative approach is appropriate for the study because it focuses on: “1) how people interpret their experiences, 2) how they construct their worlds, and 3) what meaning they attribute to their experiences” (Merriam, 2009, p. 23).

Given the fit of a qualitative approach, this study used narrative inquiry to guide the exploration of academic success as perceived and experienced by African American high school students and their single mothers. Narrative inquiry is based on the idea that people understand and assign meaning to their lives through stories (Andrews, Squire, & Tambokou, 2008). It is a form of qualitative research that begins in experience as expressed in lived and told stories (Creswell, 2013). “[N]arratives carry traces of human lives that we want to understand” (Andrews et al., p. 2). This method of inquiry provides the means to challenge dominant assumptions that have misrepresented the experiences of African American students and mothers central to BFT and emphasizes the relational aspects between participants and their world, features fundamental to PVEST.

### **Sampling and Participants**

Since this study was interested in gathering information from a specific group, purposive sampling was employed. “The logic and power of purposeful sampling derive from the emphasis on in-depth understanding (Patton, 2002, p. 46). Participants came from five high schools located in a major metropolitan area in the southeastern United States. I posted flyers on my social media handles (Facebook and Instagram) and sent emails to high school principals, teachers, counselors, and friends. Individuals within my professional and/or social network referred all 14 participants (7 students, 7 mothers) to the study.

### **Data Collection**

Data were primarily collected using one-on-one interviews. Students and their mothers participated separately in initial semi-structured interviews-as-conversations, and subsequent follow-up interviews. All but two families (Family 3 and 7) participated in the follow-up. A semi-structured format was employed because it allowed me to be more responsive to what was

taking place at any given moment, and it also provided participants the freedom to define their world in their own unique way (Roulston, 2010).

Students and mothers were encouraged to provide documents and artifacts that would add to the richness of their story; yet, only three families provided them. These artifacts included certificates, medals, and pictures. These artifacts were used to encourage participants to share a more detailed account of their experiences, and helped facilitate my understanding of students' and mothers' perceptions of academic success.

### **Data Analysis**

Data analysis and data collection occurred simultaneously. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using a combination of methods adapted by Polkinghorne (1995), Auerbach and Silverstein (2003), and Clandinin and Connelly (2000). The analysis of data also involved poetic transcription (Faulkner, 2009; Glesne, 1997; Leavy, 2015; Poindexter, 1998) resulting in found poems, which will be described in greater detail in Chapter 3. Subsequently, connections that emerge from the data will be presented in Chapters 4 and 5, and will guide discussion of the study's findings in Chapter 6.

### **Significance of the Study**

Literature documenting the successful academic experiences of African American students is scarce. More specifically, the "celebration and recognition of [their] resilience is infrequent" (Spencer, 2005, p. 37). Most studies examining the academic experiences of Black students have compared them to their White counterparts and/or focused on those who do not succeed academically. This is due, in part, to a deficit orientation framing their abilities and experiences. Consequently, far less is known about the successful academic outcomes of African American students. This study is significant for its potential to fill this knowledge gap

by building on the small body of emerging literature that highlights African American student achievement. Even more meaningful is that this study includes the perspectives of both students and their single mothers.

The significance of this study, consequently, becomes evident because it serves as a representation of the complex factors shaping the lives Black students from single-mother homes from the perspectives of the students and their mothers. Centering and honoring the distinctive vantage points of both offers a deeper understanding of the multiplicity of factors influencing academic achievement. By exploring their experiences, this research aimed to encourage social workers, educators, educational institutions, and all who work with this student population to appreciate the taken-for-granted knowledge they possess of their own experiences, and to use this knowledge to support and encourage successful academic outcomes of students in similar circumstances.

### **Definition of Terms**

Definitions central to this study are presented in this section. These definitions serve to clarify how I will use these terms in this study.

*African American and Black:* will be used interchangeably to reflect the use of these terms by different people in the Black American community.

*At-risk:* the presence of one or more factors or influences that increase the probability of a negative outcome for a child or youth (Richman & Fraser, 2001).

*Educational resilience:* also referred to as “academic resilience;” the heightened likelihood of success in school and other life accomplishments despite environmental adversities brought about by early traits, conditions, and experiences (Wang, Haertel, & Wahlberg, 1995).

*Promotive factor*: often used synonymously with “asset:” attributes or influences that actively enhance well-being (Masten, Cutuli, Herbers, & Reed, 2009).

*Protective factor*: a measurable characteristic in a group of individuals or their situation that predicts positive outcomes in the context of risk or adversity. It is an attribute or influence that mitigates or eliminates risks (Masten, et al.).

*Resilience*: patterns of positive adaptation during or following significant adversity or risk (Masten, et al.).

*Risk factor*: a measurable characteristic of a group of individuals or their situations that predicts a negative outcome (Masten, et al.).

*Single-mother families*: traditionally understood as families headed by a female who is widowed or divorced and not remarried, or by a mother who has never married; living with one or more of her own, never-married children under age 18. This study recognized that a single-led, or mother-centered household, does not mean mother-only. That is, mothers are not assumed to be solely responsible for child-rearing. Additionally, single mother does not unequivocally equate to father absent.

## CHAPTER 2

### REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

*“Definitions belong to the definer, not the defined.”* – Toni Morrison

#### **Introduction**

Chapter 1 provided an overview and the rationale of the study’s purpose: to explore academic success as perceived and experienced by African American high school students and their single mothers. Specifically, this study aimed to understand the factors and underlying processes that contribute to the successful academic outcomes of African American students in single-mother homes. It is also focused on the ways in which students and their single mothers make sense and give meaning to their academic success, and the multiple contexts in which their academic experiences occur.

Chapter 2 presents the literature germane to the academic experiences of African American youth from single-mother households. According to Creswell (2014), a literature review provides a framework for establishing the importance of the study. Boote and Beile (2005) described a literature review as “the foundation and inspiration for substantial, useful research” (p. 3). For research to be useful and meaningful it must build on and learn from prior research and scholarship on the topic (Boote & Beile). A literature review situates the topic under study within the larger, ongoing discourse in the literature, filling in gaps and extending previous studies (Creswell). A substantive and thorough literature review allows the author to not only “summarize the existing literature but also to synthesize it in a way that permits a new perspective” (Boote & Biele, p. 4).

This literature review endeavors to illuminate a new perspective from which to understand the experiences of African American academic achievers and their mothers. The chapter is divided into three major sections. The first section deconstructs deficit ideology. It addresses the need to dismantle the deficit (e.g., risk-focused) gaze that has framed the academic experiences of African American students from single-mother homes and re-conceptualize them in a way that recognizes and values their abilities and strengths. It also explores how the use of promise promoting, or strength-based, approaches that build on the assets and capabilities of youth, their families, and communities are critical in supporting and encouraging academic success. The second section provides a discussion of resilience concepts, and reviews the literature related to academic resilience, while the third section introduces Black Feminist Thought (BFT) and Phenomenological Variant of Ecological Systems Theory (PVEST), the theoretical frameworks for this study.

### **The Deficit Gaze**

The focus of this section is to deconstruct the etiology of deficit ideology<sup>3</sup> by examining it within the ongoing discourse of underachievement. It begins with a brief discussion of the characteristics, consequences, and problems of deficit thinking. Next, a call to action is proposed that encourages social workers, counselors, and others invested in student achievement to reframe the experiences of African American students from single-mother homes. Professionals are encouraged to critically deconstruct their own social locations and biases, institute a practice of empowerment, and create a school culture that internalizes the construct of students as “at promise.”

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<sup>3</sup> In reference to deficit perspectives, scholars typically use related terms. For example, Gorski (2010) and Sleeter (2004) used the term “deficit ideology;” Swadener (1995) used “deficit model;” and Valencia (1997, 2010) referred to the term “deficit thinking.” I have chosen to use the terms interchangeably.

## **What is Deficit Ideology?**

Despite the persistence and academic successes of Black students at every level of schooling, they continue to be caricatured by a host of dismal educational statistics (McGee & Pearman, 2014). In 2012, 68% of Black students graduated from high school on time, compared to 85% of White students. In 2013, 57% of Black students entered college immediately following high school, in comparison to 67% of White students (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). African American students are also over three and one-half times more likely to be suspended or expelled than their White peers, and are disproportionately underrepresented in gifted and talented programs (Civil Rights Data Collection [CRDC], 2012). The continuous trend of African American youth experiencing significantly lower academic outcomes when compared to their European American counterparts has prompted a large body of research focused on identifying and understanding the factors driving this disparity. The focus on disparities has, in both research and public interest, resulted in a preoccupation on negative academic outcomes. As Hill (2011) explained, “the prominent mainstream discourse on the education of African Americans is framed in terms of underachievement” (p. 10).

Theories advanced by scholars, educators, and policymakers to explicate underachievement among students of color have often been framed within deficit models (Valencia, 2010). Valencia described deficit thinking as a “person-centered explanation of school failure among individuals as linked to group membership (typically the combination of racial minority status and economic disadvantage)” (p. 18). Blaming the victim, emblematic of the deficit model, assumes internal deficits (e.g., low intellectual abilities, lack of motivation to learn, and immoral behavior) are the causes of academic failure (Swadener, 2000; Swadener & Lubeck, 1995; Valencia). Deficit thinking silences, ignores, and distorts individuals, families,

and communities of color and places them at fault for disproportionate levels of poor academic performance (Dudley-Marling, 2007; Dudley-Marling & Lucas, 2009; Garcia & Guerra, 2004; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; Yosso, 2005). This perspective not only undermines student abilities, but as Dudley-Marling described, “This deficit gaze renders students’ background knowledge and experiences irrelevant, or worse, *risk factors*” (p. 8, emphasis in original).

Equally important, deficit thinking fails to critically examine the sociopolitical context framing student achievement (Gorski, 2010; Perry, Steele, & Hilliard 2003; Valencia, 2010). Instead of addressing systemic inequities, such as racism and economic injustice, that grant some people greater social, political, and economic access than others, including access to high-quality schooling (Dudley-Marling, 2007; Gorski, 2005, 2010; Swadener & Lubeck, 1995; Valencia), “deficit ideology justifies existing social conditions by directing the problem of inequality as *located within*, rather than as *pressing upon*, disenfranchised communities” (Gorski, 2010, p. 3, emphasis in original). Essentially, deficit ideology deflects attention away from the underlying systemic and societal conditions for underachievement and drives it toward blaming Black parents, Black children, and the Black community (Gorski; Perry et al., 2003; Yosso, 2005).

Deficit ideology is founded on racial and class bias that make children from marginalized backgrounds look deficient when viewed from the perspective of dominant expectations. Numerous scholars (c.f. Baron, 1969; Carter & Goodwin, 1994; Delgado, 1995; Knowles & Prewitt, 1969; Ladson-Billings, 1999; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Menchaca, 1997; Solórzano, 1997; Yosso, 2005) have documented that roots of deficit thinking are inextricably linked to pathological beliefs regarding racial “difference.” As Carter and Goodwin explained:

Racial boundaries, erected over hundreds of years, have become deeply embedded in the social and psychological makeup of all Americans. Race, as defined by skin color,

physical features, and/or language, is the primary criterion used to classify individuals into one of the five racial groupings.... Once so classified, ideas and assumptions about one's place in society begin to be externally applied and internally ingrained. These classifications have become social and psychological boundaries that influence where one lives, the quality and content of one's schooling, one's earning ability, and one's access to social and health institutions and services. (p. 293)

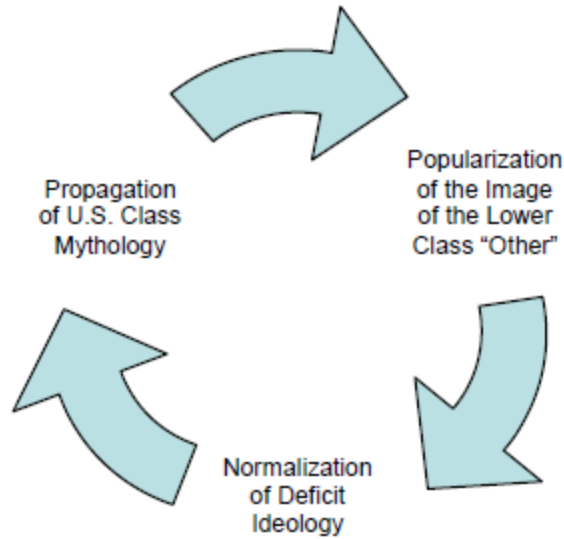
The “social and psychological barriers” Carter and Goodwin (1994) described are reflected in educational research and policies that view Black children from the perspectives of three paradigms: “inferiority, cultural deprivation, and cultural difference” (p. 294). The belief underscoring these paradigms is that children who are not White and middle class are “defective and lacking” (Ladson-Billings, 1999, p. 261). From this standpoint, questions of how to provide African American students with high-quality education are often framed in discussions of “fixing” them through remediation, compensatory education, and at-risk programming (Banks, 1993; Brown, 2001; Gorski, 2010; Hill, 2011; Perry et al., 2003).

Valencia (2010) argued deficit thinking is a pseudoscience “in which researchers approach their work with deeply embedded negative biases toward people of color, pursue such work in methodologically flawed ways, and communicate their findings in proselytizing manners (pp. 17-18). Within the past 20 years, a critical discourse has emerged within the education milieu challenging the deficit perspective (c.f. Ford & Grantham, 2003; Ford, Harris, Tyson, Frazier, & Trotman, 2002; Gorski, 2008, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2007; Swadener & Lubeck, 1995). Despite criticisms, however, deficit thinking is entrenched in U.S. society and continues to draw on stereotypes that are well-established in the mainstream psyche (Gorski, 2010), such as: *Black parents are apathetic. Black students are lazy. Black students don't care about their*

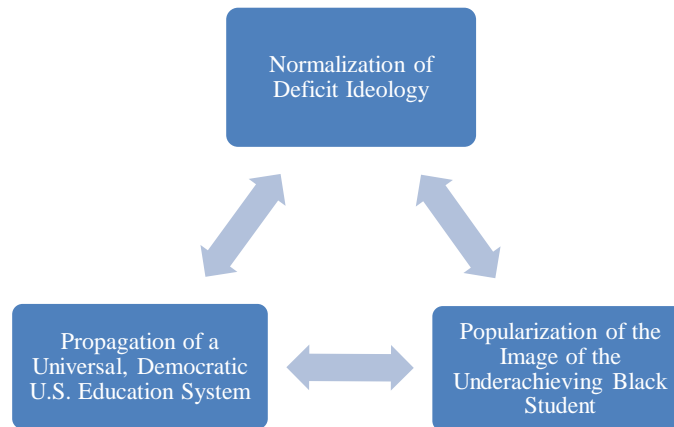
*education*. The core of these assumptions suggests “the pursuit of intellectual activities and academic excellence are not incorporated into African American culture” (Cokley, 2003, p. 526). Notwithstanding contemporary, popular notions that “all children can learn” and the insistence that “all children are gifted and possess strengths,” deficit ideology, born out of complex socialization processes (Gorski), is still widespread, perpetuating and reinforcing low academic expectations for Black students (Sleeter, 2004; Valencia).

Understanding the permanence and normalization of deficit ideology is a critical element to best address the needs of African American students, overall. Gorski’s (2010) “cycle of social conditioning for compliance with deficit ideology” (p. 11; see Figure 1) illustrates how socialization processes prepare individuals to comply, reinforce, and perpetuate deficit ideology. Influenced by the scholarship of Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995), Delgado and Stefancic (2001), Solórzano and Yosso (2002), and other critical race scholars, I offer Figure 2 as a revision of Gorski’s image to better suit the specific context of this study: African American students from single-mother homes. I changed the arrows to reflect an interdependent, bi-directional relationship to illustrate how each dimension informs and provides support for the other.

According to Gorski (2010), the base layer of socialization for compliance with deficit ideology is propagation of a myth, a popular belief or false notion that frames the U.S. as a meritocratic land of opportunity, (e.g., “*Everyone* can succeed if they work hard”) while simultaneously justifying inequality (Johnson, 2006). This myth, as it relates to African American students and underachievement, can be observed in the achievement gap discourse, which will be detailed



**Figure 1.** Cycle of social conditioning for compliance with deficit ideology (Original; Gorski, 2010).



**Figure 2.** Cycle of social conditioning for compliance with deficit ideology related to Black student achievement (Revised; adapted from Gorski, 2010).

later in this chapter. Meritocracy assumes success or failure is principally determined by work ethic, values, and intelligence and that the presence of a universal education provides equal opportunity for all students (Zamudio, Russell, Rios, & Bridgeman, 2011). Essentially, the belief is that the gaps between Black and White students, within an educational system that treats all students as equals, must be the result of intrinsic “cultural problems” (e.g., family structure,

poverty, lack of motivation). Therefore, “closing the gap,” or improving academic outcomes, means students, parents, and the community must change to conform to this equitable and effective system (Garcia & Guerra, 2004; Yosso, 2005).

However, the realities of systemic factors such as school racial segregation (Condrón et al., 2013), inequalities in school funding (Ladson-Billings, 2006, 2007), and the racial wealth gap (Johnson, 2006; Oliver & Shapiro, 2006) have little influence in a dominant consciousness shaped to believe the promise of meritocracy, where anyone can achieve (school) success if they just work hard enough. While this paradox is obvious in the experiences of many individuals, it typically goes unquestioned (Johnson). So, as Gorski (2010) explained, in order to invest in the myth of meritocracy and the promise of the “American Dream,” one must “ignore, or be wholly miseducated about sociopolitical context” (p. 13). Essentially, that is the groundwork laid by the lore of a universal, democratic U.S. educational system.

Occurring simultaneously with the propagation of a meritocratic education system is the popularization of the underachieving Black student. Lacking socio-political considerations, students who are disenfranchised by systemic conditions become hyper-visible as disparaged objects and invisible as credible subjects (Phillips & Griffin, 2015). Implicated in the deficit discourse is the stereotyped “absent” Black father, and the “matriarchal,” single Black mother. The “dysfunctional” Black family, vilified by Daniel Moynihan in the 1960s, is blamed for impediments to Black student success. Popularizing the underachieving Black student and the “dysfunctional,” “non-intact” Black family again ignores the obvious systemic conditions impacting Black students and their families and serves to preserve the interests of the dominant group.

The normalization of deficit ideology refers to the social processes that make ideas, concepts, and actions that are essentially transmitting deficits seem “normal.” Normalization, as advanced by the work of French Philosopher, Michel Foucault, is one way that power is deployed (Asimakou, 2009). According to Foucault (1977), the “power of the norm” (p. 184) which appears in all disciplines including education, “compares, differentiates, hierarchizes, homogenizes, excludes. In short, it normalizes” (p. 183). The success of the “power of the norm” lies in the ability of its techniques to be subtle and implicit, not blatant (Asimakou). Gorski (2010) underscored the normalization of deficit ideology by pointing out its implicitness in what has become common language in education: “at-risk,” “remedial,” “disadvantaged,” “underprivileged,” and, as Hill (2011) added, “diverse.”

Valencia (2010) contributed to the idea of normalization, noting the adaptability of deficit thinking and describing it as “protean in nature, taking different forms to conform to what is politically acceptable at the moment, and while the popularity of different revisions may change, it never ceases to be important in determining school policy and practice” (p. 7). The chameleon-like adaptability of deficit thinking is also highlighted by Dudley-Martin (2007) who warned of its current resurgence—a resurgence that is especially visible in the “at-risk” discourse and in the growing sense of urgency to “close the achievement gap.”

Now trained and complicit in deficit thinking, individuals, as well as policies, programs, and practices involved in redressing educational problems, direct their energies toward the disenfranchised, not the systems disenfranchising them (Gorski, 2010). Recognizing the varying forms of deficit ideology is critical because, despite how innovative and interesting these concepts appear, they still locate causes of academic underperformance as problems within students and their families. As Gorski noted, one way to defeat deficit ideology is by one’s

ability to spot it. The following section further examines the achievement gap and Black single-mother families as a means to highlight the need to critically analyze the dominant ideas, beliefs, and concepts that function as normative practices of deficit ideology.

**The achievement gap.** “The achievement gap” is one of the most commonly used phrases in education literature (Ladson-Billings, 2006). According to the National Center for Education Statistics the achievement gap occurs when one group of students outperforms another group and the difference in average scores for the two groups is statistically significant (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). It typically describes the disparity between the academic performance of White students and the academic performance of Black and Hispanic students (Education Week, 2011). The gap is evidenced by measures such as standardized test scores, college entrance exams, graduation rates, college entrance rates, and college completion rates (Hill, 2011).

Gaps in achievement between Black and White students have existed since schools were established in the U.S. (Blackford & Khojasteh, 2013). Despite reform efforts intended to address inequitable education such as desegregation (Brown v. Board of Education 1954), The Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA), and No Child Left Behind (NCLB), gaps in achievement persist (Blackford & Khojasteh, 2013, Boykins & Noguera, 2011; Harris, 2012a). To fully explore the achievement gap and its effects on African American student achievement, Hill (2011) offered a “working” definition of the achievement gap. Hill’s examination of the achievement gap defined it as both a phenomenon and a social construct. As an actual phenomenon, its existence is based on available statistics and educational performance; however, as a social construct, the gap is more complex. Hill explained:

The achievement gap as a social construct can be defined as the societal belief that the quantifiable differences in educational, social, and economic scores and outcomes of the different races and classes are based on ‘true’/‘real,’ authentic differences in the intellectual ability, academic potential, social viability, and moral proclivity of different groups. It essentially posits that these differences [all to the benefit of the White middle class who are seen as the norm] are a matter of fact that governs the relationships among the outcomes of diverse groups. (p. 13)

As a social construct, the achievement gap boasts the image of Black students lagging behind their White counterparts, emphasizing cultural deficiencies and personal responsibility and leaving no reason to consider the effects of poverty and discrimination (Dudley-Marling, 2007).

Ladson-Billings (2007) observed that one of the problems with framing educational problems as an “achievement gap” is that it suggests some groups of students are doing well and schools must find a way to get the groups that are not doing well to catch up. Thereby, the burden of “catching up” typically involves getting students and their families to muster every effort they can to achieve school success (e.g., parent-teacher conferences, developing good study habits) (Valencia, 1997, 2010). Placing the burden of the gap on students and their families draws attention away from other “gaps” plaguing poor students of color, namely the pattern of inequitable school funding, as well as gaps in wealth and health. Insight offered by Noguera (2012) suggested similar ideas: “[W]hen disparities in academic achievement are studied closely, it becomes clear that in many ways the achievement gap is first and foremost an educational manifestation of social inequality” (para. 10).

While disparities in grades and educational attainment are disturbing, the gap in standardized test scores is most concerning for policy makers (Harris, 2011). Standardized tests such as IQ scores and the SAT/ACT have long been used as scientific measures of intellectual ability and academic achievement (Hill, 2011). However, Collins (1988) among others argued that standardized testing is another biased tool designed to privilege Whites and legitimize African American deficiency (Boykins & Noguera, 2011; Ladson-Billings, 1999; Toldson, 2010; Transnational Racial Justice Initiative [TRJI], 2000). Although research has proven that assessment measures ranging from kindergarten screening tests to college entrance exams are poor indicators of student learning, these scores are often used to make decisions that subsequently affect future opportunities (Guskey, 2007; Nasim, Roberts, Harrell, & Young, 2005; Taylor, 2005).

In fact, many scholars point out that in most schools, race and class are strong predictors of academic achievement (Blackford & Khojasteh, 2013, Boykin & Noguera, 2011; Dudley-Marling, 2007; Oates, 2003, 2009). For example, a sizeable body of research has found associations between teacher expectations and student academic outcomes (Alvidrez & Weinstein, 1999; Brophy & Good, 1970; Dusek & Joseph, 1983; Garcia & Guerra, 2004; Harris, 2012b; Oates, 2009). In an important meta-analysis examining teacher expectations, Dusek and Joseph concluded that five student characteristics were closely related to teacher expectancies: attractiveness, student classroom conduct, cumulative folder information, race, and social class. The authors acknowledged that race and social class “likely reflect stereotypic (perhaps prejudicial) expectancies for social behaviors” (p. 341).

More recently, Arnold and Cross (2003) asked a group of Head Start teachers to rank-order their students based on their interest in math. Consistent with the stereotyped image of

Asian kids as math-oriented, the teachers rated Asian American kids as more interested in math than White, African American or Latino kids. However, objective observers found nothing to confirm the teachers' ranking; their records along with students' self-reports revealed there were no actual differences in how students liked math. Tenenbaum's and Ruck's (2007) meta-analytic review of studies found a small but statistically significant effect of race where teachers had higher expectations for White students compared to African American and Latino students. Using National Educational Longitudinal Study (NELS) of 1988 research, Oates (2009) examined the feasibility of five prominent explanations for the Black–White performance gap (“academic engagement,” “cultural capital,” “social capital,” “school quality” and “biased treatment”). The results of structural equation model testing found that school quality and race-based biased treatment (related to teachers' perceptions) were the primary explanations for Black–White high school test performance. In a study examining how varying teacher expectations impact the implementation of academic standards, Harris (2012b) found that although teachers reported using academic standards to guide instruction, their application varied based on teacher perceptions about students. Teachers' low expectations were informed by implicit racialized and class-based deficit beliefs where the responsibility for change was placed on students rather than on teacher practices.

Teachers' beliefs about a student's academic ability are also informed by their perceptions of the student's family. For example, research has shown how teachers differentially explain children's classroom behavior or academic performance based upon whether they live in a single-parent or two-parent family. An early study conducted by Santrock and Tracey (1978) revealed that a child from a father-absent home is likely to be perceived more negatively by his teachers than a similar child from an intact family. For African American parents, and single-

mothers specifically, research consistently demonstrates how educators have approached Black parents from a deficit perspective (Abdul-Adil & Farmer, 2006; Field-Smith, 2005; Ford, 2011; Hill & Craft, 2003). Educators often hold stereotypical attitudes towards Black parents. They question their involvement, label them as apathetic, and blame them for their child's academic failure (Abdul-Adil & Farmer; Thompson, 2003a, b). Doing so ignores the role of the school in both perpetuating harmful stereotypes and negatively impacting Black student achievement (Ford).

To further understand how expectations based on societal stereotypes can shape individuals' perceptions of themselves and their academic achievement, studies have used Robert Merton's (1948) theoretical perspective, "self-fulfilling prophecy" (Brophy, 1983; Weinstein, Gregory, & Strambler, 2004) and Claude Steele's and Joshua Aronson's (1995) "stereotype threat." Merton defined self-fulfilling prophecy as "a *false* definition of the situation evoking a new behavior, which makes the originally false conception come *true*" (p. 195, emphasis in original). False definitions, Weinstein and colleagues suggested, create "expectancy effects" (p. 512) which consequently produce educational inequalities. The inaccurate expectations and inappropriate educational treatments experienced by Black students are detected and internalized by these students (Weinstein et al.), thereby producing poor academic outcomes. The negative impact of teacher bias is not only felt by students (Brantlinger, 1990; Dee, 2005; Mckown & Einstein, 2008), but also by their parents (Brantlinger, 1995; Cooper, 2003, 2007).

Stereotype threat refers to a situational dilemma in which people are or believe themselves to be at risk of conforming to negative stereotypes about their social group (Steele & Aronson, 1995). The fear of being reduced to that stereotype has been shown to negatively impact academic performance, particularly among African Americans—a group that has long

had limits placed on their educational access due to segregating structural and social practices (Steele, 1997). However, unlike Merton's self-fulfilling prophecy, stereotype threat does not derive from internal doubts about one's ability (e.g., internalization of the stereotype) but from their identification with the domain in which these negative stereotypes apply. For instance, according to Steele and Aronson, whenever African American students are tasked with performing in an explicitly scholastic or intellectual domain, they face the threat of confirming or being judged by a negative societal stereotype about their group's intellectual ability and competence. Once this threat is prompted, it can undermine one's intellectual performance (Steele, 1997; Steele & Aronson, 1995).

### **Black Single-mother Households**

Children's living arrangements in the United States are becoming increasingly diverse. Specifically, a growing proportion of children are being raised in single-parent homes. In 2014, 69% of children ages 0–17 lived with two parents (64% with two married parents and four percent with two unmarried cohabiting parents), 24% lived with only their mothers, and four percent lived with only their fathers (Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics, 2015). The growing shift from the traditional structure of the married, two-parent family has led to a considerable body of research examining the effects of growing up in a single-parent, namely single-mother, home (Amato, 2005; Brown, Manning, & Stykes, 2015; Mandara & Murray, 2006; McLanahan, 1999; McLanahan, & Sandefur, 1994; McLanahan, Tach, & Schneider, 2013). Much of this research finds that children who grow up in non-traditional families fare worse in multiple domains of child wellbeing, including education, mental health, family relationships, and labor market outcomes, when compared to those growing up with both biological parents (McLanahan et al.). Though the change in family structure has become

commonplace in all families, the implications of these changes for African American children are more serious.

As stated earlier in this chapter, the propagation of the underachieving Black student is also assumed to be a consequence of growing up in a single-mother home. African American youth are disproportionately represented in single-parent households, the majority of which are maintained by mothers. According to Annie E. Casey Foundation's KIDS COUNT Data Book (2015), the number of African American children living in single-parent households is twice the national average. Studies of African American families in general, and single mothers in particular, have historically been undertaken using deficit models (Allen, 1978; Dickerson, 1995b; Mandara, Johnston, Murray, & Varner, 2008; McAdoo & Young, 2009). Early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, family configuration in Black families was the focus of much social science debate. Noted African American sociologist E. Franklin Frazier's (1939/1957) classic study, *The Negro Family in the United States*, viewed the female-headed household as both a symptom and source of family disorganization. He claimed that the majority of Black households were female-centered due to out-of-wedlock births, which resulted in family disorganization and the transmission of disorganized family norms from one generation to the next (Battle & Coates, 2004; Battle & Scott, 2000). Frazier (1957) argued:

The widespread disorganization of family life among Negroes has affected practically every phase of their community life and adjustment to the larger white world. Because of the absence of stability in family life, there is a lack of traditions. Life among a large portion of the urban Negro population is casual, precarious, and fragmentary. It lacks continuity and its roots do not go deeper than the contingencies of daily living. This affects the socialization of the Negro child. With a fourth to a third of Negro families in

cities without a male head, many Negro children suffer the initial handicap of not having the discipline and authority of the father in the home. Negro mothers who have the responsibility for the support of the family are forced to neglect their children who pick up all forms of socially disapproved behavior in the disorganized areas in which these families are concentrated. (pp. 636-637)

According to Davis (1981), though Frazier's work detailed the horrendous impact of slavery on Black people, he underestimated their ability to persevere despite conditions that denied their humanity. Moreover, Davis argued, Frazier misinterpreted and distorted the spirit of independence and self-reliance Black women developed as a result.

Daniel Patrick Moynihan's (1965) report, perhaps the best-known document associated with deficit perspectives of Black family life, reinforced Frazier's earlier work. Moynihan's report linked the "pathology" of Black communities to the "deterioration" of Black family life, specifically female-headed households. According to Battle and Coates (2004):

[T]he Moynihan report led to three assumptions that influenced research on families for decades: (a) two-parent families, headed by men, are "better" than one-parent families; (b) single Black women are unskilled parents and this notably affects boys; and (c) Black female-headed families are a deviant cultural norm and, therefore, transmit deviancy to children that negatively influences aspirations and social roles. (p. 392)

Numerous scholars, particularly African American feminist scholars, have pointed out that blaming problems such as academic underperformance on mother-centered households ignores the larger socio-political-cultural context in which single mothering and learning takes place (Battle & Scott, 2000; Collins, 2009; Dickerson, 1995b). All African American mothers encounter the common theme of having their family experiences shaped by intersecting

oppressions of race, gender, and class (Collins). Despite their omission of race, gender, and class oppression in the creation and perpetuation of female-headed households and associated problems (e.g., poverty and unemployment), Frasier's and Moynihan's analysis has had a profound impact on subsequent empirical research of African American families.

Allen (1978) identified three theoretical perspectives that characterize the literature on African American families: cultural equivalent, cultural deviant, and cultural variant. The cultural equivalent approach views African American families as normal provided they adhere to society's traditional image of family life as established by the dominant culture, that is, a nuclear family composed of a mother-father-child with traditional gender roles (Allen; Dickerson, 1995b). With the cultural deviant perspective, researchers recognize the distinctive qualities of Black family life, yet they tend to view these qualities as abnormal and maladjusted (Allen; Dickerson). The degree to which Black families deviate from the cultural norms and structures of two-parent middle class White families, the more pathological they are considered to be (Allen; Mandara et al., 2008). The cultural variant approach also views African American families as a distinctive cultural form. However, unlike the "cultural deviant" perspective, these differences are not taken as a reflection of pathology. Allen concluded that researchers examining Black families should become more sensitive to inherent "objective/subjective" (p. 127) biases in contemporary theorizing about Black families.

The ways in which Black single-mother families are researched has tremendous implications on understanding the academic experiences of their children. It is an injustice to use cultural deviant and cultural equivalent perspectives to assess African American mother-centered households because they fail to acknowledge important cultural factors and variations in life experiences (Allen, 1978; Barajes, 2012). Ignoring the diversity and important cultural elements

of this family structure creates false perceptions that lead to inaccurate questions and explanations related to student achievement. Therefore, an analysis of the academic experiences of students raised in Black single-mother families cannot be performed without grounding them within larger cultural and historical contexts (Collins, 1994; Dickerson, 1995b; Sudarkasa, 2007).

**Contesting cultural deficit approaches of Black single-mother families.** Generally, studies of single-mother families tend to be guided by deficit models. This is due in large part to paradigms that stress the necessity of role responsibility in families (c.f. Parsons, 1951; Parsons & Bale, 1955). Families without the full scope of role relationships (e.g., men working and women taking care of the family) are regarded as incomplete, thereby upsetting the stability and equilibrium of the family and its members. Though research shows all single-mother families are susceptible to a variety of social and contextual risks, there are important limitations in research focused on this family structure (Hill, Murry, & Anderson, 2005; McLoyd, Hill, & Dodge, 2005; Stacks, Taylor, & Conger, 2014). These limitations include the scarcity of studies that have examined the strengths and resilience of single-mother homes (for exceptions see Cain & Combs-Orme, 2005; Greef & Ellis, 2009; Murry et al., 2001; Taylor & Conger, 2014; Taylor et al., 2010) as well as the tendency to compare single-mother families to two-parent families and not examine within-group differences, including single-mother households of different racial and ethnic backgrounds (Garcia Coll et al., 1996; McLoyd, Hill, & Dodge, 2005). Stressing the need for more culturally congruent examinations of Black families, McAdoo and Younge (2009) pointed out the tendency for empirical investigations of African American families to use White, middle class families as the standard for comparison. The underpinnings of this approach assume that Black and White families are afforded equal opportunities and equivalent life spaces

(Jenkins, 1989). Using White families as a “standard” is methodologically misleading and precipitates biased results (Jenkins, 1989; McAdoo & Younge, 2009). Billingsley (1992) also cautioned, “[I]f we concentrate on the similarities and differences Black families have in comparison with White families, we risk missing the more important distinctions among Black families themselves” (p. 64). Similarly, in an analysis of co-parenting relationships among Black families, Gonzalez, Jones, and Parent (2014) noted that “comparing African American single-mother families with European American and two-parent families provides relatively little information about the range of variability in the African American single-mother family context” (p. 34). The tendency to portray African American single mothers and their families as abnormal deviations serves to maintain the persistent image of the “normal,” White American family as ideal.

Significantly, Black mothers and White mothers transact their family lives in substantially different ways in varying multilevel contexts (Hill et al., 2005). Black families confront a number of societal pressures, ranging from social to economic (McLoyd & Younge, 2005), and these pressures can be even greater among single-mother-headed households. Therefore, as Sudarkasa (2007a) described, examinations of Black family patterns cannot be explicated without reference to socioeconomic contexts. Moreover, Sudarkasa argued, in addition to understanding how Black families possess strategies for coping with societal forces, they must also be understood as containing historical traditions that set them apart as alternative formations that are not identical to or pathological variants of White, middle class families. Sudarkasa (2007b) offered six points for researchers to consider when studying African American single-mother households. These points, included below, will help provide a clearer conception and more complete analysis of the Black family’s circumstances and development.

1. A key to understanding contemporary African American family structures, whether headed by women, men, or couples is an understanding of the structure of African extended families out of which these African American families evolved. It is particularly important to note that as these African American extended families evolved in America, they embraced households headed by single parents (mainly women, as well as households headed by couples).
2. Female-headed households are not all the same. They differ in terms of the dynamics of their formation and their functioning.
3. Marital stability and family stability are not one and the same. Many female-headed households have been and can be stable over time.
4. There are demographic and socioeconomic reasons why many female-headed households are now and have always been a predictable and accepted form of household organization in African American communities.
5. It is particularly important to point out that women are primary providers and heads of households in some families where both parents are present, not just in situations where women are the sole parent in the home.
6. It is necessary to refute the notion that female-headed households are the main cause of the poverty, crime, and hopelessness found among some blacks in many inner cities. (p. 173)

Sudarkasa's (2007a, b) more recent work builds on her earlier work that criticized the methodological, theoretical, and analytical flaws found in many contemporary works on Black family life. Beginning in the late 1960s, Sudarkasa and other scholars began contesting cultural deficiency approaches for their harmful and inaccurate depictions of Black family life. This shift

toward cultural variant approaches was partly in response to the Moynihan Report (Allen, 1978; Baca Zinn, 2010; Dickerson, 1995b). In *Disfigured Images: The Historical Assault on Afro-American Women* Patricia Morton (1991) described the shift in this way:

[T]he 1970's saw a veritable revolution in interpretation of the modern Afro-American family...[with] an emphasis on familial health. In contrast to the old equation of black deviance from white middle-class norms as pathologized and dysfunctional, the new black family studies increasingly emphasized Afro-American diversity—including familial and sexual departures from white norms—as a positive thing. (pp. 125-126)

Cultural variant scholarship, termed revisionist scholarship, rejected the common practice of pathologizing Black families as deviant, matriarchal, and broken (Stacks, 1974). The scholarship of Billingsley (1968, 1992), Gutman (1976), Stacks (1974), Staples and Johnson (1993) and many others helped to put into context, reevaluate, and revise distorted conceptions of cultural deviant and cultural equivalent approaches of Black family life (Dickerson, 1995b). Paula Giddings' foreword to Andrew Billingsley's (1992) book, *Climbing Jacob's Ladder*, recalled her excitement when discovering this “new” intellectual development. She remembered “feeling my mind expand in the late 1960s and 1970s” (p. 11) when reading “the new generation of black sociologists” (p. 11) studying the Black family. “Where a previous generation of scholars saw deviation and weakness, the new scholars saw resourcefulness and resilience” (p. 11). Furthermore, she observed, “If black families were in difficulty, it was not some inherent, cultural condition which was at ‘the heart of the deterioration’ but socioeconomic factors pressing in from the outside” (p. 11).

Revisionist scholarship explicitly challenged dominant portrayals of Black single-mother families. One of its aims was to debunk the myth of the Black matriarchy. The term

“matriarch,” hooks (1981) clarified, suggests the existence of a social order in which women exercise social and political power, a state that does not resemble the conditions of Black women. hooks further noted that while some Black women have been willing to accept the matriarch label because it seemed they were finally being acknowledged for their contributions to the family, on the contrary, the matriarch label “impress[ed] upon the consciousness of all Americans that black women were masculinized, castrating, ball-busters” (pp. 80-81).

The importance of Black women in Black family networks should not be confused with female dominance (Collins, 1989, 2009; Dickerson, 1995a; hooks, 1981). A more accurate term to describe single-mother households is “matrifocal,” or woman centered (Dickerson, 1995a; Gutman, 1976). According to Collins (2009), the matriarchy thesis assumes that someone must “rule” to ensure family stability. A matrifocal orientation, in contrast, moves beyond traditional husband and wife or mother and father family organizations and takes into account the extended nature of the Black family. Sudarkasa (1971) observed how Black families cut across household divisions, and in many instances, single households are only part of larger family structures. In much of her work Sudarkasa (1971, 1981, 2007) suggested that Black families are often centered around consanguineal (related by blood) relationships, which include aunts, uncles, and grandparents. Extended members, Sudarkasa (1971) argued, have as much legitimacy and respectability as family units that are nuclear.

Understanding the role of extended family has significant implications for studying the academic success of African American students from single-mother homes. A wider inclusion of family members means that a larger number of people have a role in the health and well-being of children (Jones, Zalot, Foster, Sterrett, & Chester, 2007). In their review of literature on African American single-mother families and the role of extended family, Jones and colleagues argued

that broadening the definition of family to include extended family members, as well as “fictive kin” (non-relatives considered a part of the extended family matrix), creates opportunities to consider other predictors of youth outcomes and, perhaps, a more accurate depiction of African American youth development.

Revisionist scholarship emboldened centered standpoints, including those developed primarily for women of color. As mentioned earlier, Black mothers cannot be analyzed in isolation from their social, cultural, historical, and political context (Collins, 1994; Dickerson, 1995b, McAdoo & Younge, 2009). Dickerson, Parham-Payne, and Everette (2012) argued that Black mothers must be examined in a holistic manner that takes into account sociohistorical, cultural, and economic factors. Sociocultural contexts (to include social, political, and economic features) have strong implications for family functioning and how families raise their children (Hill et al., 2005). Therefore, exploring academic success as perceived and experienced by African American high school students and their single mothers also requires an analysis of sociohistorical contexts that address the impact of race, class and gender. As Collins (1994) stated:

Motherhood occurs in specific historical situations framed by interlocking structures of race, class, and gender, where the sons and daughters of white mothers have “every opportunity and protection,” and the “colored” daughters and sons of racial ethnic mothers “know not their fate.” Racial domination and economic exploitation profoundly shape the mothering context, not only for racial ethnic women in the United states, but all women. (p. 45)

To illustrate, Collins’ (1994) notion of “motherwork” (p. 48) aligns with the idea that race, class and gender are interlocking aspects of Black women’s identity, meaning-making, and

mothering (Cooper, 2007). Collins offered motherwork as a way to theorize and acquire a deeper understanding of Black women's motherhood. Motherwork loosens theoretical boundaries that create rigid dichotomies between family and work, private and public, and individual and the collective. For women of color, work and motherhood are intertwining acts that support family and community. Essentially, motherwork is what Black mothers do all day, whether for their own children, someone else's, or the work done to preserve the community and earth. It is rooted in family, culture, and community.

For women of color, motherwork challenges dominant assumptions of mothering and family, and offers another way to understand mothering (Collins, 1994). It allows Black mothers and other mothers of color to center their stories and experiences of mothering—stories that reflect the tensions that emerged during their own identity formation and upbringing, and also the ways in which they continue to negotiate their experiences and histories in the U.S. (Tellez, 2011). According to Collins, motherwork is anchored in three core themes characterizing the experiences of mothers of color: survival, power, and identity. Black mothers' struggle to acquire these things is linked to their experiences with oppression and a desire to ensure their children's right to exist and prosper in a racist society (Cooper, 2007). Andrea O'Reilly's (2004) book, *Toni Morrison and Motherhood: A Politics of the Heart*, described the ways in which Morrison's body of work illustrates motherwork. O'Reilly noted that Morrison defined motherwork "as a political enterprise that assumes as its central aim the empowerment of children" (p. 1). She further described Morrison's motherwork as "concerned with how mothers, raising black children in a racist and sexist world, can best protect their children, instruct them in how to protect themselves, challenge racism, and, for daughters, the sexism that seeks to harm

them” (p. 1). Mothering for many African American mothers, therefore, is both personal and political work (Cooper, 2007).

Overall, revisionist or cultural variant scholarship maintained that it was the strength and resiliency of Black motherhood that enabled Blacks to resist and thrive despite institutional racism and exploitation (O’Reilly, 2004). This body of work countered cultural deficit theories that have shaped U.S. public policy and educational practice (Cooper, 2007). Therefore, given the societal disadvantages that many Black children and their families face, regardless of family structure, it is possible that an African American child from a father-mother family has no greater advantage over one from a mother-centered home (Heiss, 1996).

Approaching Black student achievement from constructs of deficit (e.g., at-risk, vulnerable, disadvantaged) perpetuates false definitions of students’ academic abilities. Deficit thinking fails to examine the root causes of underachievement, instead opting to locate the problem of disproportionate levels of poor academic performance within students, families, and communities. This approach, albeit intentional or not, ignores the success of African American students and their families, and negates their strengths, abilities, agency, resources, and support systems, while simultaneously upholding distorted, racialized notions of students and families of color. It is imperative for social workers, educators, and others invested in the academic success of minoritized<sup>4</sup> students to not only adopt a strength-based approach that focuses on the capabilities of African American students and their families, but to also assume a critical posture that challenges the larger, socio-political contexts creating oppressed conditions.

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<sup>4</sup> Minoritized” unlike “minority” emphasizes the social construction of underrepresentation and subordination in U.S. social institutions. The minoritized are rendered minorities in particular situations and institutional environments that sustain an overrepresentation of Whiteness (Harper, 2012; Mukherjee, Mukherjee, & Goddard, 2006).

Fundamental to social work is recognizing and addressing the environmental forces that create and contribute to the problems associated with human functioning (National Association of Social Workers [NASW] 2008). Therefore, social workers are ethically obligated to challenge the structures that impede the growth and development of the least advantaged (Horton, 2004; Joseph, Slovak, & Broussard, 2010; Williams, 2014). As Jansson (2008) argued, social workers are “morally deficient” (p. 41) if all they do is address the immediate needs of students and do not engage in policy-sensitive and policy-related practices.

### **Defeating Deficit Ideology**

While the overuse of the deficit framework has resulted in less research on how some Black students, particularly those from single-mother homes, manage to avoid the pitfalls and hardships that beset other Black students from this family type, it is important to address how some individuals have attempted to defeat the pathologization of Black students (Valencia, 2010). Gorski (2010) outlined several ways to defeat deficit ideology, including: learning to “spot” it; critically reflecting upon one’s own race and class socialization; and refusing to locate any problem in the “cultures” of disenfranchised communities. These ideas are reminiscent of Paulo Friere’s (1970, 1993) conscientizagao (critical consciousness), or the process of learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality” (1993, p. 33). This process also includes identifying and taking action against the oppressive elements in one's own life. Critical consciousness, Sakamoto and Pitner (2005) contended, challenges social workers to be aware of power differentials and how these differentials can make social work practice an oppressive experience.

Kivel’s (2009) constructive critique of (the lack of) democracy in the U.S. offers a similar idea, suggesting practitioners ask themselves four questions to strengthen their work: Who is not

included? Who is not respected? Whose voice is not heard? Whose vote does not count? Kivel's questions underscore the need for counter-narratives to challenge transparent and concealed notions of African American intellectual inferiority (Perry et al., 2003). Counter-narratives not only disrupt the reality constructed by the dominant group, they also have a community building function. They assist in building a shared voice and a common culture of collective understanding (Delgado, 1995; Solórzano, 2002). Counter-narratives, akin to Collins' (2000, 2009) Black Feminist standpoint, offer new angles of vision on which African American students are, in fact, high achieving, have a high achieving self-concept, and possess the capacity to excel in school despite social and systemic factors that compromise their achievement, health, and overall wellbeing.

Other scholars propose that countering deficit ideology requires a new paradigm of African American achievement. The influential works of Swadener (1990, 2000), Swadener and Niles (1991), and Swadener and Lubeck (1995) deconstructed the discourse of risk or at-risk, wrought with its implicit racism, sexism, ableism, and classism, and suggested that social workers, educators, policy makers and all those vested in education utilize the construct of "at-promise." These researchers insisted that reconstructing students who have been marginalized due to systemic conditions as "at-promise" is not merely a semantic substitution. Rather, the construct of promise conveys the potential all children possess. Swadener (2000) offered:

[W]e would encourage everyone working with children and families to look for and build upon the promise in all children and to concentrate valuable energies and resources on building on these strengths while addressing the many structural and environmental factors that have been argued to place many children "at risk." (p. 10)

The "at-promise" approach to African American student achievement is echoed by

several scholars. Boykin's (2000) "talent development model" asserted that all children are capable of succeeding in demanding and high-expectation academic settings. To accomplish this, however, the traditional classifying, sorting, and weeding out perspective of schooling must be redirected toward maximizing every child's potential for academic development. "For African American children and adolescents to develop into individuals actively engaged in optimal personal and collective development, they must be placed 'at promise' as opposed to 'at risk'" (American Psychological Association Task Force on Resilience and Strength in Black Children and Adolescents [APA Task Force], 2008, p. 24).

Ford and Grantham (2003) suggested professionals adopt "dynamic" thinking. Dynamic thinking is a perspective that appreciates and attends to the various cultural dynamics of students and their families. It, too, requires a critical self-examination that explores dominant attitudes and perceptions concerning cultural diversity, and an examination of how these attitudes influence one's understanding of minoritized student achievement and opportunities. When individuals, including social workers and educators, are culturally responsive "they are student-centered; they eliminate barriers to learning and achievement and, thereby, open doors for culturally different students to reach their potential" (Ford, 2010, p. 50). Essentially, recognizing the potential and promise of Black students requires that they not be regarded as "other people's children" (Delpit, 1995, 2012).

Recognizing the ability and potential of Blacks students also requires the acknowledgement and appreciation of the Black family, regardless of its family structure or composition. As Sudarkasa (2012) insisted, we must contest ideas that purport Black single mothers are impediments to their child(ren)'s academic success. The issue is not who "leads" or "rules" the family, but rather the functionality of those present in the student's life. Those

devoted to the achievement of Black students should affirm the families' efforts (Bryan & Henry, 2008). True investment in the academic success of Black students requires becoming familiar with and honoring aspects of their culture. This knowledge allows better access about their potential. According to Delpit (2012), "True culture supports its people; it doesn't destroy them" (p. 7). Overall, this study did not frame "underachievement" as a function of culture, but rather a symptom of larger, socio-political, oppressed conditions.

A growing body of literature focused on the success stories of African American students is helping to interrupt the hegemony of deficit. This body of work captures the experiences of academically successful African American students' ability to perform well in school despite real and perceived circumstances deemed to challenge their academic performance. Much of this emerging literature has shifted toward efforts to promote resilience. Resilience, Gayle (2005) stated, encourages research "to supplement the innumerable stories of school failure with stories of success...resilience allows us to more completely frame the manner in which students engage schooling" (p. 251).

### **Resilience**

The literature is brimming with accounts of African American student failure. The tendency to focus on failure keeps research and public perceptions of Black students from single-mother homes trapped within a culturally deviant framework that often labels them "unteachable" or "lacking academic potential." A failure focus not only creates damaging stereotypes that influence how others see this student population, it also affects the way these students see themselves. Exploring resilience fundamentally shifts the ways in which African American students are researched and understood. By investigating what makes these students academically successful, instead of what causes them to fail, social workers and educators are

better able to identify the strategies that facilitate the success of all African American children and youth as they journey through school and beyond (Ungar, 2005).

The study of resilience emerged from the study of psychopathology, where researchers initially focused on the deficits and risk associated with child development. Over time this focus shifted as researchers noticed that some children were doing surprisingly well despite risks and adversity (Cicchetti & Garmezy, 1993; Masten, 1994; Supkoff, Puig, & Sroufe, 2012; Werner, 1995). As Masten (2001) observed, “the recognition and study of resilient children overturned many negative assumptions and deficit-focused models about the development of children growing up under the threat of disadvantage and adversity” (p. 227). Consequently, models focused on efficacy, competence, and protective factors began receiving greater attention in theory, research, and intervention with children (Masten et al., 1995; Masten, Best, & Garmezy, 1990). Although there is no widely accepted definition of resilience, it generally refers to successful adaptation despite risk and adversity. Luthar, Cicchetti, and Becker (2000) highlighted two critical conditions inherent in resilience: 1) the presence of real or perceived risk; and 2) attributes or influences that reduce those risks, often termed protective factors. Masten and Obradovic (2008) described resilience as “quintessentially inferential” (p. 14). When one identifies a child as resilient, two major judgments have been made: 1) that a child is “doing o.k.,” and 2) there is now or has been adversity or risk to overcome.

Garmezy (1971, 1991) is credited for conceptualizing modern research in resilience. Through his work studying people with schizophrenia and their offspring, Garmezy (1971) discovered that not all children became dysfunctional (Werner, 2012). Based on his research, Garmezy (1991) categorized three levels of protective factors that appeared to be associated with children who were able to adapt under stressful circumstances: *individual level factors* which

include elements such as temperament, intelligence, and sociability; *familial factors* involve the degree of support parents can give to their child, despite poverty status or marital discord; and social environment which includes external supports, such as institutional structure or a role model outside the family that can provide support to the child and family (Condly, 2006; Garnezy, 1991; Olsson et al., 2003; Windle, 2011; Zolkoski & Bullock, 2012).

Werner's (1989, 1995, 2005) summation of findings from her Kauai longitudinal study offered clusters of protective factors similar to those identified by Garnezy (1991). Werner's and Smith's (1982, 1992) 32-year longitudinal study of 698 children born in 1955 from Kauai, Hawaii is perhaps the most influential study in resilience research. These researchers designated one-third of children in the study ( $n = 201$ ) as high risk due because of their exposure to poverty, biological risks, family instability, and reared by parents with serious mental health problems. However, of those high-risk children, one out of three ( $n = 72$ ) developed into competent and confident adults. An in-depth analysis comparing these children with those who developed serious problems revealed three clusters of protective factors that supported resilience: dispositional attributes of the individual; affectionate ties with the family; and external support systems in the environment (Waxman, Gray & Padron, 2004).

Overall, the contributions of Garnezy (1991), Werner and Smith (1982, 1992) and other early resilience investigators, such as Rutter (1979, 1985), Masten (2001, 2007) and Luthar (1991), provide compelling evidence that attributes both individual characteristics and environmental factors to the resilience process (Waxman et al., 2004). While this complex interaction is acknowledged throughout literature, also important is the "recognition that there is huge heterogeneity in people's responses to all manner of environmental adversities" (Rutter, 2012, p. 335). This explication not only sheds light on the specifics of different responses, but

also highlights the multiple ecologies, or broader range of casual processes, that characterize the lives of youth (Rutter 2006, 2012). This revelation was especially important to this study because it aided in exploring the individual experiences of academically successful African American youth and their single mothers in relation to their group status in the United States.

### **Resilience as a Process**

Research often illustrates the complexities associated with establishing an operational definition of resilience (Luthar et al., 2000; Windle, 2011). Notwithstanding varying definitions, this study was directed toward definitions that clarify resilience as a process (Werner, 2012). Masten, Best, and Garmezy (1990) referred to resilience as “the process of, capacity for, or outcome of successful adaptation despite challenging or threatening circumstances” (p. 426). Likewise, Luthar, Cicchetti, and Becker described it as “a dynamic process encompassing positive adaptation within the context of significant adversity” (p. 543). Understanding resilience as a process places greater emphasis on the role of relationships beyond the individual and family and integrates the role of biological, social, and cultural processes on child development (Luthar et al.; Wright & Masten, 2005).

Early studies of resilience were descriptive, examining important (protective) factors believed to be associated with resilience. They focused on identifying characteristics of child, family, and/or environmental dynamics that resulted in positive outcomes (Masten, 2007; Wright & Masten, 2005). Yet, what was often lost when studies focused primarily on identifying factors was an understanding of, and appreciation for, the processes leading to resilience in development (Morales, 2010; Wright & Masten). In other words, identifying factors alone does not capture how or why these factors result in positive outcomes.

Subsequent studies, or what Wright and Masten (2005) referred to as the second wave of resilience studies, began to focus more on understanding the interactions that shape positive outcomes, emphasizing resilience as a complex process. Davey, Eaker, and Walters (2003) described this change stating, “[I]t is important to note that the emphasis in resiliency research has shifted from identifying characteristics of children who are resilient to identifying processes that promote resiliency” (p. 347). The second wave of resilience research moved beyond viewing resilience as a personal attribute which, as Luthar and colleagues (2000) cautioned, “can inadvertently pave the way for perceptions that some individuals simply do not ‘have what it takes’ to overcome adversity” (p. 546).

The third wave of resilience studies is characterized by efforts to promote resilience through prevention, intervention, and policy (Masten & Obradovic 2006; Masten & Wright, 2005). It emerged as children facing significant adversity could not wait for the lengthy process of science to elucidate resilience (Masten, 2007; Masten & Wright). Experiments soon began testing resilience ideas directly through prevention and intervention. Subsequently, “resilience frameworks” for practice and policy were being shaped and described in literature (Luthar et al., 2000; Masten, 2001). Without interventions, youth growing up with higher odds for failure have a greater likelihood of encountering problems as they navigate their developmental paths (Luthar et al.). Fundamentally, interventions need to focus on developing assets and resources for adolescents exposed to risk, rather focusing on risk amelioration (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005; Luthar et al.).

Few studies have explored the processes contributing to academic success among African American children and adolescents from single-mother homes. This study endeavored to contribute to the growing body of empirically-based research studies examining the processes

underlying resilience and guiding the design of appropriate interventions for African American students from mother-centered households (Luther et al., 2000). Understanding resilience as a process offers a closer examination of the behaviors, motivations, and intentions influencing the academic success of Black students from single-mother homes. Equipped with empirically-based, culturally-relevant strategies, the intervention efforts of social workers, parents, and educators can be significantly enhanced. As a result, children and youth will have better access to learning and greater protection from socially stressful situations at all levels of their environment (Brooks, 2006).

### **Academic Resilience Defined**

It is well-established in the literature that resilience is multi-dimensional in nature as well as context and content dependent (Fraser, 2004; Luthar et al., 2000; Masten, 1994; Ungar, 2008). Resilience is understood as encompassing diverse and complex phenomena (Masten, 1994). The complex, multidimensional nature of resilience demonstrates why investigators must specify the particular spheres or domains in which the resilience phenomena are being explored (Luthar et al.). Success in one domain does not imply positive adaptation across all important areas. Children may exhibit resilience in some domains but have problems in other areas (Luther et al.). Educational or academic resilience represents one specific domain of resilience where students demonstrate success in school despite environmental circumstances that create barriers for achievement (Debaca, 2010; Gayles, 2005; Wang, Haertel, & Walberg, 1994). One of the most widely used definitions of educational resilience is “the highlighted likelihood of success in school and in other life accomplishments, despite environmental adversities, brought about by early traits, conditions, and experiences” (Wang et al., p. 46).

According to Wang, Haertel, and Walberg (1997) educational resilience is not the product of a single precipitating event, but continuous interactions between individuals and their environment. For many African American students, educational resilience is not only associated with achieving within school systems that have numerous social and economic challenges, but negotiating the challenges associated with exposure to community violence, poverty, and racism (Cunningham & Swanson, 2010). Therefore, fostering educational resilience requires developing interventions that not only enhance children's learning, but also protect or buffer against environmental adversities.

### **Mechanisms of Resilience: Risk and Protective Factors**

Educational resilience is established through dynamic interactions between two fundamental properties: risk and protective factors (Rutter, 1985). Conceptually, factors associated with each area predict either an undesirable (risk) or positive (protective) outcome. The propensity of research to focus on risks associated with African American academic outcomes has resulted in an uneven understanding of academic functioning. A more balanced understanding of the academic experiences of Black students from single-mother homes necessitates an exploration into the factors influencing academic success. This study was primarily concerned with exploring the protective factors and processes that contribute to why some students succeed in school despite adversity.

**Risk factors.** Resilience is not just the presence of “good” outcomes. Children who achieve good outcomes can be called “competent, well adjusted, or simply ‘normal’” (Masten, Cutuli, Herbers, & Reed, 2009, p. 120); it is the presence of risk that distinguishes a resilient child from one who is just well-adjusted. Without risk, there is no resilience (Ungar, 2005).

Fraser (2004) defined risk factors “as any influence that increases the probability of onset, digression to a more serious state, or maintenance of a problem condition” (p. 14). Essentially, a risk factor is some characteristic that predicts a negative outcome (Masten et al., 2009). Notably, however, the presence of one or more risk factors does not guarantee that children will have academic and/or behavioral problems, but rather they increase the probability that such problems will arise (Masten, 1994; Vance & Sanchez, 1998). A wide range of risk factors and challenges have been the focus of study (Masten & Obradovic, 2006). In some cases, risk has been defined solely by sociodemographic factors (e.g., educational level of parents, racial and ethnic status, single-parent households), whereas in others cumulative life events (counts of negative experiences over time) and specific experiences (e.g., divorce, bereavement), have been combined (Fraser, Richman, & Galinsky, 1999; Garmezy, 1991; Masten, 2011; Masten & Obradovic; Ungar, 2012; Wright & Masten, 2005).

Olsson, Bond, Burns, Vella-Brodrick, and Sawyer (2003) asserted that it is “simplistic” (p. 4) to believe a single factor, such as being reared in a single-mother household, is the primary cause of compromised social or academic abilities. Thinking of resilience as a process, these authors maintained, necessitates consideration of a range of risk factors acting in synergy at varying degrees of impact, and at varying points in development. African American youth from single-mother homes do face significant obstacles. However, it would be a mistake to conclude that their challenges or negative outcomes are the direct consequence of the number of parents in the home. Rather, it is the presence of additional risk factors that co-occur with single-parenthood, such as economic hardships, that negatively impact child well-being.

In a study examining student achievement among single- versus two-parent families, Pong, Dronkers, and Hampden-Thompson (2003) noted the negative outcomes often associated

with single parenthood are not necessarily a consequence of an absent parent. After investigating gaps in math and science achievement among third- and fourth-graders who live with a single parent versus those who live with two parents in 11 countries, they found single parenthood to be less detrimental when family policies, such as parental leave or child/family allowances, equalize resources between single- and two-parent families. Countries with more generous welfare policies (e.g., Austria, with large family allowances) show smaller or no achievement gap by family structure.

In the United States family structure and poverty are inextricably linked (Belgrave & Allison, 2010; Eggebean & Lichter, 1991; Eshelman, 2003; Wilkinson, 1999). Children raised in families headed by single-mothers are among the highest living in poverty, and for African American children the rate is even higher (DeNavas-Walt, Proctor, & Smith, 2013; National Women's Law Center [NWLC] 2012). Unfortunately for many students, living in poverty is associated with an array of conditions (e.g., exposure to violence, crime, negative role models, and stress) that can limit their academic achievement (APA Task Force, 2008; Crosnoe et al., 2012; McLoyd, 1998). Moreover, youth who live in poverty tend to live in more disorganized and segregated neighborhoods that cut them off from the social and information networks that help facilitate positive academic outcomes (Condrón et al., 2013; Crosnoe et al.; Massey & Denton, 1988). They are also more likely to attend schools with fewer resources, high teacher turn-over, and inadequate school facilities (Condrón et al.; Crosnoe et al.).

Research also highlights the negative effects of poverty on parents' mental health which, in turn, impacts their engagement in parental behaviors (e.g., effective discipline and control strategies) that promote positive well-being (Crosnoe et al., 2012; Dodge, McLoyd, & Lansford, 2005; McLoyd, 1998). Economic disadvantage is often associated with less positive and more

negative parenting behaviors (e.g., dominating, hostile, harsher discipline). Negative parenting behaviors, such as corporal punishment, are linked to increased psychosocial adjustment problems for youth of all ages (c.f. Jones et al., 2007; Murry et al., 2001).

While individual, family, and community level factors have a profound impact on African American child development, a comprehensive exploration into their lived experiences also requires consideration of the larger sociocultural contexts in which these children of color develop (Garcia Coll et al., 1996). That is, as Garcia Coll and colleagues emphasized, studies should also investigate how “racism, prejudice, discrimination, and other sources of oppression operate and influence developmental outcomes” (p. 1895). African American children and youth have risks due to the existence of pervasive racism that informs racial profiling, low expectations, institutional barriers (APA Task Force, 2008), and their stereotyped misrepresented images in the media (Dixon, 2008; Sanders & Ramasubramanian, 2012). Given the risks associated with systemically oppressive conditions, African American children have an increased number of risk factors that can negatively affect their academic outcomes. While it is beyond the scope of this review to provide rigorous detail of the social, structural, and economic forces negatively impacting Black student achievement, this study acknowledged the continued systemic oppression facing all African American youth and their families (even those well-resourced) that places them at some degree of risk for lower academic achievement (APA Task Force).

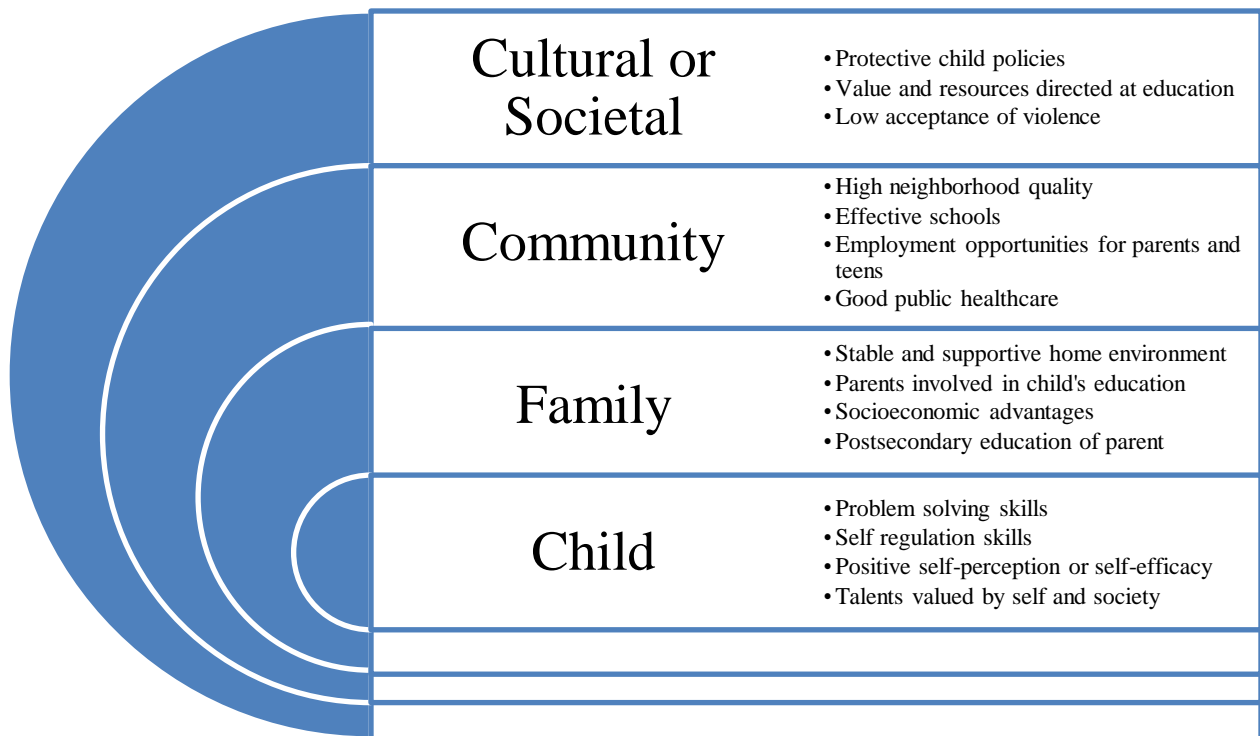
**Protective factors.** Since African American adolescents from single-mother homes are overrepresented in the risk literature, it is particularly important to understand the protective processes that may be at work for this population. A focus on resilience shifts attention away from deficits or disorders towards an understanding of the processes that enhance wellbeing

(Ungar, 2012; Windle, 2011). Resilience does not necessarily imply an invulnerability to stress, but rather an ability to recover from negative events (Garmezy, 1991; Luthar, 1991; Masten, Best, & Garmezy, 1990; Olsson et al., 2003). The ability to recover or demonstrate successful coping is accomplished through the application of protective factors (Luthar, 2001; Masten et al., 2009; Rutter, 1993). Protective factors are characteristics or processes that have the potential to predict better outcomes for everyone, but appear to be more important under circumstances of higher risk or adversity (Masten et al., 2009).

Although protective factors often moderate the effects of environmental factors, they do not necessarily yield resilience (Masten et al., 1993). Vulnerability factors, defined as individual attributes that make a person more susceptible to a particular threat in development, also moderate resilience (Luthar, 1991; Masten, 1994; Wright & Masten, 2009). In other words, it is possible that protective processes, such as efforts from a parent or mentor to foster adaptation, may not be sufficient if the vulnerability of the individual or severity of the adversity is too great to overcome (Masten et al.). In this regard, individuals should not be considered resilient in an absolute or unchanging sense (Supkoff, Puig, & Sroufe, 2012); resilience is a process that operates throughout the lifespan (Rutter, 2012). According to Rutter (1993):

Protection does not reside in the psychological chemistry of the moment but rather in the ways in which people deal with life changes and in what they do about their stressful or disadvantaging circumstances...particular attention needs to be paid to the mechanisms underlying developmental processes that enhance people's ability to cope effectively with *future* stress and adversity and those that enable people to overcome the sequelae of past psychosocial hazards. (p. 634, emphasis in original)

Generally, protective factors are identified across three levels of functioning:



**Figure 3.** Example of the layers of the assets and protective factors that facilitate resilience (from Wright & Masten, 2005; adapted from Table 2.2, p. 24)

(1) individual (e.g., psychological); (2) social (e.g., family cohesion, parental support); and (3) community/society (e.g., support systems generated through social institutions) (Garmezy, 1991; Werner, 1995; Windle, 2011). The first wave of resilience research generated a common set of broad correlates attributed to better adaptation among children placed at risk for diverse reasons (Wright & Masten, 2005). Figure 3 presents an example of the multiple layers at which protective factors might occur (Wright & Masten, 2005). Masten (2001) referred to these correlates as “the short list” (p. 234) and argued that they reflect the fundamental adaptive systems supporting human development (Masten; Wright & Masten).

Equally important, protective factors must be viewed in the context of youths’ individual culture and developmental stages (Alvord & Grados, 2005). Ungar (2005, 2008, 2012) argued that research has not adequately understood people's own culturally determined indicators of

resilience. Although some of the protective factors and processes that have been identified foster resilience in individual functioning, little is known about how these processes are culturally influenced (Wright & Masten). Resilience researchers have focused on outcomes that are largely Western-based with an emphasis on individual and relational factors typical of mainstream (White, middle-class, heterosexual, able-bodied) populations (Ungar, 2005, 2008, 2012). As a result, there has been little systematic investigation of culturally-based protective processes (Wright & Masten).

The academic resilience of African American youth at every level of schooling has been the focus of several studies (Brown & Tylka, 2011; Carter, 2012; Cornell, Spencer, & Aber, 1994; Floyd, 1996; Ford & Harris, 1992; Gayles, 2005; Glaser & Ross, 1970; Griffin & Allen, 2006; Hirsch & Costello, 1970; O’Conner, 1997; Somers et al., 2011; Williams & Portman, 2014; Williams & Bryan, 2013). By exploring the effects of race/ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, as well as the influence of particular contexts and circumstances, these studies have demonstrated the need to better understand the variation of experiences related to academic resilience. In a report detailing resilience and strength among Black children and adolescents, the APA Task Force on Resilience and Strength in Black Children and Adolescents (2008) noted that resilience studies of Black youth should take into account the “cultural integrity” (p. 1) as well as the unique experiences of these youth. Though African American youth face countless challenges related to their minoritized group status that can compromise their academic outcomes, the review of empirical work in this section highlights the range of strength and protective components found within the individual and family that facilitate the academic success of African American youth.

## **Individual Contributions to Academic Success**

Research has noted the fundamental importance of individual assets in achieving academic success (Benard, 1995; Werner, 1984). The literature suggests that students who have a high sense of self (e.g., self-concept, self-motivation, internal locus of control) are successful in both academic and social areas. The “self,” defined as a general sense of worth and well-being, includes appraisals of efficacy in school and the perceived quality of relationships with others (Connell, Spencer, & Lawrence, 1994). Early studies examining self-concepts of African American students and achievement include a study conducted by Hirsch and Costello (1970) which compared African American inner-city children who were achievers and underachievers. Though participants in the study came from two-parent households, their study found that achievers manifested strong interpersonal relationships, clear self-concepts, and positive self-evaluations. High achieving students were also more organized and independent in their behaviors. In a similar study, Glaser and Ross (1970) examined the personality traits of economically disadvantaged achievers and non-achievers belonging to minoritized cultures (Black or Mexican-American). They found that a strong sense of identity or having a strong sense of self was a characteristic of successful individuals. According to these researchers, self-concept involves the process of seeing oneself not locked into one fixed negative or limited identity. Achievers in the Glaser and Roth study were also optimistic about “getting ahead” and able to form a new sense of self based on their success. These studies are important to understanding academic resilience because both attempted to isolate factors that contributed to the success of individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds.

A consistent theme in Ford’s (1992, 1993, 1994) and Grantham’s and Ford’s (1998, 2003) research examining the experiences of African American gifted students is their insistence

on helping Black youth develop healthy, positive self-concepts. In Ford's (1992) examination of factors related to underachievement as perceived by 148 Black fifth- and sixth-grade students, Ford found that the greatest determinant to these students' academic achievement pertained to the psychological factors associated with the self. Similarly, Ford's (1994) overview of resilient individuals noted that resilient Black youth, in particular, have a positive sense of self, internal locus of control, and feelings of empowerment.

Students who possess a positive sense of self are more likely to believe in their ability to control themselves and influence the world around them (Ford, 1993, 1994; Gordon, 1995). Internal locus of control, or one's belief that a particular outcome is dependent upon one's own behavior or permanent characteristics (Rotter, 1966), is also captured in Gordon's (1995) study of academically resilient Black high school students. Gordon found that resilient African American students scored higher in measures of cognitive control (the belief that they controlled their own cognitive goals), and exhibited personality traits such sensitivity, sociability, inner control, and cooperativeness. Floyd (1996) also highlighted the benefits of certain personality traits on academic success. In a qualitative study examining factors contributing to the academic success of 20 African American high school students (10 females, 10 males), Floyd found that perseverance and optimism were critical resources in students' academic success. These traits were demonstrated in students possessing a strong belief in the power of hard work to overcome obstacles and expressing the conviction that their academic efforts would pay off. In a more recent study, Cunningham and Swanson (2010) explored academic resilience with 206 African American students and found that among the constructs examined (perceived school support, academic self-esteem, and mother's work history) their most striking finding was the positive relationship between academic self-esteem and academic resilience. Their findings seemed to

suggest that self-esteem, instead of being a mere contributor to academic success, is the core component of academic success. They concluded that a focus on increasing students' academic self-esteem may be vital to facilitate educational resilience.

Research has also extended the discussion of self-concept and achievement by targeting the role of racial identity in the achievement of African American students (Brown & Tylka, 2008; Carter, 2012; Cokley & Chapman, 2008; Grantham & Ford, 2003; Graves, 2014; Spencer, 2008). There is extant literature examining the influence of Black racial identity awareness on the academic performance of Black youth. Earlier research suggested that Black students' race and racial identity were associated with failure (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Ogbu, 1985). Recent scholarship contradicts these findings by demonstrating the ways in which racial identities inform Black students' constructions of achievement (Graves, 2014).

Racial identity is defined as “a schema or mental representation of the racial aspect of the self, including perceived attributes and the feelings associated with them (e.g., I am Black, Black people do X, I like X)” (Murray & Mandara, 2002, p. 74). Using interview data collected from 28 African American students, Sanders (1997) found that students with a high awareness of racism and racial discrimination responded in ways that were conducive rather than detrimental to academic success. Of the 10 students that fell into the “high-awareness” category, six were high achievers. Rather than reducing their academic motivation and efforts, this awareness seemed to increase them. Findings also revealed some participants saw their academic success as a way to prove to a racist society that stereotypes labeling Black students as “lazy” are false. Cokley and Chapman (2008) also noted that students with more positive racial and ethnic identities had higher academic self-concepts which were predictive of higher grades. Smalls, White, Chavous, and Sellers (2007) explored associations of racial identity beliefs (how Blacks

should act, think, and behave) and racial discrimination experiences with academic engagement among 390 African American middle and high school students. Their study revealed that youth with higher reported grade averages more strongly endorsed racial pride and nationalism (beliefs emphasizing African Americans' unique social status in America) ideology beliefs ( $r = .14$ ,  $p < .01$  and  $r = .14$ ,  $p < .01$ , respectively). Conversely, students who had stronger assimilation beliefs (emphasizing a mainstream American identity versus an African American one) reported lower grade performance. Overall, their findings support embracing racial/ethnic minority group identity may enhance school engagement.

Other studies have focused on how students' conceptions of race inform their constructions of achievement. In a year-long qualitative study, Carter (2008) examined the adaptive behaviors used by nine high-achieving Black students to navigate the process of schooling at an upper-class, predominantly White, suburban public high school. Carter argued that students employed a critical racial achievement ideology (CRAI) to navigate their schooling experiences. CRAI "assumes that a student believes in achievement as a characteristic of his or her racial group and values both achievement and racial group affiliation as a part of his or her self-definition" (p. 493). According to Carter, a critical understanding of the role of race in one's academic experiences facilitates a psychological resistance to racism as a potential barrier to success. Components of CRAI, exhibited by the high-achieving students in the study, included "students view achievement as a human, raceless character trait...[they] possess a critical consciousness about racism and the challenges it presents to their present and future opportunities...[and] develop adaptive strategies for overcoming racism in the school" (p. 493).

Studies have also highlighted academic achievement as a form of resistance (Brayboy, 2005; Carter, 2009, 2012; Ward, 1999). Ward contended that resilience and resistance are

mutually reinforcing processes of strength. Resistance is a process whereby African Americans respond to race-related pressures and stressors such as racism and discrimination (Ward). For African American students from single-mother homes, this includes strategies to defy stereotypes related to their academic ability. Therefore, resistance fosters resilience. The resilient student is “able to negotiate hard times by resisting effectively and that successful negotiation facilitates further resilience” (Ward, p. 181).

Gayles’ (2005) study examined resistant themes related to academic resilience among three African American males. Using ethnographically informed interviews conducted during their senior year, two themes emerged: distanced and diminished achievement (reducing the power of good grades as the primary marker of identity), and utilitarian achievement (academic achievement was good for future prospects and transformative). By actively diminishing the significance of their own academic achievement, students felt academic achievement did not “prove” anything about them. It was not the primary indicator of how hard they worked. Yet, they were clear about the utilitarian value of achievement. In other words, they believed in the power of their school achievement to transform their future lives. According to Gayles, the themes identified in the study represented aspects of a larger counter-narrative in that academic success was an act of opposition to commonly held expectations for African American men.

Griffin and Allen (2006) illustrated themes related to resistance as resilience. The authors conducted a multi-site case study comparing the experiences of nine Black high achievers attending a well-resourced suburban high school (Twin Oaks), and eight academically successful Black students attending a low-resourced urban school (Bennett). Many of the barriers faced by Black high achievers at Twin Oaks, in particular, were related to a hostile campus environment that assumed these students were less intelligent because they were African

American. High-achieving Black students were often encouraged to apply to community colleges instead of a four-year college or university. Despite these recommendations students demonstrated resilience and resisted this advice. Six students were planning to apply to private four-year colleges and five intended to apply to public four-year colleges.

Similar to her 2008 study, Carter (2012) explored adaptive behaviors among Black students in a predominantly White school. This time, however, Carter detailed the specific resistant strategies students employed to maintain both cultural integrity and emotional and psychological stability. According to Carter those strategies assisted students in resisting racism, and aided students in maintaining high academic achievement and a strong racial/ethnic self-concept. Response types included:

attempts to understand and mentally prepare for the racial microaggression by construing it in a positive way while still accepting the reality of the situation...[and] refrain[ing] from [a] vocal response as a means of protecting his or her emotional and mental state in the context, understanding that silence is the best way to handle future experiences with the racial microaggression. (p. 15)

### **Family Contributions to Academic Success**

Research has frequently documented the significance of relationships with family as a factor impacting the academic achievement of African American students. The Coleman report (1966) titled, *Equality of Educational Opportunity*, considered the most important education study of the 20th century, provided strong evidence on the importance of the home environment in determining children's school achievement. The examination of family dynamics is particularly important to this study since the majority of African American students are raised in single-mother homes.

Given the barrage of negative stereotypes impacting African American single-mother families, it is critical that researchers understand the particular ways families, single-mother families in particular, promote and support the academic success of their youth. According to Ford (2010), families are critical variables in the translation of talent, ability, and promise into achievement for students. Families provide the context for the transmission of values through behaviors and modeling which includes the significance of hard work, success, effort, independence, and self-sufficiency. Families also play an important role in choosing and providing opportunities, talent development, and by reinforcing performance and achievement standards for students (Ford).

One of the reasons educational attainment is so important to Black families is because it is associated with employment and income, which impacts access to other resources such as housing and healthcare (Belgrave & Allison, 2010). Education for African Americans serves as an important mechanism to strengthen the individual, family, and community (Hill, 2011). Jenkins (1989) maintained that Black families, like other families, value education. However, unlike other families, Black families are unique due to their distinct status imposed by structural conditions of the U.S. social stratification system. Notwithstanding structural conditions, Jenkins added that a major strength of the Black family has been its “unparalleled resilience” (p. 140)—the ability to design a family structure that has contributed to the accomplishments and survival of its members despite the social system that surrounds it.

Given the racial minoritized status of Black families, studies have examined various strategies these families have employed to support Black students’ achievement. One such strategy explored in research is racial socialization. Racial socialization refers to the implicit and explicit set of behaviors, communications, and interactions between parents and children used to

transmit information regarding their racial membership (Brown, 2008; Hughes, 2003; Murray & Mandara, 2002). Research indicates that racial socialization is a vital step in preparing African American children to cope with the anticipated obstacles associated with their race (Berkel et al.; Brown, 2008; DeGruy, Kjellstrand, Briggs, & Brennan, 2012; Stevenson & Arrington, 2009). Thus, racial socialization can be seen as Black parents' efforts to foster resilience. Resilience, according to Ward (1999), is

a by-product of black parents' interpretation and construction of their social reality.

Black parents, in teaching their children how to interpret, evaluate, and react to their social reality, fortify their ability to withstand and rebound from normal and race-related adversity. (p. 181)

Lessons that parents teach their children about the nature of their racial environments prepare Black children to identify racism and resist notions of racial subordination wherever they might occur, including the school environment (Ward, 1999).

Like resilience, racial socialization is also multidimensional in nature and certain socialization messages may shape how youths construct their achievement (Hughes, 2003; Hughes et al., 2006). Boykin and Toms (1995) proposed a framework for racial socialization that involves three themes: (a) promoting cultural pride, (b) preparing children for life in mainstream society, and (c) preparing children to deal with racism and discrimination (Hughes; Rodriguez, McKay, & Bannon Jr, 2008). Cultural pride messages, in particular, have been associated with improved academic achievement and racial identity development (Caughy, O'Campo, Randolph, & Nickerson, 2002). Results from Brown's and Krishnakumar's (2007) study found that ethnic socialization (e.g., ethnic pride, cultural values, cultural embeddedness) were strongly associated with higher levels of academic achievement. Brown's (2008)

examination of racial socialization and resiliency among 154 African American undergraduate students also revealed that resiliency was positively associated with Cultural Pride Reinforcements (i.e., coping with antagonism and cultural pride socialization).

Studies of families of academically successful Black students suggest that parents of these students have high expectations for their children's educational and future career aspirations. Clark (1983) conducted an extensive study of academic achievement among 10 Black families living in low-income communities with 10 high school seniors (5 achievers, 5 underachievers). Families fell into four distinct groups: two-parent families/one high-achieving senior; one-parent families/one high-achieving senior; two-parent families/one low-achieving senior; and one-parent families/one low-achieving student. Clark's influential study revealed significant differences in behavioral and psychological patterns between parents of high- and low-achieving students. In families of high-achieving students, parental patterns for achievement included: strong encouragement; clear academic expectations comprising post-secondary plans; establishing clear, specific role boundaries; and being psychologically and emotionally calm with students. Another important characteristic of parents of high-achievers was they did not believe school was solely responsible for educating their children.

Ford's (1993) examination of family achievement orientation (parental beliefs regarding education) as perceived by gifted Black students found that students who "strongly" believed their parents valued education were more likely to have optimistic views of education. Fan's and Chen's (2001) meta-analysis examining the relationship between parental involvement and students' academic achievement revealed that parental aspirations/expectations for children's educational achievement had the strongest relationship with academic achievement. Likewise, Johnson's (1992) review of literature related to factors outside of school contributing to the

academic achievement of Black students reported that the home context was crucial to their success. According to Johnson, it is the presence of optimistic, supportive parents, who provide support and structure that facilitates academic achievement and aspiration. Overall, these studies highlight an important relationship between parental hopes and desires and academic outcomes.

Parents also facilitate their children's educational success through involvement in their children's school. Parental involvement is a critical component to student success. According to Trask and Cunningham (2010), parents are a dynamic force in student achievement because they are a continual and persistent resource throughout their lifespan. Though parental involvement can be a vague term (Jeynes, 2003), it is generally defined as "parental participation in the educational processes and experiences of their children" (Jeynes, 2007, p. 83).

In a qualitative case study examining factors and processes contributing to the academic success of eight urban, African American high school graduates from low-income, single-parent families, Williams and Bryan (2013) found that high, yet realistic, expectations regarding academic achievement was a source of motivation for participants. Similarly, a study by Morales (2010) with 50 high-achieving low-socioeconomic students of color (30 African American and 20 Latino) found that high parental expectations supported by words and actions served as a key protective factor facilitating academic success. Parental actions included helping students attend out-of-zone specialized schools. Cooper's (2003) study of African American mothers' engagement in school choice also reflected the preventative approaches parents employ to ensure their children receive a good education, even if it means sending them to schools of out their district.

Morales' (2010) and Cooper's (2003) studies both illustrated the importance of understanding the types of parental involvement exhibited by Black parents. Research suggests

that parents with different demographic characteristics, such as race and income levels, tend to exhibit different types of parental involvement (Desimone 1999; Lee & Bowen, 2006). For example, using a sample of 415 third through fifth graders, Lee and Bowen found that African American parents were more likely to be involved at home (helping with homework), whereas European American parents reported more involvement at school. Jeynes' (2003) meta-analysis revealed that parent involvement strategies, such as communicating with the school, checking homework, encouraging outside reading, and participating in school activities, benefited African Americans and Hispanic/Latinos more than it did Asian Americans. Largely, research indicates that the parents of successful African American students are more likely to discuss school experiences and future plans (Clark, 1983; Yan, 1999); communicate high expectations (Gutman & McLoyd, 2000; Jeynes, 2005); make frequent contact with the school (Gutman & McLoyd); and have high degrees of parental control and strong family values (Lee, 1984).

Research has demonstrated that family demographic variables, specifically the presence of a father in the home, contribute little to Black students' achievement orientation (Allen, 2003; Clark, 1983; Coleman, 1966; Ford, 1993; Johnson, 1992; Wilson & Allen, 1987). Such findings counter the considerable body of research documenting academic failure among African American students from single-mother homes. An important finding in Clark's (1983) study indicated the major difference between two-parent and one-parent families of high-achieving students was "the creative use of other persons to reinforce parents' goals for their children" (p. 61). He added, "The approach of those single mothers to their circumstances is an example of sheer determination, persistence, and strength" (p. 61). Johnson's (1992) review demonstrated that achievers are found in all family structures.

Some studies have revealed that the strongest determinant of Black students' educational attainment was the attainment levels of Black mothers. Wilson and Allen (1987) examined young Black adults' relationships with family members and other significant people outside the family as a way to better understand educational attainment. They found that participants whose mothers completed more years of schooling had significantly higher educational attainment. Their findings also revealed that father encouragement was the next strongest influence on educational attainment. Allen (2013) had similar findings in his examination of patterns of high school preparation among Gates Millennium Scholars. According to Allen, when holding all other variables constant (e.g., high school characteristics, attitudes, college choice), students whose mothers had higher education levels tended to have stronger college persistence.

Black mothers have long played a critical role in the academic success of Black children. According to Staples (1971), "The only source of family continuity was through the female and there was a heavy reliance of the black child on his mother" (p. 129). Black mothers place high value on children. The bond between mother and child is embedded in the Black historical experience (Staples). As Nobles (1974) observed, this value is "deeply rooted in our African heritage and philosophical orientation...which places special value on children because they represent the continuity of life" (p. 15).

Significantly, the literature has recognized that even in two-parent homes, Black mothers generally assume greater responsibility in socializing their children, both male and female (Belgrave & Allison, 2010; Clark, 1983; Frabutt, Walker, & MacKinnon-Lewis, 2002). A longitudinal study by Blumenthal (1985) of 62 low-income child/mother pairs investigating parent-child interactions and child intellectual development revealed that mother/child interaction in the early years was a strong determinant of the child's intellectual development. A

later study by Ardel and Eccles (2001) investigated the effects of parental efficacy on promotive parenting strategies (encouragement, collaborative activity between parent and child, involvement in out-of-house programs and activities, and proactive prevention) children's self-efficacy (overall perception of self-control and control over their environment), and children's academic success among Black and White mothers in adverse environments. The study revealed that Black mothers' parental efficacy is a strong predictor of promotive strategies, and mothers' self-efficacy is associated with the self-efficacy and academic success of their children, even among married mothers. These findings support previous research (c.f. Brody & Flor, 1997, 1998; Murry & Brody, 1999) revealing that positive mother-child relationships and maternal involvement fostered self-regulatory behaviors which, in turn, predicted high academic performance.

Using data from the National Educational Longitudinal Study (NELS) Battle (2004) examined the effects of being in a father-only or mother-only household on the academic achievement of Black female students. Battle's results suggested that Black single-mother households create better pathways to academic success for their daughters than do single-father households prior to high school. Students from mother-only households outperformed students from father-only households. However, socioeconomic status moderated these results. As SES increased, Black females in mother-only households outperformed their counterparts in father-only households. Robinson's (2013) multi-case study explored what academically successful Black males, born to single mothers, attending "failing" schools attribute to their school success. All participants credited much of their success to the guidance and support they received from their mothers. Respondents re-counted their mothers' relentless academic encouragement and

frequent meaningful conversations about school/homework and the adversity they faced as instrumental to their success.

The success of African American students in single-mother homes does not negate or minimize the role of fathers in raising socially and academically competent children. The term “father absent,” which is often used interchangeably with single-mother, erroneously suggests that a father is entirely disconnected from his children (Dickerson, 1995a). While it is true that Black parents are less likely to marry, it is not true that in this family formation Black fathers are derelict in their parental duties (Blow, 2015). A recent Center for Disease Control (2013) report found that Black fathers were the most involved with their children on a number of measures compared with any other group of fathers (Jones & Mosher, 2013). Studies have also begun to conceptualize father involvement to also include the emotional and psychological presence of the father, and the overall “closeness” these children feel toward their father, despite the fathers not physically living in the home (Krampe, 2009; Thomas, Krampe, Newton, 2008).

Significantly, “single mother” status does not mean mothers are alone in raising children. The role of extended family and “fictive kin” is important among African American families (Jones & Lindahl, 2011; Jones, Zalot, Foster, Sterrett, & Chester, 2007; Parent, Jones, Forehand, Cuellar, & Shoulberg, 2013; Waites, 2009). Historically, extended kinship or family networks have been a source of survival and advancement for African Americans (Stewart, 2007). According to Stewart, “What appears to be a ‘single parent family,’ from a Western European perspective, may in actuality be part of a larger extended family system” (p. 165). Strong kinship ties and intergenerational support have long been effective resources to African American families. Considering many Black children live in extended families, research indicates that extended families also contribute to academic success.

In Williams' and Bryan's (2013) study of high-achieving African American students from single-mother homes, seven of the eight participants indicated that extended family members, such as aunts, uncles, cousins, and grandparents, had a positive effect on their academic success. According to Williams and Bryan, extended family members served as a social support network that assisted students in overcoming difficulties (e.g., emotional, financial) often associated with single-parent households. These authors also noted the importance of these networks in providing students with positive role models, academic support, and information about college, to name a few.

Fictive kin refer to relationships involving individuals not related by blood or marriage but who are as close and involved as blood relatives (Stewart, 2007). Carol Stack's (1974) classic ethnography, *All Our Kin*, revealed the complexities of kinship relationships within a poor Black community. Stack observed how friends were incorporated into domestic circles, and shared in reciprocal obligations such as child-rearing. Ultimately, Stack would define family "as the smallest, organized, durable network of kin and non-kin who interact daily, providing domestic needs of children and assuring their survival" (p. 31). In general, African American children and youth raised in single-mother households often have a network of family and friends carrying out important roles in their child rearing.

### **Resilience: Cautions and Considerations**

Ungar (2005) noted, "If resilience is going to be understood, it is going to be a messy affair" (p. xxvii). While the growing interest in resilience research has resulted in an increased attention on "success stories," criticisms remain (Bartelt, 1994; Luthar, 2000; Rigsby, 1994; Ungar, 2005). Literature has demonstrated how the resilience construct might cause individuals to espouse the classic American bootstrap logic, again placing the burden of success or failure on

a person's character (Franklin, 2000; Rigsby, 1994; Ungar, 2005). Ungar argued that the resilience discourse has been co-opted by a neo-conservative agenda that contends if one person can do well in the face of adversity, then everyone should. Rooted in the myth of meritocracy, the belief is that if parents just did their job and students worked harder, they can overcome any problem within their environment (Franklin, 2000). Mainstream achievement ideology requires individuals to take ownership of their successes and failures (Carter, 2008). This line of reasoning ignores important ecological and structural influences that benefit some and disadvantage others (Carter; Rigsby).

Additionally, because resilience is an inferential construct, it imposes certain value judgements. As Bartelt (1994) argued "resiliency is never directly observed" (p. 101) and is subjectively defined, thereby dependent on an external evaluator's definition of success. Rigsby (1994) urged researchers working on resilience to be self-conscious about personal values influencing and deciding what are and what are not desirable outcomes or adaptations. Researchers and practitioners must learn to distinguish between their own values and interests and those of others. In recognizing resilience as a dynamic, multidimensional, and complex set of interactions, researchers must be open to the possibility that adaptive behaviors come in a variety of forms (Taylor, 1994), some of which are informed by an individual's culture. Rigid and biased conceptions of resilience overlook the fact that success develops (Piant & Walsh, 1998), and leaves open the possibility of treating students labeled "non-resilient" as failures beyond hope (Rigsby). Thus, it is important that social workers recognize that their understanding (or lack thereof) of student outcomes or adaptations may be a reflection of their own particular social locations and standpoints.

Given the legacy of structural and systemic inequities that African American youth and

their single mothers face, some research suggests that resilience should be problematized to more effectively address social inequality (Andrews, 2009; Carter, 2008; Richardson et al., 2015).

Richardson and colleagues insisted that investigations of resilience should begin by critically examining pre-existing power structures. Moreover, for students of color in particular, signs of resilience, or more specifically school success, should be reframed as an intentional act of resistance (Carter; 2005; Richardson et al.). For some students, academic resilience is an act of resistance against mainstream achievement ideology and systemic forces that oppress Black people (Carter, 2008; Ward, 1999). Resilience then becomes not just the strength or fortitude to “stay the course” but to also define it. It is resistance not just to survive but to thrive.

Other research suggests departing from the notion of resilience altogether. Working in the area of political economics and regional development, MacKinnon and Derickson (2012) offered the concept of resourcefulness as an alternative to resilience. Their critique of resilience echoes that of other scholars, observing that the ecological concept of resilience is conservative, thereby privileging “the restoration of existing systemic relations rather than their transformation” (p. 263). These scholars also note that resilience is externally defined by state agencies and expert knowledge, placing the responsibility on individuals and communities to become more resilient. In contrast, resourcefulness “problematize[s] both the uneven distribution of material resources and the associated inability of disadvantaged groups and communities to access the levers of social change” (p. 263) and “emphasizes forms of learning and mobilization based upon local priorities and needs as identified and developed by community activists and residents” (p. 263). The value of resourcefulness for Black students and Black single mother families lies in its emphasis on the uneven distribution of resources within and between communities and to the possibilities of self-determination through the use of their

taken-for-granted knowledge.

### **Theoretical Frameworks: PVEST and Black Feminist Thought**

The following sections discuss Phenomenological Variant of Ecological Systems Theory (PVEST) and Black Feminist Thought (BFT) as the analytical frameworks for this study. As an ecological perspective, PVEST was appropriate for this study because it emphasizes the interactions between a wide-range of variables within an individual's environment. Ecological perspectives consider how students develop and adapt through various contextual conditions, which include transactions with parents, teachers, religious leaders as well as broader social, cultural, and historical forces (Fraser, 2004). As a centered perspective, BFT allows for an open examination of marginalization and encourages participants to develop a self-defined standpoint, one that resists dominant narratives of their lived experiences.

#### **Phenomenological Variant of Ecological Systems Theory**

*It is not merely one's experience, but one's perception of experience in culturally diverse contexts that influences how one evolves an identity and experiences a sense of self –*  
Spencer, 1999, p. 44.

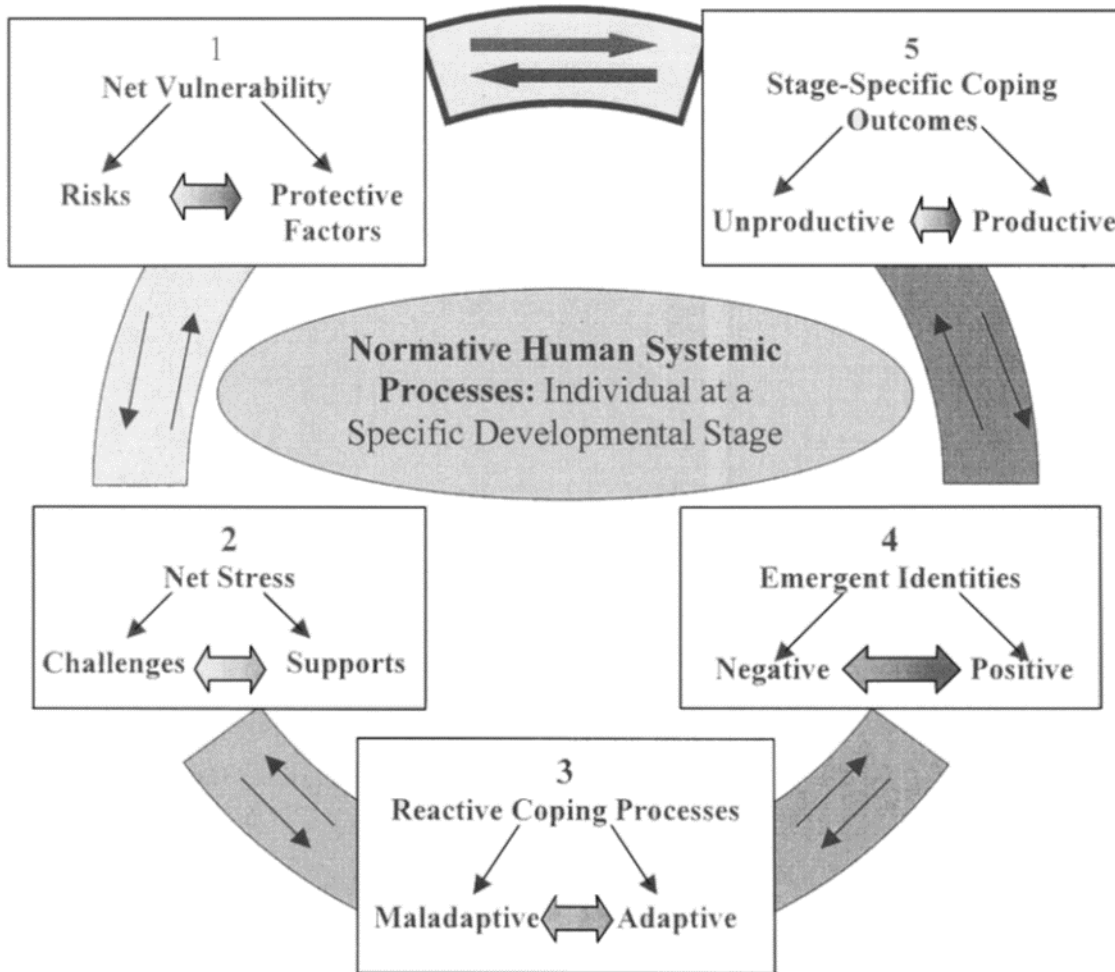
Spencer's (1995) Phenomenological Variant of Ecological Systems Theory (PVEST) is a systems theory of life-course development that integrates a phenomenological approach with Bronfenbrenner's (1989) ecological systems theory, linking both context and perception (Spencer, 1995, 2006, 2008; Spencer, Dupree, & Hartman, 1997). Unlike ecological systems theory which describes micro, meso, exo, and macro systems contexts directly, PVEST highlights not just the interactions of these experiences, but also the meaning that individuals make of them.

PVEST takes into account group-level or individual differences in experience, perception, and negotiation of stress and dissonance. By doing so, it attempts to illuminate how

individuals understand, experience, and are affected by the multiple system levels of context throughout their life course (Spencer et al., 2004; Swanson, Spencer, Dell'Angelo, Harpalani, & Spencer, 2002). This process-focused framework is unique in that it emphasizes the “how” of development, thereby directing attention to the meaning-making processes of individuals and the influence these processes have within one’s context (Spencer, 1995, 2008).

Unlike other theories that heavily focus on the risks associated with one group and the protective factors of another, PVEST presupposes that all humans are vulnerable and encounter both risks and protective factors. Given the necessary interactions people experience in a variety of social environments, PVEST “functions to disaggregate the multiple *sources and pathways of less than stellar outcomes* as well as to accentuate *the many expressions of positive outcomes obtained under conditions of systematic inequality*” (Spencer, 2008, p. 701, emphasis in original). PVEST utilizes an identity-focused cultural ecological perspective of normative human development, integrating issues related to social, historical, political, and cultural contexts within normative developmental processes (Spencer, 2004). This is significant because it allows for an enhanced examination of resilience and vulnerability among youth of color (Spencer et al., 2006; Swanson et al., 2002). Understanding how African American students and their single mothers make meaning of themselves, their family, community, and social expectations, as well as their prospects for success, is key to understanding resilience and developing interventions that promote it (Spencer et al., 2006).

The PVEST model is a comprehensive and integrative framework consisting of five basic components: risk contributors, stress engagement, reactive coping strategies, emergent identities, and coping outcomes linked by bidirectional, interdependent processes forming a dynamic and



**Figure 4.** Phenomenological variant of ecological systems theory (PVEST; Spencer, 1995, revised in 2004).

recursive life course model (see Figure 4). By examining these complex interdependent connections, the framework emphasizes the relationship between individuals and their environment and how they develop within a social context based on how they perceive, make meaning about, and cope in that context (Spencer, 2011; Spencer et al., 2004; Swanson et al., 2002).

The first component of this theory, *net vulnerability* consists of individual, family, and community characteristics that may potentially serve as risk factors predisposing individuals to experience adverse outcomes. Consequently, these risk factors may be offset by the presence of

protective factors, thereby defining an individual's net vulnerability (Spencer 2006; Spencer et al., 2006). For African American students from single-mother homes, these risk contributors may include, but are not limited to, socio-economic conditions experienced by living in poverty, discrimination, and imposed expectations based on race and gender stereotypes (Spencer, 2006). These risk factors not only affect how African American students perceive themselves, but may also predispose them for adverse outcomes in the context of school. As such, it is important to understand how students experiencing these contexts are able to achieve academic success, whereas others are not.

*Net stress engagement*, the second component of PVEST, refers to the actual experiences that challenge African American students' well-being; (Spencer, 2006). These are risks that are actually encountered and must be dealt with (Swanson et al., 2002). Available social supports can help youth negotiate experiences of stress; therefore, a support is an actualized protective factor (Spencer, 2004; Swanson et al., 2002). While the risks and protective factors associated with net vulnerability represent potential entities within the environment, stress and support refer to the actual encounter of these entities (Spencer, 2004; Spencer et al., 2006). Vocalization of low social and academic expectations and dangerous neighborhood encounters that are actually experienced constitute stressors. The presence of positive role models and peer associations and resources present in the school and community can help students cope with these experiences (Spencer et al., 2006).

In response to stressors and in conjunction with supports, youth employ various *reactive coping methods*, which include the use of adaptive or maladaptive behaviors as problem-solving strategies (Spencer, 1999, 2006). In an attempt to moderate the stress associated with poverty, racism, and expectation bias, African American students may respond with increased school

engagement, resulting in academic success (adaptive) or display poor academic behaviors such as truancy and discipline issues, causing academic failure (maladaptive). Important to note, however, is while a particular coping strategy may be adaptive in one context it may be maladaptive in another (Spencer, 2006). For African American students who have achieved academic success, recognizing and understanding the problem-solving strategies utilized for their attainment may assist other students facing similar contexts.

Over time, these reactive coping methods become stable and yield the fourth component of PVEST, *emergent identities*. As coping methods are employed, self-appraisal continues and replication of those strategies that produce desirable outcomes for the ego remains. For African American students who continue to engage in coping strategies that promote academic success, an identity of achievement emerges. This emergent identity helps define how African American academic achievers view themselves within and between various contexts of their development. (Spencer, 2004; Spencer et al., 2006). Accordingly, this identity lays the foundation for future perceptions and behaviors. These patterned identity formation processes are inextricably linked to either productive or unproductive *life-stage-specific coping outcomes*, the final component of PVEST (Spencer, 1999). Productive outcomes can include good health, high academic performance, positive relationships, and high self-esteem, whereas adverse outcomes include poor health, school drop-out, and incarceration (Spencer, 2006; Spencer et al., 2006).

An important task for researchers and practitioners who seek to facilitate positive youth development for African American students is to understand how social, political, cultural, and historical contexts interact with and influence their normative developmental processes. PVEST provides a normative human development framework to examine a range of outcomes experienced by African American students from single-mother homes, including academic

success (Spencer et al., 2006). Moreover, PVEST centers the voices and experiences of students who have traditionally been overrepresented in deficit research, thereby providing an opportunity for understanding diverse experiences within this group. By emphasizing issues relevant to students of color, PVEST helps to facilitate an understanding of the various circumstances (positive and negative; adaptive and maladaptive) African American academic achievers from single-mother households encounter during their development, and offers a framework that recognizes and promotes their resilience.

### **Black Feminist Thought**

*Black women both shape the world and are shaped by it...they create their own black feminist theory. They come to feminist theory and practice out of the oppression they experience as people who are poor and black and women – Kesho Yvonne Scott, The Habit of Surviving, 1991, p. 5.*

Black Feminist Thought (BFT) is a theoretical framework that centers and articulates the taken-for-granted knowledge of African American women (Collins, 1990, 2009; Guy-Sheftall, 1995). BFT highlights Black women's exposure to a distinct set of social practices situated within a unique matrix of domination characterized by intersecting oppressions—race, class, and gender (Collins, 1990, 2009). This framework offers a unique perspective to explore the successful academic outcomes of African American students from single-mother homes because it situates Black women and their families as experts in their own experiences and encourages a self-defined standpoint. Namely, it offers Black women a view of themselves and their world different from those offered by mainstream society (Collins, 1995, 2009). By centering African American women's lived experiences and giving them the space to “break their silence” (Collins, 1998) this study aimed to capture a more nuanced and authentic understanding of the meaning mothers and students make of academic success and the various contexts in which these academic experiences occur. BFT fuses Black women's allegiance to both women and the Black

community's empowerment. It produces insight essential to any examination centered on Black single mothers (Dickerson, Parham-Payne, & Everette, 2012). Additionally, since BFT positions Black female academics to use their social location to distinctively analyze race, class, and gender within various social settings, this framework allows me to explore and articulate my own experiences as an African American single mother. The following section provides a brief history of Black feminism. Next, Patricia Hill Collins's (2000, 2009) theoretical framework and its applicability to this study is discussed.

**History of Black feminism.** As a movement, Black feminism emerged during the mid-1960s as a continuation of an intellectual and activist tradition that began nearly two centuries before (Guy-Sheftall, 2000). Black women in the 19<sup>th</sup> century were conscious that true freedom required liberation from both racist oppression *and* sexist domination (Davis, 1981, 1983; hooks, 1981). Anna Julia Cooper (1969), a prominent 19<sup>th</sup> century, Black woman intellectual described African American women's social location this way:

The colored woman of today occupies, one may say, a unique position in this country. In a period of itself transitional and unsettled, her status seems one of the least ascertainable and definitive of all the forces which make for our civilization. She is confronted by both a woman question and a race problem, and is as yet an unknown or an unacknowledged factor in both. (p. 134)

Contemporary Black women intellectuals such as Patricia Hill Collins, Angela Davis, Beverly Guy-Sheftall, Audre Lorde, bell hooks, and others consistently point to the contributions of 19<sup>th</sup> century African American women who participated in the struggle for racial equality and women's rights. Maria W. Stewart (1803-1879), a free Black woman from Connecticut, is generally recognized as the first United States-born woman (of any race) to speak publicly to

audiences of men and women about political matters (Davis, 1981, 1983; Giddings, 1994; Guy-Sheftall, 1995). Her speeches boldly admonished both Black men for their chauvinistic attitudes toward Black women and free Blacks for not doing enough to uplift the race (Giddings, 1984; Simien, 2006). Stewart challenged African American women to reject negative images of Black womanhood and produce a self-defined standpoint of self-reliance and independence (Collins, 2000, 2009). She emphasized racial pride and self-help strategies that could enhance educational and employment opportunities, so that Blacks would not have to depend on White society to solve problems of race (Simien, 2006). Stewart was also passionate about Black women attaining leadership roles and insisted they use their roles as mothers to champion political action (Collins, 2000, 2009; Guy-Sheftall, 1995). Though her admonishment of Black men, free Blacks, and Whites resulted in a short-lived public career, Maria Stewart “articulated the precepts upon which the future activism of Black women would be based” (Giddings, 1984, p. 50).

Following the tradition of Maria Stewart, other important African American women, such as Sojourner Truth and Anna Julia Cooper, would express and act on ideas that liberated them from racist and sexist oppression. In 1851 Sojourner Truth (1797-1883), who as a Black female in 19<sup>th</sup> century White society was not attributed the qualities of womanhood, delivered her speech, “Ain’t I A Woman,” at a women’s convention in Akron, Ohio (Collins, 2000, 2009, Davis; 1983; hooks, 1981). Enduring the protests of White men and women who thought it unfitting a Black woman speak on a public platform in their presence, Sojourner became one of the first feminists to draw attention to the experiences of Black enslaved women (hooks, 1981). In her speech, Truth drew contradictions between her life as an African American woman and the qualities attributed to White women (Collins, 2000, 2009). She refuted claims that women’s

weakness was incompatible with the right to vote (Davis, 1983). Her assertion that women were not inherently weak and helpless was buttressed by her commanding presence, as Truth rose to 6-feet, with flexed muscular arms (Davis, 1981, 1983; Giddings, 1984). Later praised by White women as the hero of the day, Sojourner's implicit links between race and gender in the lives of Black women highlighted the racist attitudes of White female suffragists (Davis, 1983; Giddings, 1984). "In repeating her question 'Ain't I a woman?' no less than four times, she exposed the class-bias and racism of the new women's movement" (Davis, p. 63).

Black clubwomen (Black women organizations that undertook educational, philanthropic, and social welfare issues) such as Anna Julia Cooper, Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin, Mary Church Terrell, Ida B. Wells-Barnett and others have also analyzed the intersecting oppressions that limited Black women's lives and incessantly worked for social justice (Collins, 2009). Like White women's clubs, the Black women's club movement emerged during the 1890s. However, unlike White women's clubs, the Black women's club movement was motivated by both race and gender obligations (Davis, 1983; Guy-Sheftall, 1995). Black women's clubs, including the National Federation of Afro-American Women and National Association of Colored Women, developed both in response to the racism of White women and also to address the specific issues Black women faced (Giddings, 1984; Guy-Sheftall, 1995; hooks, 1981). While White women could focus their attention on education, charity, and what Giddings (1984) referred to as "upper class frustration" (p. 97), Black women were concerned with issues such as defending Black womanhood, racial uplift, poverty, anti-lynching campaigns, and improving family life, to name a few (Davis, 1983; Guy-Sheftall, 1995; hooks, 1981).

hooks (1981) credits Anna Julia Cooper (1859? – 1964) as being "one of the first black activists to urge black women to articulate their own experiences and to make the public aware

of the way in which racism and sexism together affected their social status” (p. 166). In 1892, Cooper published *A Voice From the South by a Black Woman of the South*, a text regarded as the first book-length feminist analysis of the condition of African American women (Guy-Sheftall, 1995). Ida B. Wells (1862 – 1931), a newspaper editor, journalist, outspoken defender of women’s suffrage, and fervent defender of Black civil rights, led the first anti-lynching campaign (Davis, 1983; Giddings, 1984; Simien, 2006). After three personal friends were murdered at the hands of White mob violence, Wells traveled the country and Europe decrying the silence and lack of attention given to these mob murders (Davis). Wells’ campaigns not only worked to undermine the stereotypes of Black men that spurred lynching, it also challenged beliefs of the immorality of Black women (Giddings). Wells’ anti-lynching campaigns created so much interest among Black women that they “galvanized a group that was already poised to emerge” (p. 83).

Mary Church Terrell (1863 – 1954), like her contemporary and critic Ida B. Wells, was also well established as a spokesperson for women’s suffrage and Black civil rights (Simien, 2006). As founding president of the National Association of Colored Women’s Clubs, Terrell worked diligently to involve Black women in the struggle for women’s rights. In 1898 Terrell gave a speech at the (mostly White) National American Woman’s Suffrage Association where she emphasized the intellectual and political achievements of Black women, two generations away from slavery (Guy-Sheftall, 1995). Davis (1983) noted that few could equal Terrell’s advocacy for Black Liberation. The writings of Black clubwomen give contemporary Black women the material to discuss the “patterns of injustice characterizing Black women’s collective group history” (Collins, 1998, p. 75). As hooks (1981) acknowledged:

For the first time ever in American history, black woman like Mary Church Terrell, Sojourner Truth, Anna Cooper, Amanda Berry Smith and others broke through the long years of silence and began to articulate and record their experiences. In particular, they emphasized the “female” aspect of their being which caused their lot to be different from that of the black male, a fact that was made evident when white men supported giving black men the vote while leaving all women disenfranchised. (p. 3)

Black feminist scholars are encouraged to look back to the activities of 19<sup>th</sup> century Black women as a way to reconstruct and recognize Black feminist intellectual traditions in the present (Guy-Sheftall, 1995). Reflecting on and considering the contributions of the women discussed above and the hundreds, if not thousands, not mentioned affirms the historical reality of Black women’s “life-and-death struggle for survival and liberation” (The Combahee River Collective, 1977, as cited in Guy-Sheftall, 1985, p. 232). Listening to those who have come before acknowledges “that African American women will continue to confront a series of ongoing challenges stemming from system injustice” (Collins, 1998, p. 75). Honoring this legacy is important for an exploration into academic achievement among African American students from single-mother homes, a group that has long been framed within a deficient paradigm. By recognizing and following the traditions of these great women, this study supports Black single mothers in breaking their silence and speaking out about their experiences.

Black feminism is not a static ideology (Guy-Sheftall, 1995, 2000). As Guy-Sheftall (2000) explained, there is great diversity of thought among African Americans with “feminist consciousness” (p. 347). Yet, despite this multiplicity of ideology, Guy-Sheftall (1995) outlined the following core tenets as remaining constant:

1) Black women experience a special kind of oppression and suffering in this country which is racist, sexist, and classist because of their dual racial and gender identity and their limited access to economic resources; 2) This “triple jeopardy” has meant that the problems, concerns, and needs of black women are different in many ways from those of both white women and black men; 3) Black women must struggle for black liberation and gender equality simultaneously; 4) There is no inherent contradiction in the struggle to eradicate sexism and racism as well as the other ‘isms’ which plague the human community, such as classism and heterosexism; and, 5) Black women’s commitment to the liberation of blacks and women is profoundly rooted in their lived experience. (p. 2)

The following sections will focus on BFT as a critical social theory and its core themes: self-definition and Black women and motherhood.

### **Black Feminist Thought as a critical social theory.**

*Despite long-standing claims by elites that Blacks, women, Latinos, and other similarly derogated groups in the United States remain incapable of producing the type of interpretive, analytical thought that is labeled theory in the West, powerful knowledges of resistance that toppled former social structures of social inequality repudiate this view. Members of these groups do in fact theorize, and our critical social theory has been central to our political empowerment and search for justice. Patricia Hill Collins, *Fighting Words: Black Women and the Search for Justice*, p. xvi.*

Collins’ (2009) Black feminist thought (BFT) will frame this exploration of academic success as perceived and experienced by African American high school students and their single mothers. BFT is a framework that centers the subjugated knowledge of African American women. It starts with the assumption that African American women have developed independent, oppositional knowledge concerning their subordination within intersecting

oppressions of race, class, and gender (Collins, 1998, 2009). Given the rich intellectual<sup>5</sup> traditions that exist, as detailed in the previous section, BFT asks, “Why are African American women and our ideas not known and not believed in?” Accordingly, BFT creates the space for Black women to reclaim and re-conceptualize Black women’s subjugated knowledge. At the core of BFT is clarifying Black women’s experiences and ideas (Collins, 2009). Collins (1990) observed:

Black feminist thought demonstrates Black women's emerging power as agents of knowledge. By portraying African American women as self-defined, self-reliant individuals confronting race, gender, and class oppression, Afrocentric feminist thought speaks to the importance that knowledge plays in empowering oppressed people. One distinguishing feature of Black feminist thought is its insistence that both the changed consciousness of individuals and the social transformation of political and economic institutions constitute essential ingredients for social change. New knowledge is important for both dimensions of change. (p. 221)

Like other oppressed groups, Black women are often placed in situations of being heard “only if we frame our ideas in the language that is familiar to and comfortable for a dominant group” (Collins, 2009, p. ix). Doing so only serves to elevate the ideas and position of the dominate group (Collins). The language of risk (e.g., disadvantaged, achievement gap) often associated with African American students from single-mother homes reflects why research, even when conducted by African American scholars, and policy are more preoccupied with the academic failure of these students instead of their academic achievement.

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<sup>5</sup> Collins (2009) is clear that the term “intellectual” is not limited to Black women in academia or in the middle class. Rather “intellectual” is for all Black women who have contributed to Black feminist thought as a critical social theory.

The proclivity of research to focus on academic failure makes BFT an appropriate framework to not only explore the academic achievement as perceived and experienced by African American students and their single mothers, it also provides the space and tools so they can actively oppose oppression. By giving voice to their lived experiences, BFT urges Black women to create a self-defined standpoint that counters negative controlling images<sup>6</sup> of Black womanhood (e.g., mammies, jezebels, and welfare mothers) advanced by mainstream society (Collins, 2009). That is, BFT creates the space for African American students and their mothers to refashion their conceptions of self and community—conceptions that will reject the deficit paradigm often framing their academic experiences (Collins).

Additionally, as a critical social theory, BFT draws attention to the conditions and systems in mainstream society that privilege certain groups while oppressing others. Specifically, BFT highlights the racist, sexist, heteronormative, and other oppressive assumptions that permeate Western knowledge (Collins, 1998). Dant (2003) offered that to be critical or to critique “builds in the possibility of resistance....What is implicit here is that critique means not only fault finding but setting up a line of opposition, one that deals not just with the detail but rather the whole system” (p. 7). BFT takes on the task of “setting up a line of opposition” by illuminating knowledge “produced by, for, and/or in behalf of African American women” (Collins, p. 45). This oppositional knowledge, Collins insisted, is indispensably

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<sup>6</sup> 1) Mammy is an asexual, faithful, and obedient woman. The mammy symbolizes the dominant group’s perception of the ideal Black female relationship to White male power. 2) Sapphire or matriarch is a domineering and emasculating woman, also known as the Strong Black Woman. The matriarch allows the dominant group to blame Black women for the success or failure of their children. 3) Welfare mothers are uneducated and irresponsible “breeders” who are content sitting around collecting welfare. They represent a failed mammy. The welfare mother provides ideological justification for the dominant group’s interest in limiting Black women’s fertility who are seen as producing too (something is missing here) many economically unproductive children. 4) Jezebel is an oversexed and sexually aggressive woman. A jezebel’s function was to relegate all Black women as sexually aggressive, which provided a powerful rationale for the sexual assaults of Black women by White men.

important in resisting oppression. Maintaining an oppositional stance involves challenging the constructs, paradigms, and bodies of knowledge that have more power and legitimacy (Collins).

As a collective, the liberation and empowerment of Black women rests on two goals: self-definition (the power to name one's own reality) and self-determination (aiming for the power to decide one's own destiny) (Collins, 1998). Although all African American women are not oppressed in the same way and are capable of being oppressive, the need for BFT arises because African American women as a *group* remain oppressed in the United States. As a framework that fuses theory and activism, BFT's theoretical identity lies in its commitment to social justice for Black women and other oppressed groups (Collins, 2009).

***Self-definition.*** Much of BFT reflects efforts to find a collective, self-defined voice. Self-definition speaks to the power dynamics in rejecting externally, dominant images of Black womanhood (Collins, 2009). It is part of Black women's journey from victimization to empowerment. By insisting on self-definition Collins (2009) posited, "Black women question not only what has been said about African American women but the credibility and the intentions of those possessing the power to define" (p. 125). Within a matrix of domination demonstrated by race, class, and gender oppression, the negative stereotypes surrounding African American women serve to justify Black women's oppression.

In her book, *Ain't I a Woman? Black Women and Feminism*, bell hooks (1982) examined the effects of racism and sexism on Black women. hooks discussed how the devaluation of Black womanhood and the stereotypes that Black women continue to experience today originated during slavery. The exploitation of Black women during slavery led to a diminishing of anything Black women did, including mothering. The ideological conception of motherhood was never extended to Black women (Davis, 1981). They were "breeders"—animals, whose

bodies were for the pleasure and profit of White men (Davis, 1981; Walker, 1981). The institutionalized rape of Black women and their hard labor in the field (during and after slavery) created a complex system of negative myths and stereotypes that affected the way members of their own race perceived them, and how they perceived themselves (hooks).

Self-definitions were designed to resist the negative controlling images of Black women as mummies, matriarchs, welfare mothers, and jezebels, as well as the discriminatory social practices that these controlling images supported. For Black women, self-definition was and is necessary for survival. Considering the reproduction of these controlling images in research, educational systems, media, government agencies, and other institutions, without ongoing resistance, Black women (and everyone else) would have no alternative worldview that affirms and celebrates Black womanhood (hooks, 1992). Black women's self-definition validates Black women's power as human subjects (Collins, 2009).

The power to name one's own reality or self-define is central to this study. This research endeavored to provide a safe space in which Black women and their children can speak and name their own realities. Self-definition is synonymous with what hooks (1989) described as "talking back." Because Black women and their children are often forced to mask their struggles, or be kept silent, talking back—the act of speaking—is a form of resistance. It is important that Black women and their children exert their voice, and not one that has been scripted by White supremacy, but the voice that authentically belongs to them. hooks explained:

Moving from silence into speech is for the oppressed... a gesture of defiance that heals, that makes new life and new growth possible. It is that act of speech, of "talking back," that is no mere gesture of empty words, that is the expression of our movement from object to subject—the liberated voice. (p. 8)

It is a way to come to power.

***Black women and motherhood.*** The core theme of BFT, Black women and motherhood, was important to this study because it highlights the efforts African American women have employed to define and value their own experiences with motherhood (Collins, 2009). Because the discourse surrounding Black single mothers is wrought by prejudice and stereotypes, it is critical to hear what Black women have to say about their own mothering experiences (Dickerson, 1995b). Bette J. Dickerson's (1995) text, *African American Single Mothers*, is entirely devoted to debunking myths related to single-mother families. She described it as a response to the continual use of stereotyped distortions of Black single families. As a way to counter these distortions, the text illustrates "the more generative legacy of resiliency, strength, and survival of the African American single mother family" (p. xiii). Like Collins, Dickerson insists that clearer understandings of African American women and their experiences exist when viewed from their own standpoints.

Given the pervasive assaults of racism, sexism, and class inequality, and their hypervisibility as "strong black women," "matriarchs," and uneducated "baby mamas," Black single mothers have had to find innovative methods for managing everyday life (Dickerson, 1995b). They continue to struggle to be seen as "good" mothers (Collins, 2009). A Black woman's standpoint on mothering serves as a theoretical space where Black women can express and learn the power of self-definition. Their standpoint exemplifies "self-reliant strategies that emphasize resiliency, innovation, and survival in the face of the intersection of race, class, and gender oppression" (Dickerson, p. 8).

Collins (2009) outlined five enduring themes that characterize a Black woman's standpoint on Black motherhood: bloodmothers, othermothers, and women-centered networks;

mothers, daughters, and socialization of survival; community othermothers and political activism; motherhood as a symbol of power; and, the view from the inside: the personal meaning of motherhood. *Bloodmothers, othermothers, and women-centered networks* reflect the centrality of women in African American extended families. Othermothers are women who assist bloodmothers by sharing mothering responsibilities. According to Collins, the resiliency of women-centered familial networks (e.g., grandmothers, sisters, aunts, cousins, and/or friends) reflects how traditional cultural values can help people cope with and resist oppression.

Collins (2009) described *Mothers, daughters, and socialization of survival* as a “troubling dilemma” (p. 198):

One on hand, to ensure their daughters’ physical survival, mothers must teach them to fit into systems of oppression....On the other hand, Black daughters with strong self-definitions and self-valuations who offer serious challenges to oppressive situations may not physically survive. (p. 122)

An early study conducted by Joseph and Lewis (1981) was influential in recognizing the differences between Black and White women’s experiences with motherhood. These researchers illustrated the distinctive ways Black mothers socialize their daughters. Joseph and Lewis found that among Black mothers, teaching their daughters survival skills and independence was paramount:

What was startlingly evident, as revealed in the mother/daughter questionnaire, was the teaching of survival skills to females for their survival *in* and for the survival *of* the Black community...There is a tremendous amount of teaching transmitted by Black mothers to their daughters that enables them to survive, exist, succeed, and be important to and for

the Black communities throughout America. Black daughters are actually “taught” to hold the Black community together. (p. 107)

Collins (2009) explained the ways in which African American women see their work not just for economic purposes, but as a way to contribute to their children’s survival and instill values that will encourage them to strive for more than what has been socially proscribed for their children. Overall, the theme *mothers, daughters, and socialization of survival* reflects Black women’s efforts to provide a physical and psychic base that allows their children to survive and thrive.

In *Community othermothers and political activism*, Collins discussed a more comprehensive ethic of care and personal responsibility among Black women. Community othermothers reflect the experiences of Black women nurturing children in extended family networks, in the community, as well as “mothering the minds” (p. 215), a practice in which Black women teachers develop bonds with students beyond the traditional mentoring. Community othermothers also play a critical role in building a different type of community through activism. Their participation in activism demonstrates a rejection of separateness and individual interests. Instead, the connectedness with others and common interests shared model a value system whereby ethics of caring and personal accountability move communities forward (Collins, 2009).

*Motherhood as a symbol of power* demonstrates Black women’s involvement in fostering the advancement of the African American community as the basis for community-based power. Collins (2009) argued, “Viewing motherhood as a symbol of power, can catalyze Black women to take actions that otherwise might not have considered” (p. 210). In the final section on mothering, *The view from the inside: personal meaning of mothering*, Collins referred to Black

motherhood as a fundamentally “contradictory institution” (p. 133). Though Black motherhood can be rewarding, Black mothers’ ability to cope with race, class, and gender oppression should not be confused with transcending those conditions—Black motherhood can come with high personal costs. This theme articulates the tensions Black women experience in having hope for their children juxtaposed with the harshness of their environment. It also speaks to how Black children affirm their mothers and the importance of that affirmation in a society that denigrates Black mothers. According to Collins:

The institution of Black motherhood consists of a series of constantly negotiated relationships that African American women experience with one another, with Black children, with the larger African American community, and with self.... Black motherhood as an institution is both dynamic and dialectical.” (p. 190).

The ways in which Black women articulate these negotiations represent an important component in the development of Black women’s standpoint on mothering. By highlighting the importance of a Black mother-centered standpoint, this study intended to capture the various mechanisms Black single mothers employ to assist in their child(ren)’s academic experiences.

### **Chapter Summary**

The purpose of this chapter is to examine the literature related to African American student achievement. Beginning with an examination of deficit ideology, the chapter focused on identifying the strengths and capabilities of Black youth and their families. Contrary to the “deficit literature,” African American students from single-mother homes succeed in school in spite of insurmountable odds. Researchers have found that many Black children learn, succeed, and have plans for furthering their education despite experiencing the effects of low socioeconomic status (SES), minimal teacher expectations, and inadequate representation of their

success. The chapter also provided the theoretical foundations for the study. The following chapter will present the research design and methods that were employed to explore academic success as perceived and experienced by African American high school students and their single mothers.

## CHAPTER 3

### RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

“Qualitative research begins with questions; *its ultimate purpose is learning.*”- Rossman & Rallis (2003, p. 4, emphasis in original)

#### **Introduction**

The purpose of this study was to explore academic success as perceived and experienced by African American high school students and their single mothers. This research aims to challenge the deficit frame that has guided research on African American students and their families towards a perspective that highlights their successes and honors their varied experiences, values, perspectives, and voices.

The following research questions guided this study:

1. How do African American students and their single mothers understand and explain the protective factors and processes contributing to academic success?
2. What do African American students and their single mothers report as potential barriers (risk factors) to academic success?
3. How has family structure shaped the academic success of African American high school students?
4. In what ways can existing and/or future social structures help support and facilitate academic success for African American students from single-mother households?

A qualitative approach was the selected methodology because this research project is concerned with understanding an experience. Merriam (2002) suggested qualitative inquiry is appropriate when the researcher “strives to *understand the meaning* people have constructed

about their world and their experiences” (p. 4-5, emphasis in original). Qualitative research is an approach to inquiry that “locates the observer in the world.... [It] consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 3). Qualitative inquiry allows researchers to get a detailed understanding of seemingly complex issues (Creswell, 2013). Rossman and Rallis (2003) noted that qualitative research has two unique features: 1) the researcher is the means through which the study is conducted, and 2) the purpose of the research is to learn about some facet of the social world. These characteristics are essential to a view of learning that “sees the learner as a constructor of knowledge rather than a receiver of it” (p. 5). Accordingly, the learner generates *representations* of reality, as described by the data, not reality itself (Rossman & Rallis).

Qualitative inquiry emphasizes inductive inquiry and thick, rich description. By approaching studies inductively, researchers are not limited to a rigid set of hypotheses to prove or disprove; rather, they can engage the study in more flexible ways. Inductive inquiry gives authorization to participants to guide the direction of the study and the data collected (Bogden & Biklen, 2007). Additionally, valuing descriptive data allows qualitative researchers to thoroughly explore the unique realities of their participants and capture their experiences more accurately (Bogden & Biklen; Merriam, 2002). As a result, nothing is taken for granted; every detail is considered (Bogden & Biklen). Unlike quantitative research that keeps researchers at an objective distance, assumes a singular truth, and is focused on generalizability, qualitative research invites researcher subjectivity and values multiple realities (Bogden & Biklen; Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 2009). A qualitative research design allows for a nuanced and comprehensive understanding of how African American academic achievers and their single mothers define and

make meaning of their successful academic outcomes, despite circumstances perceived to place them at risk for school failure.

Overall, qualitative inquiry provided the philosophical and methodological “space” and opportunity to explore the experiences of African American academic achievers and their mothers on their own terms, thereby allowing them to participate in a discourse that has excluded their voice and perpetually failed to recognize their strengths. In the following sections, I provide a detailed description of the methodology and methods of this study. This chapter is organized using the five phases of the qualitative research process outlined by Denzin and Lincoln (2011). In *Phase 1, researcher as a multicultural subject*, I discuss my relationship to the research and make clear my researcher subjectivities. Next, in *Phase 2, theoretical paradigms and perspectives*, I introduce the beliefs that guided this research. In *Phase 3, research strategies*, the particular design that situates me, the researcher, in the empirical world is outlined. In *Phase 4, methods of data collection and analysis*, I discuss the methods I used for collecting and analyzing data. Lastly, in *Phase 5, the art, practice, and politics of interpretation and evaluation*, I describe how I made sense of the data.

### **Researcher as a Multicultural Subject**

*“One’s subjectivity is like a garment that cannot be removed. It is insistently present in both the research and nonresearch aspects of our life.”* Peshkin (1988, p. 17)

Phase 1 begins with a consideration of what the researcher brings to the inquiry. It includes personal histories, conceptions of self and others, and the ethics of politics and research (Creswell, 2013; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). This aspect of the research process does not necessarily have a start and stop point, but is integrated into all phases of the research process. Guba and Lincoln (2005) acknowledged this process as a conscious experience, whereby the researcher identifies as both teacher and learner, and as one coming to an awareness of self

within the research process. The practice of writing ourselves into the research is referred to as reflexive awareness and researcher subjectivity. Hesse-Biber (2007) described reflexive awareness “as the process through which a researcher recognizes, examines, and understands how his or her own social background and assumptions can intervene in the research process (p. 129). Similarly, Peshkin (1988) noted researchers should “systematically identify their subjectivity throughout the course of their research” (p. 17). Subjectivities, he warned, have the potential to “filter, skew, shape, block, transform, construe, and misconstrue” (p. 17) a research project from its conception to the final written product. As such, it is important that researchers disclose to their readers where self and the subject merge (Peshkin). By centering my personal experiences and illuminating my positionality, I reveal to the reader how my life shaped and will be shaped by this study.

As I began the emotional task of situating my subjectivities in this research, what became undeniably clear is the paradox of my social location. In what Collins (1986, 1998) referred to as “outsider-within,” I came to this research “border[ing] spaces occupied by groups of unequal power” (Collins, 1998, p. 5). On the one hand, as a PhD student and emerging scholar I have the privilege of operating within academic spaces and acquiring the benefits and status these spaces afford (Collins, 1998). Yet, on the other hand, I am a Black woman within the academy, a space that has “long been implicated in institutionalized racism, gender oppression, and other relations of ruling” (Collins, p. 95); I am not afforded the full set of rights and privileges controlled by the insider group. Despite my understanding of dominant assumptions or guiding principles in the field of social work, and academia in general, as a Black woman operating within a socially stratified system, I cannot gain the full insider power bestowed to White academics (Collins, 1998).

This juxtaposition of an outsider-within is further complicated by my position as a Black, single-mother. From the perspective of the participants, my positionality may have looked remarkably different. Specifically, as a Black, single mother researching single Black mothers, I am an insider who may share similar experiences as them. However, as a PhD student and a researcher I am an outsider who may occupy a social world different from theirs. Collins (1989) captured this double perception:

On certain dimensions, Black women may more closely resemble Black men; on others, white women; and on still others Black women may stand apart from both groups. Black women's both/and conceptual orientation, the act of being simultaneously a member of a group and standing apart from it, forms an integral part of Black women's consciousness. (p. 757)

Therefore, I had to attend to my dual status (like other Black women researchers conducting research on Black women) as a researcher in the Eurocentric academy, and as a member of a marginalized and oppressed group.

I came to this study acknowledging how being a heterosexual, temporarily able-bodied, cis-gendered woman in higher education gives me a privileged vantage point from which I view and experience the world. The collection of all these identities provides a particular viewpoint on oppression and privilege, as well as a standpoint on self, family, and society (Collins, 1986, 1998, 2009). These identities locate me in a particular space politically, socially, and culturally. Specifically, they placed me in a particular relationship with participants in this study. It was important that I maintained critical awareness of how I navigate these political, social, emotional, and cultural spaces and consider the implications this process had on the study. I often captured my overall feelings about this research process in journals and voice recordings.

This study (and my overall PhD experience) has forced me to find my voice. Essentially, it required that I move from object to subject. In becoming a subject I placed myself and those like me at the center of analysis (hooks, 1989). In doing so, I called upon the writings of Audre Lorde (2007), proclaiming, I am who I am:

Nothing I accept about myself can be used against me to diminish me. I am who I am, doing what I came to do, acting upon you like a drug or a chisel to remind you of your me-ness, as I discover you in myself. (pp. 146-147)

Despite not being a participant in this study, my expressions in this subjectivity statement and narrative (as detailed in the methodology section below) were a part of my journey toward self-definition (Collins, 2009). It was a part of my journey to come to power. Here is where I resisted and negated the dominant discourse that has produced controlling images of Black students as intellectually inferior and Black single mothers as detriments to their children's education and overall wellbeing. I explicitly positioned this study as an act of defiance to the dominant power structures that have dehumanized my existence and those like me.

My motivation for pursuing this study was due to my growing outrage over the portrayal of Black single mothers and Black students. The narrative was always the same: *Black mothers are an impediment to their children's academic progress. Black mothers are to blame. Black students continue to fail. Black women are angry.* The constant denigration and distorted imagery of Black women never seemed to cease. Despite the sad reality of the angry Black woman stereotype, the truth is:

**I AM ANGRY!**

**Boldly, Brilliantly, and UNAPOLEGETICALLY So!**

**I am Righteously Angry**

My image, pervasively  
Distorted, Warped, and Consumed  
Stereotyped, TYPE-CAST  
Reduced  
Humanity Removed  
I AM FUMING!  
and Righteously So<sup>7</sup>.

Black female writer, professor, and political commentator, Melissa Harris-Perry (2011), referred to Black women's confrontation with racial and gender stereotypes as a "crooked room" (p. 28), one in which Black women have to figure out which way is up. She wrote, "Bombarded with warped images of their humanity, some black women tilt and bend themselves to fit the distortion" (p. 29). I did not realize the impact of these misrepresentations on my life until I began this research. It was not until I fully embraced Black Feminist Thought (BFT) that I realized how much of these distortions I internalized. When I began the PhD program, I had an interest in exploring BFT, but did not know how to make sense of it, and as a new (first generation college) student, I did not know where to turn for help. I recalled for an assignment I wrote (verbatim):

*My feelings about exploring black feminism were quite ambivalent. As a Black woman and a student of social justice work, I intentionally avoided black feminist thought. Something about it, I insisted, was too radical. This ducking and dodging, I realize, was tragically rooted in ignorance, misinterpretation, and, well, fear. It was/is a fear of*

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<sup>7</sup> The inspiration for my poem comes from Griffin's (2012) article "I AM an Angry Black Woman: Black Feminist Autoethnography, Voice and Resistance." In it, Griffin wrote a similar poem. Her article positioned anger as the fuel for Black women coming to voice.

*acknowledging a reality that, even despite my own painful experiences within a sexist and racist social system, I was not prepared to face. My decision to finally pursue this course was sparked by my interest of Black women who participated in the Black Liberation movements of the 1960's and 70's. After reading the autobiographies of Elaine Brown (A Taste of Power: A Black Woman's Story) and Angela Davis (Angela Davis: An Autobiography) I knew I could no longer evade what was inevitable. Black feminism was staring me in the face and there was nowhere I could (or wanted) to go.*

To help in this knowledge-seeking process, I began reading Patricia Hill Collins, bell hooks, Audre Lorde, and other Black women researchers whose studies were guided by Black feminism. I became so overwhelmed. I needed to speak to someone who could help move my thinking along. In the spring of 2013 (still, my first year in the PhD program) I made a trip to the Institute of Women's Studies. After talking to two Black women faculty members, in my notes I wrote:

*The meeting was very informal and enlightening. They instructed me to first create a self-portrait by articulating my own experiences as a single mother. They explained that often Black women don't have the opportunity or authority to define their own experiences, so journaling will be my entry point into my study. They also shared some readings and other resources to help me along my way; however, they emphasized that the most important piece of my exploration is to capture and define my own experiences.*

Yet, even after talking to these women, I continued to be afraid. If I were to take their advice and begin working on a self-portrait, I was fearful of what I might reveal and what I would have to come to terms with.

For 16 years I struggled with my position as a single mother. The lack of positive representations of Black women, namely Black single mothers, in media and elsewhere and constantly defending my role and abilities as a single mother contributed to a negative self-view and an incredible amount of anger. I felt it necessary to emblazon my chest with the letter “S” for super, believing that hyperbolic strength and independence were expected of me (Collins, 2009). As a Black unwed mother, I knew I did not have the privilege of looking weak or needing help. I was determined to not mirror those images on T.V. or be someone’s cautionary tale. Demonstrating self-reliance and an exaggerated independence, I thought, was necessary for my son’s survival, and for my own as well. Although I had always been self-sufficient, as a single mother this was more calculated; it was an attempt to convince the world (and myself) that I was a “good” mother, a good single mother.

It was not until my third year as a PhD student that I fully embraced BFT as a theoretical framework. Ironically, the suggestion came from a White woman colleague. Somehow, during our conversation I was finally able to put together various pieces of my life and fully appreciate what BFT had to offer. Why did it take a White colleague for me to move forward with BFT as a framework for my study? Honestly, I am still exploring what that means. Nonetheless, through BFT I was able to find the community and language to articulate my life. Reflecting on my experiences in this graduate space allowed me to come full circle, back to where my fear-filled interest laid dormant. In describing the importance of oppressed communities sharing their voice as a way to resist, Audre Lorde (2007) stated:

And of course I am afraid, because the transformation of silence into language and action is an act of self-revelation, and that always seems fraught with danger.... In the cause of silence, each of us draws the face of her own fear—fear of contempt, of censure, or some

judgement, or recognition, of challenge, of annihilation. But most of all, I think, we fear the visibility without which we cannot truly live. (p. 42)

As a social worker serving students of color in an urban, economically disadvantaged school district, I saw the multiplicity of students' academic experiences and abilities. Although many of their circumstances looked similar (e.g., living below the poverty line and raised in single-mother households), their academic experiences and abilities were not. When I started my research, I noticed that while we lauded the accomplishments of African American students anecdotally, they were almost invisible in the research. Subsequently, I began to explore variables such as gender, racial identity, family structure, and parent involvement looking for positive images of African American student achievement, but the research was scarce. I then began to reflect on my own family dynamics and how the students and families I was researching resembled mine. What did that mean for my son? Hell, what did that mean for me? As a single mother was I putting him "at risk" for school failure? I refused this deficit lens for my son, and for every other African American student. As detailed throughout this research, I am strength focused and all too aware of the social and structural forces that negatively impact the lives of African American youth. However, there are too many Black youth who go on to accomplish great things, despite various forms of oppression and structural inequalities, for their stories not to be told. Essentially, my research interest was motivated by both my desire to advance scholarship on the successful academic outcomes of African American students and to also validate the strength of my own family.

When I began this research, I was not prepared for the emotional roller-coaster I would encounter. My interviews with students and mothers often triggered strong emotions. In hearing their stories, I reflected on my own experiences with my son, becoming consumed with "What

ifs?” What if I had done this? What if I had not done that? Throughout this process, I remained cautious of the ways in which my positionality might influence this study.

### **Theoretical Paradigms and Perspectives**

The second phase of the research process is uncovering the set of beliefs that guided this study (Guba, 1990). These beliefs, Denzin and Lincoln (2011) wrote, “shape how the qualitative researcher sees the world and acts in it” (p. 13). This research argues that an exploration into the lived experiences of African American students and their mothers requires a framework that not only explores an understanding of the individuals and socio-cultural contexts in which they are located, but one that challenges power dynamics and has a transformative and emancipatory agenda. Therefore, this study, which seeks to explore academic success as perceived and experienced by African American high school students and their single mothers, is grounded in a social constructionist perspective. This perspective will inform the study’s theoretical frameworks, Phenomenological Variant of Ecological Systems Theory (PVEST) and Black Feminist Theory (BFT), in addition to the study’s design strategies and methods.

### **Epistemology**

Harding (1987) defined epistemology as “a theory of knowledge. It asks questions about who can be a ‘knower’” (p. 3). Similarly, Collins (2009) pointed out that an epistemology “investigates the standards used to assess knowledge or why we believe what we believe to be true...epistemology points to the ways in which power relations shape who is believed and why” (p. 270). Social constructionism undergirds this study because this epistemological perspective is concerned with how individuals construct their reality. According to Crotty (1998), constructionism maintains the view that “[All] knowledge, and therefore all meaningful reality as such, is contingent upon human practices, being constructed in and out of interaction between

human beings and their world, and developed and transmitted within an essentially social context” (p. 42). In this sense, constructionism is not concerned with truth beyond that social context or particular community (Gergen, 2007).

Within a constructionist view, human beings do not find or discover knowledge, but rather they construct it (Crotty, 1998; Schwandt, 2000). Accordingly, constructions of knowledge occur through social interactions, as individuals interpret and make meaning of the world around them. Also, significant, Crotty specified, the “social” in social constructionism need not always pertain to people. The experience or interaction through which individuals form meaning may also be with the natural world, such as a tree, and it is one’s culture that teaches how to see (or not see) it (Crotty). Social constructionism focuses on the collective generation of meaning, and emphasizes the role of culture in an individual’s life. Culture provides the lens through which individuals view the world; it brings certain things into focus and, in the same way, ignores other things (Crotty). Additionally, through the historical and socio-cultural dimension of knowledge construction, social constructionism emphasizes the notion that meaning making does not happen in isolation, rather it occurs “against a backdrop of shared understandings, practices, languages, and so forth” (Schwandt, p. 197). To clarify, social constructionism goes beyond saying something is socially constructed; it guides research toward the historical and cultural location of that construction (Young, 2003).

Although constructionism is often used interchangeably with constructivism (Young, 2003), several scholars draw clear distinctions (e.g., Crotty, 1998; Gergen, 2007; Schwandt, 2000). For instance, Crotty argued that constructivism is focused on the individualistic activities of meaning making, whereas constructionism is concerned with “the collective generation [and transmission] of meaning” (p. 58). Social constructionism, according to Gergen, “not

only challenges empiricist accounts of knowledge, but indeed stands as an impediment to all first philosophies of knowledge (p. 2). Unlike constructivism, Gergen furthered, social constructionism “asks a new set of questions—often evaluative, political, and pragmatic—regarding the choices one makes” (p. 2). In this manner, Burr (2003) observed, constructionism invites researchers to take a critical stance on “taken-for-granted” (p. 2) ways of understanding the world.

Interestingly, Charmaz’s (2000, 2008b 2014) view of constructivism aligns with tenets of social constructionism. According to Charmaz, (2014) constructivism also emphasizes “social contexts, interaction, sharing viewpoints, and interpretive understanding” (p. 14). Despite the ambiguity, both perspectives assume that 1) there are multiple realities; 2) the researchers and the researched co-construct reality or understandings; 3) individual values are honored; 4) the research process is hermeneutic (entails consensus building); and 5) the phenomenon can only be understood within the context in which it is being studied (Charmaz, 2008; Creswell, 2013; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Guba & Lincoln, 1989).

Social constructionism helps liberate the voices, knowledge, and experiences of African American students and their mothers by providing the ideological means to speak their reality and have their realities central to guiding the research. By using a social constructionist theory of knowledge, this study not only seeks new ways to understand the experiences and perspectives of academically successful African American students and their single mothers, it also promotes new forms of practice with them. Social constructionism emphasizes practice that is not informed by mainstream ideology, but rather practice that includes “dialogue, co-construction, collaboration, community building, narrative and positive visioning” (Gergen, 2007, p. 3) with the community under research.

## **Theoretical Frameworks**

Two theoretical frameworks directed this study, Spencer's (1995) Phenomenological Variant of Ecological Systems Theory (PVEST) and Collins' (2000, 2009) Black Feminist Thought (BFT). By using both PVEST and BFT as guides into the experiences of academically successful African American students and their mothers, this study aims to do the following: 1) center participants' unique, context-linked life-course experiences and their perceptions of these experiences; 2) challenge the deficit narrative associated with this group, and; 3) foster empowerment and promote social change.

**Phenomenological Variant of Ecological Systems Theory.** As a theoretical model, PVEST provides both an inclusive and process-oriented analysis of development for African American youth (Spencer, 1995, 2008). PVEST builds on Bronfenbrenner's (1989) ecological systems theory, which emphasizes the importance of studying individuals in context and combines it with a phenomenological approach which highlights how individuals make meaning of experiences (Spencer, 1995; Spencer, Dupree, & Hartmann, 1997). By linking two significant scholarly traditions (phenomenology and ecological systems theory) PVEST offers a "heuristic device for understanding the unique experiences of diverse group members as had at varying developmental periods" (Spencer, 2008, p. 698).

As detailed in Chapter 2, PVEST considers the bi-directional interactions among an individual's level of vulnerability (e.g., race, SES factors), actual encounters with stress (e.g., social supports, neighborhood dangers), reactive coping strategies (e.g., school engagement, expressive anger), emergent identities resulting from stable coping mechanisms (e.g., identity, self-efficacy), and specific coping outcomes (e.g., school status/performance) (Graves, 2014; Spencer, 2008; Swanson, Spencer, Harpalani, & Spencer, 2002). Unfortunately,

as highlighted in the review of literature, the academic successes of African American students from single-mother households often go unrecognized. Failure to acknowledge and celebrate their successes denies these students a sense of individual agency, accomplishment, and the opportunity to express conscious competencies (Spencer, 2011; Spencer et al., 2006). Unlike other theories that focus primarily on risk factors for some groups and highlight mainly protective factors for others, PVEST offers a more balanced approach by assuming all humans are vulnerable, and simultaneously possess both risk and protective factors (Spencer, 2008, 2011; Spencer et al., 2006).

PVEST's balanced approach provided the means to design this research in a way that considers and presents relevant and contextually-linked constructs specifically associated with African American academic achievers from single-mother households (Spencer, 2008).

Specifically, Spencer noted:

[PVEST] acknowledges and explores variables generally under-researched as constructs functioning as salient protective factors (e.g., cultural socialization, meditation, spirituality, cultural identity, physical and artistic aesthetics [e.g., music performance and dance; art appreciation], physical [e.g., walking, jogging] activity, "outsider experiences" [e.g., growing up with a "special needs" parent or sibling], and political socialization). (p. 703)

Significantly, PVEST highlights that it is not just the experience, but also the perception of the experience that aids in explaining the nature of behavioral outcomes and responsive coping strategies (Spencer, 2008; Spencer et al., 1997). This interaction also accounts for how students' meaning making may differ in response to similar experiences within the same context, depending on how they perceive and are perceived within that context (Spencer). The critical

integration of phenomenological experiences with interactions in the social context emphasizes the “how” (mediating factor approach) of development, thereby producing a very different view from the traditional “what” (outcome approach) focus (Spencer). Spencer suggested that the insistence to focus on “what” exacerbates stereotypes related to African American academic underachievement. Conversely, however, the “‘how’ oriented perspective contributes to understandings about individual-context interactions” (p. 698). Accordingly, by underscoring the “how” of students’ experiences this study endeavored to provide a more nuanced understanding of the factors and processes contributing to the academic success of African American students from single-mother homes.

Furthermore, PVEST acknowledges and illuminates the existence of social stratification and its impact on youth of color. By emphasizing the salience of factors such as race and gender, PVEST provides a way to understand how imposed expectations (such as stereotypes resulting from inferences about race, gender, family structure, and other social context experiences) interact with and influence normative developmental processes among African American students (Spencer et al., 2006). This framework explains the ways in which race and gender-linked experiences, independent of whether these experiences are acknowledged, undergird students’ social understandings and self-perceptions (Spencer, 2008; Swanson et al., 2002). To illustrate, African American students have experiences very different from European-American students. These experiences also vary by gender, resulting from stereotyped expectations on race, masculinity, and femininity (Spencer, 1995; Swanson et al., 2002). PVEST considers how encounters with racial and gender-based oppression (e.g., negative stereotypes in the media, racial profiling, low expectations) influence the social and psychological experiences of African American students as they navigate multiple levels of social context (Spencer, 1997, 2008;

Spencer et al., 2006). These experiences also make them acutely aware that they fit the “profile” for deviance and/or academic underperformance. Thus, PVEST takes into account how within a socially stratified system, the attributes of certain groups (e.g., African American, male or female, and adolescent) contribute to their risk (Spencer, 1995).

Overall, as an identity-focused culturally ecological (ICE) framework, PVEST enhanced this study’s examination of resilience and vulnerability among African American students from single-mother homes (Spencer et al., 2006). As Swanson and colleagues (2002) advised, an exploration into the lived experiences of African American youth requires a “multifaceted approach, incorporating identity, culture, and context while emphasizing developmental processes” (p. 74). Therefore, PVEST was used to explore how African American students and their mothers make meaning of their academic success in response to their specific social and cultural contexts, as a way to understand resilience and overall development (Graves, 2014).

**Black Feminist Thought.** As a critical social theory, BFT challenges the dominant discourse that has defined African American women and other marginalized groups in ways that deny their humanity. At the core of BFT is the belief that African American women possess a specialized knowledge which clarifies a particular standpoint of and for Black women (Collins, 1990). In essence, BFT articulates the taken-for-granted knowledge of Black women and encourages all Black women to create new self-definitions that validate and honor Black women’s standpoint (Collins, 1989). According to Collins (1989), BFT goes beyond demonstrating Black women can produce specialized knowledge:

By taking elements and themes of Black women’s culture and traditions and infusing them with new meaning, Black feminist thought rearticulates a consciousness that already

exists. More important, this rearticulated consciousness gives African American women another tool of resistance to all forms of their subordination. (p. 750)

Therefore, BFT is both connected to Black women's lived experiences and aims to better those experiences in some way (Collins, 2009). BFT was used in this study to center the experiences and ideas of Black single mothers and their academically successful children (Collins, 2000, 2009). In doing so, this study aimed to challenge the prevailing viewpoints that have primarily focused on the deficits of Black single-mother families and the academic underperformance of African American students from single-mother homes.

Findings from the review of literature revealed an emerging, albeit small, body of literature documenting the resilience and strengths of Black single-mother families, and the academic successes of students from this family structure. Until recently, researchers have dedicated more attention to determining the causes and adverse effects of single-mother homes (Murry, 2001). This risk-focused perspective fails to recognize the variability among African American single-mother families and provides little insight into how this variability influences diversity in youth outcomes (Sterrett, 2015). The scarce opportunity for accurate, self-defined recognition, Melissa Harris-Perry (2011) highlighted, is a fundamental problem for marginal and stigmatized groups:

Individuals denied access to the public realm or whose group membership limits their social possibilities cannot be accurately recognized. An individual who is seen primarily as part of a despised group loses the opportunity to experience the public recognition for which the human self strives.... Inaccurate recognition is painful not only to the psyche but also to the political self, the citizen self. (p. 38)

The tendency of research to ignore the heterogeneity of this family type and to focus on deficits maintains the pervasive social stereotypes associated with African American single-mother families and their children. Left unchallenged, Spencer (2008) maintained, “[S]ocial stereotypes function as oppressive expectations and contexts, which undermine youthful performance (p. 703).

BFT was a valuable framework to guide this exploration of academic success as perceived and experienced by African American high school students and their single mothers because it provides the mechanisms for this mother-child dynamic to construct and reconstruct oppositional knowledge that resists the pervasive deficit meta-narrative (Collins, 1998). Oppositional knowledge, Collins explained, aims to foster Black women’s opposition to oppression (self-definition) and their search for justice (self-determination). The stereotyped misrepresentations of Black women as angry “sapphires,” loyal “mammies,” emasculating “matriarchs,” lazy “welfare mothers,” and promiscuous “jezebels” have been used to justify U.S. Black women’s oppression (Collins, 2009; Harris-Perry, 2011). BFT’s insistence on Black women’s self-defined standpoint “offers a powerful challenge to the externally defined, controlling images of African American women” (Collins, 2009, p. 125).

Specifically, this study intended to challenge the stereotyped images of the matriarch or the bad Black mother. As discussed in Chapters 1 and 2, Daniel Patrick Moynihan’s (1965) report *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* designated Black matriarchy as the principle cause of weakness and pathology in the Black community. The cultural deficiency associated with Black matriarchy suggests Black children lack the attention and care necessary for a proper upbringing. This purported cultural deficiency severely impedes Black children’s achievement (Collins, 2000, 2009). Rather than identifying the structural barriers facing African

American communities, portraying Black women as matriarchs allows the dominant group to blame Black women for their children's failure in school (Collins, 2009; Harris-Perry, 2011).

Asking African American single mothers and their children to reflect and share stories of academic success as experienced within their specific social and cultural contexts is an act of resistance. This study's application of BFT allowed the mother-child dynamic to challenge the controlling image of the Black matriarch and her offspring—the academic underperforming student (Collins, 2009). Calling attention to the connection between domination and representation hooks (1992) stated:

Black people must be willing to grant the effort to critically intervene and transform the world of image making authority of place in our political movements of liberation and self-determination.... We would consider crucial both the kind of images we produce and the way we critically write and talk about images. And most important, we would rise to the challenge to speak that which has not been spoken. (p. 4)

By using their voice to break their silence, participants in this study are reclaiming their humanity in a system that gains part of its strength in their misrepresentation (Collins, 1998). Replacing negative images with positive ones is an act of defiance against elite discourse; self-definitions validate their power as human subjects, not objects (Collins, 2009).

### **Research Strategies: Narrative Inquiry**

*“Stories don't fall from the sky (or emerge from the innermost 'self'), they are composed and received in contexts – interactional, historical, institutional, and discursive – to name a few.” – Reissman, 2008, p. 105*

Phase 3 of the research process begins with establishing how the research should proceed (Hardin, 1987). It involves a clear focus on research questions, the study's purpose, and the information and strategies that most appropriately guide the study (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005).

Essentially, this stage of the research process entails the strategy of inquiry that moved my research from theory to praxis. This strategy also lays the foundation for the specific methods of collecting and analyzing the data (Creswell, 2013; Denzin & Lincoln).

This study used narrative inquiry to guide the exploration of academic success as perceived and experienced by African American high school students and their single mothers. Narrative inquiry was appropriate for this endeavor because it is “an approach to the study of human lives conceived as a way of honoring lived experience as a source of important knowledge and understanding” (Clandinin, 2013, p. 17). For African American students and their single mothers who are subjected to a meta- or dominant narrative that subjugates their experiences, narrative inquiry is a way to privilege the multiplicity of their realities (Kramp, 2004). Thinking narratively challenges the dominant, deficit-prone perspective that has often framed their experiences, and offers a more authentic means to explore their lives (Johnson-Bailey, 2004).

The term “narrative” has many meanings and is often used interchangeably with “story” but as research demonstrates, the two terms are analytically different (Kramp, 2004; Riessman & Quinney, 2005; Riley & Hawe, 2005). Riley and Hawe pointed out, “The difference relates to where the primary data ends and where the analysis of that data begins” (p. 227). For some researchers, stories as narratives are simply a compelling way to represent data (Clandinin, 2013). Yet, for the narrative inquirer, what is missing in this process is analytic attention to how that “story” was constructed (Riessman & Quinney).

Polkinghorne (1988) approached narratives as a cognitive scheme, by which individuals link various events and actions into a whole. Meaning is subsequently assigned to these events and actions according to their effect on the whole (Polkinghorne). Understood this way (and

distinguished through the use of formal practice), narrative inquiry is a useful tool to organize and understand various details of an individual's lived experiences in relation to a particular phenomenon (Kramp, 2004). By nature, people lead storied lives and tell stories of those lives. Stories are familiar, an authentic way of giving voice, and they help to construct meaning in our lives (Johnson-Bailey, 2004). The narrative researcher, in turn, collects, describes, and tells stories of those lives, and subsequently writes narratives of that experience (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). Clandinin and Connelly (2000) offered:

Narrative inquiry is a way of understanding experience. It is collaboration between researcher and participants, over time, in a place or series of places, and in social interaction with milieus. An inquirer enters this matrix in the midst and progresses in the same spirit, concluding the inquiry still in the midst of living and telling, reliving and retelling, the stories of the experiences that made up people's lives both individual and social. (p. 20)

In addition to the value placed on an individual's lived experience, narrative inquiry explores the "social, cultural, familial, linguistic, and institutional narratives within which individuals' experiences were, and are, constituted, shaped, expressed, and enacted" (Clandinin, 2013, p. 18).

Using narrative as a form of inquiry is based on the understanding that narratives are a way of knowing (Kramp, 2004). The researcher who engages in narrative inquiry studies the individual's experience in the world, and recognizes that "what" the individual storyteller expresses is significant to understanding the meaning of a particular phenomenon (Clandinin, 2013; Kramp; Riessman, 2008). Narrative ways of knowing, Clandinin explained, require the narrative inquirer to think relationally. Thus, the researcher is a part of the stories being studied.

Narrative inquiry often begins with the researcher's own narrative of experience—one's autobiography (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

Collecting and analyzing stories is only part of an inquirer's role; researchers intentionally put their lives alongside their participants' lives (Clandinin, 2013; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). In coming into relation with participants, inquirers think about their own experience, about the participants' experiences, and those experiences that become visible as they both tell and hear each other's stories (Clandinin). Emphasizing the importance of mutually constructing the research relationship creates the space where both "practitioners and researchers feel cared for and have a voice with which to tell their stories" (Connelly & Clandinin, p. 4). Still, the focus of the inquiry and research remains on the participants.

Within the inquiry field, the co-construction of narratives between participants and the researcher entails a reflexive relationship between *living* out stories, *telling* a life story, *retelling* a life story, and *reliving* a life story (Clandinin, 2013; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). People *live* and *tell* stories; the process of coming alongside participants and inquiring into these lived and told stories is *retelling*. Researchers begin to *relive* their stories in the process of noticing they are changed by retelling their lived and told stories (Clandinin). For both participants and the researcher, the process of living, telling, retelling, and reliving stories occurs within a three-dimensional space, with temporality, sociality, and place serving as the dimensions. Temporality is where researchers attend simultaneously to the past, present, and future of people, places, things, and events under study (backward and forward). Sociality refers to the conditions under which people's experiences and events are unfolding (inward and outward). Lastly, place refers to the specific physical and topological boundaries (Clandinin).

Overall, narrative inquiry was especially suitable for this study because it privileges the storyteller, not external perspectives (Kramp, 2004). It illuminates individual ways of knowing and meaning making. For academically successful African American students and their mothers whose voices have been ignored in research, a narrative approach provides them with an opportunity to share the various experiences of their lives, and the meanings they attach to them. Narrative inquiry also aligns with the study's theoretical frameworks, PVEST and BFT. Relevant to PVEST, narrative considers the continuity and wholeness of a person's lived experiences and the context in which these experiences unfold (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). The collaborative and interactive nature of narrative inquiry attends to power disparities inherent in research (Johnson-Bailey, 2004). The use of narratives can also present marginalized stories in a nonlinear and holistic manner so that participants' stories are brought to the center of the inquiry (Johnson-Bailey & Ray, 2008). These qualities allow them to share their story easily and readily, thereby supporting the creation of a self-defined standpoint essential to BFT.

### **Methods of Data Collection and Analysis**

The fourth phase of this study outlines the methods used to collect data and data analysis. The following three subsections provides a detailed framework to address these areas: 1) sample selection, site of the research, and ethical considerations; 2) data collection; and 3) data analysis.

#### **Sample Selection, Site of the Research, and Ethical Considerations**

Since this study was concerned with gathering information from a particular group, purposive sampling techniques were employed. According to Patton (2002), participants are purposefully selected for the richness of information they provide, thereby illuminating the

questions under study. Student participants were selected based on the following criteria<sup>8</sup>: (a) self-identified as African American or Black; (b) high school senior; (c) enrollment in at least one AP or Honors class; (d) has a cumulative G.P.A. of 2.75 or higher, based on a 4.0 scale; (e) participation in at least one extra-curricular activity; (f) has taken or is planning to take the ACT or SAT; (g) raised in a single-mother household; and (h) has articulated and begun to prepare for post-secondary plans, such as entry into college and/or armed forces. While recruiting participants, I noticed that those who were not taking AP/Honors classes (Malcolm, Langston, and Damon) were dual-enrolled. That is, they were enrolled in both high school and college. Dual enrollment status allows students the ability to earn both high school and college credits. Considering this opportunity is only afforded to academically outstanding high school students, I allowed them to participate in the study. Criteria for mothers included: (a) self-identify as being African American or Black; and (b) not married, with no live-in partner at the time of the study.

The recruitment flyer (Appendix A) was posted on my social media handles (Facebook and Instagram) and shared among social media friends and various social media groups. As a way to widen my recruitment opportunities, I also applied for school district approval from two school districts in the metro area. I received approval from School District A on September 19, 2016 by the office of Research, Assessments, and Grants. I was denied approval from School District B on September 26, 2016 with the option to resubmit. After discussing my application with the district's data strategist, I decided not to resubmit my research request. After receiving district IRB approval from School District A, I sent emails to high school principals, but did not receive a response. None of the study's participants were located as a result of this method.

Emails were also sent to teachers, counselors, and other school personnel within my professional

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<sup>8</sup> Several recent studies (c.f. Carter 2008, 2012; Griffin & Allen, 2006; Williams, 2013, 2014) have used similar criteria for their student participants.

and personal network. Participants (7 students—3 boys, 4 girls—and 7 mothers) were referred from a variety of professional and personal sources. Participants attended five different high schools in a Southeastern metropolitan area in the United States. All schools had a predominately African American student body. All schools were also designated “low performing” by the state. Table 1 displays a few school characteristics: (1) graduation rate for 2016; (2) percentage of students who are college ready (students who are likely to be successful in first-year college courses based on state-wide indicators); (3) Title 1 status (program through the Elementary and Secondary Education Act which provides financial assistance to schools with high numbers of children from low-income families); (4) state Governor’s office assigned letter grade based on school performance; and (5) the geographic location of the schools. Referrers

Table 1.

*School Characteristics*

*High School	2016 Graduation Rate	% of Students College Ready	Title 1?	State “Grade”	Geographic Area
Malcolm X High School	69.8	18.8	Yes	F	Urban/City School
Stonebrook High School	72.3	37.8	Yes	D	Large Suburb
John Lewis Learning Academy (single-gender)	78.8	15.6	Yes	F	Urban/City School
Ella Baker High School	80.8	37.5	Yes	C	Large Suburb
King High School	58.1	28.6	Yes	F	Urban/City School

\*Note: Pseudonyms were used.

were able to confirm that participants met the study's academic (i.e., GPA, school activity, ACT/SAT) requirements.

All participants were initially contacted via phone call. First, they were screened using the Telephone Eligibility Screening Consent (Appendix B1) to request their permission to ask questions related to their eligibility. After agreeing to the terms in the Telephone Eligibility Screening Consent, participants were given the Screening Interview (Appendix B2) to determine their eligibility for the study. Table 2 provides a profile of participants.

During the screening process, interested participants were informed of the study's purpose. Once told they met the eligibility requirements and they agreed to participate, we determined the best day, time, and location to meet.

The rights of participants were protected by adhering to the following procedures:

- First, the dissertation committee approved the research proposal, May 11, 2016.
- Second, the application for approval to conduct the research study was submitted to and granted by the Institutional Review Board of The University of Georgia on June 20, 2016.
- Third, all participants were provided in writing details pertaining to study and the expectations of participants. They were given the option to decline participation or withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. Consent forms were given to students (Appendix C) and mothers (Appendix D) outlining the expectations of participants and the researcher. Signed consent forms were collected from participants prior to commencing the study and remain in the possession of the researcher.

Table 2.  
*Participant Profiles*

Family No.	Student/Mother	Participant No.	Student Sex	Age	G.P.A	High School/Selected Course Work/ Activities
Family 1	Malcolm	S1B	M	17	3.1	Malcolm X High; Dual Enrollment; Football
	Maya	M1B				
Family 2	Shannon	S2G	F	17	3.0	Stonebrook High; AP Composition & Micro Economics; SGA Class Senator
	Sonia	M2G				
Family 3	Langston	S3B	M	17	3.3	Stonebrook High; Dual Enrollment; 100 Black Men
	Lee	M3B				
Family 4	Octavia	S4G	F	17	3.1	King High; AP English & Calculus Softball, Upward Bound
	Opal	M4G				
Family 5	Damon	S5B	M	17	4.0	John Lewis Learning Academy; Dual Enrollment; 100 Black Men; Contemporary Ballet
	Audre	M5B				
Family 6	Raegan	S6G	F	17	3.6	Ella Baker High; Dual Enrollment; Beta Club; Volleyball
	Rosa	M6G				
Family 7	Tari	S7G	F	17	3.7	King High; AP Macro Economics; Beta Club
	Toni	M7G				

*Note:* Pseudonyms were used to maintain participant confidentiality.

- To ensure the anonymity of participants, I clustered screening interviews, face-to-face interviews, and other documents by a family number first (i.e., Family 1) and then by individual number (i.e., **M**(other)**1\_B**(oy)**1** or **G**(irl)**1**; and **S**(tudent)**1\_B**(oy) or **G**(irl)**1**).

Participants were also assigned individual pseudonyms to disconnect any identifying information.

### **Data Collection**

According to Merriam (1998) data collection is about “asking, watching, and reviewing” (p. 85). Important to note, Merriam warned, is the idea that “collecting data” can be misleading. Data is not just “out there” waiting to be picked up like garbage on trash day, she explained. It must be identified as such by the researcher and regarded as data for the purpose of research. To understand academic success as perceived and experienced by African American students and their single mothers, data were primarily collected via in-depth interviews. Patton (2002) described interview data as “direct quotations from people about their experiences, opinions, feelings, and knowledge” (p. 4). Students and mothers were also encouraged to provide personal-familial-social artifacts to serve as the second data source.

Embarking on this narrative journey required that I accept personal involvement in the process. Personal involvement, Kramp (2004) suggested, is what makes it possible for me as the learner to gather and interpret the narratives of study participants. Engaging in narrative inquiry, Clandinin (2013) maintained, places participants and researchers “in the midst” (p. 43) of each other’s unfolding, complex, and multiple (personal and professional) experiences—experiences that are shaped by past, present, future, and social-cultural contexts. As students and their mothers shared their experiences, I also became a part of that experience. The significance of this narrative space allowed me to carefully attend to how I understand myself in relation to the stories being told (Clandinin). This space became more lucid as I reflected on my own experiences as a Black woman and single mother.

Within this narrative process, I became attentive to the three-dimensional space

(temporal, social, and place) of participants' lives (Clandinin, 2013; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). That is, I made efforts to note how participants constructed their stories around time, location, and ecology. For example, while sharing their story, all mothers reflected on their own experiences growing up. They often juxtaposed various events of their childhood (temporal) with their child's schooling experiences. I also attended to the four directions of inquiry: *inward* (internal conditions such as hopes and feelings) *and outward* (the environment), and *backward and forward* (past, present, and future). Attending to inward conditions I noted how student participants talked about their goals for the future, or feelings about growing up in a single-mother home. By outward, I tuned in to how participants talked about their neighborhood or schooling environments. In backward and forward, I concentrated on how participants connected past actions to present experiences.

Engaging in this space allowed me to conduct interviews, write field notes, interpret stories, and draft a final product that offers a more nuanced understanding of participants' lives. The collection of data, or what Clandinin and Connelly (2000) referred to as field texts, happens through a variety of sources and can begin by either listening to individuals tell their stories and/or living alongside participants as they live and tell their stories. Data collection methods for this study will be further explained in the subsections that follow.

**Interviews as conversations.** Interviews were the primary method used to engage students and their mothers in the process of storytelling. Influenced by Collins (2009) Hesse-Biber (2007), Reinharz and Davidman (1992), and hooks (1989), I made efforts to approach each interview as a conversation. As a narrative inquirer using a feminist framework, I am fundamentally committed to designing a study that uncovers the subjugated knowledge of African American women and their children, and aims to promote social justice and social

change (Hesse-Biber). Carefully designed, interviews-as-conversations are consistent with women's interest because they avoid control over others and cultivate a sense of connectedness with people (Reinharz & Davidman). It was also important to note that conducting interviews was a privilege granted by students and mothers, not a right (Denzin, 2004). Interviewing Reinharz and Davidman proposed “offers researchers access to people's ideas, thoughts, and memories in their own words rather than the words of the researcher” (p. 19). It is a valuable research method to gain in-depth knowledge from participants about particular phenomena or experiences (deMarrais, 2004).

Notably, however, in narrative inquiry there is a fundamental shift away from the archetypal interview. Chase (2005) warned researchers that question protocols, characteristic of interviewing, have the potential to stifle the research (storytelling) process as interviewers may get frustrated because participants shift the intended direction of the interview or participants do not feel they are saying what is most authentic to them. Accordingly, conversations are more commonly used (Clandinin, 2013).

When the interview is viewed as a conversation—discourse between speakers—it “encourages greater equality (and uncertainty) in the conversation.... Encouraging participants to speak in their own words can, at times, shift power in interviews” (Reissman, 2008, p. 24). My hope was that approaching interviews as conversations would help create a space where students and mothers felt safe to share their stories. Interviews-as-conversations also align with BFT's use of “dialogues” in assessing knowledge claims (Collins, 2009). Collins suggested that dialogues with Black women and other marginalized groups are where new knowledge claims are developed. It is where the researcher and participants connect. Similarly, hooks (1989)

wrote, “Dialogue implies talk between two subjects, not the speech of subject and object. It is a humanizing speech, one that challenges and resists domination” (p. 131).

Notwithstanding my best efforts to balance the power dynamic and create a conversational tone to the interview, my role as the researcher may have created potential challenges to the conversation. Despite my insider status as a Black single mother, I am still an outsider, a stranger, inquiring about the intimate details of participants’ lives. As Reissman (2008) pointed out, power relations are never equal, but they can be diminished. When appropriate, I attempted to diminish the power dynamics by sharing my experiences. For instance, during my conversation with Maya she was visibly uncomfortable sharing that Malcolm attends a school out of district. To help her feel at ease about sharing this information, I disclosed my decision to also send my son to school out of district.

Interviews followed a semi-structured format. The initial questions were broad and open-ended as a means to invite participants to be narrators (Chase, 2005; Kruger, 2004). Broad questions allowed participants to determine how they wanted to respond. Half of the participants in this study are teenagers, so I often used probing questions to encourage more in-depth responses (Patton, 2002). Generally, mother participants were more open and spoke freely, offering detailed responses to questions. To help ensure I did not misinterpret elements of their stories, I frequently asked clarifying probes for more context.

Interviews focused on gathering data about participants’ experiences with schooling and the larger social and community contexts in which their academic experiences are situated. The goal was to privilege the emic perspective of participants (Patton, 2002), particularly with respect to their understanding of academic success and single-mother households. Previous studies have often explored Black students and Black single-mothers from a deficit perspective,

based on dominant, mainstream beliefs of their experiences. This study, in contrast, sought to center and honor the multiplicity of their experiences, in their voices. Interview questions (see Appendix E) covered the following general topics: (a) how participants made sense of academic success; (b) their experience and understanding of single-mother households; and (c) questions that asked general information associated with their personal histories and everyday lives.

Interviews with the 14 participants took place between August 2016 and February 2017. Two interviews (initial and follow-up) were conducted with 10 out of the 14 participants. I was unable to schedule a follow-up interview with two families. Initial interviews with students ranged from 30-60 minutes, and interviews with mothers lasted between 30-90 minutes. Follow-up interviews were also conducted face-to-face and ranged between 20-45 minutes. The time between the initial and follow-up interview ranged between two weeks and two months. Since the mother-child dyad is the unit of analysis, in most cases the mother and student were interviewed individually, usually within an hour of each other. Because of their busy schedules, Malcolm and his mother were interviewed in two separate locations. With the exception of Malcolm and Maya, mothers were interviewed first and the student immediately after. The rationale for ordering the interviews in this way was that mothers might offer more context that could be used during the interview with students. The aim for interviewing them separately was that it might encourage more authentic expressions. Raegan's mother Rosa, however, requested that she and her daughter be together while interviewing. It was important to Rosa that Raegan be present as she shared her story. Although she explained that Raegan "knows a lot" because they are close and share a lot of information, Rosa saw the interview as a good opportunity for Raegan to hear more about the decisions she made in parenting. I was initially uneasy when Rosa made the appeal to conduct the interview in this manner. I was too attached to *my* research

design. I quickly realized the privilege granted me to be in their home, listening to their stories. I subsequently asked Raegan if she felt comfortable doing it in this way and she nodded her head in agreement. Though both would be present during the interview, I asked them not to interrupt as I talked to the other, as their role during that time was to listen.

My initial and follow-up meetings with Family 1, the student was interviewed at the college where he is dual enrolled and the mother was interviewed at her place of work for both interviews. With Families 2 and 3, both the initial and follow-up interviews were conducted at the local library. With Family 4, the initial interview took place at the library and the follow-up interview at their home. The interviews with Families 5, 6, and 7 occurred in their homes. Student participants received \$20 gift cards for their participation in the study.

Interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim by a professional transcription service. I read the transcripts while listening to the digital recordings and corrected any transcription errors. Within 24 – 48 hours after each interview, I listened to the recordings of the interviews, familiarized myself with the data, and made adjustments in my interview style. One such adjustment, suggested by my methodologist, involved probing students about their everyday lives, such as asking “Walk me through your day,” as a way to encourage students to share more information.

**Artifacts.** Artifacts such as pictures, memory boxes, and/or items of clothing help construct and interpret narratives (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). They can trigger memories of important times, people, and events (Clandinin & Connelly). Students and mothers were encouraged to provide documents and artifacts that would add to the richness of their story; yet, only three families provided them. Artifacts included such items as trophies, boards displaying certificates and awards, vision boards, and pictures of receiving scholarships.

## Data Analysis and Interpretation

The process of data collection, analysis, and report writing is not necessarily a “one way street” or linear. In qualitative research the inquirer can move fluidly between collecting, analyzing, and synthesizing the data (Bold, 2012; Clandinin, 2013; Creswell, 2013). According to Clandinin, the process of moving from data (field texts) to research texts (e.g., an article or dissertation) “is a complicated and iterative process, full of twists and turns” (p. 49). Connelly and Clandinin (1990) noted, “There is frequently a sense that writing began during the opening negotiations with participants or even earlier as ideas for the study were first formulated” (p. 7). Therefore, narrative inquirers must be cognizant of the end as they begin the study (Connelly & Clandinin).

Reissman (2008) referred to a narrative analysis as “a family of analytic methods for interpreting texts that have in common a storied form” (p. 11). Fittingly, this project used a combination of methods to analyze the data including Polkinghorne’s (1995) narrative configuration approach, data analysis techniques used by Auerbach and Silverstein (2003), and the poetic transcription methods of Carr (2003), Glesne (1997), Leavy (2015) as well as other art-based researchers.

Polkinghorne’s (1995) method of narrative configuration helped establish two distinct stages of the analysis process. Using Bruner’s (1985) work on cognition (as cited in Polkinghorne, 1995), Polkinghorne described two types of narrative analysis: paradigmatic-type and narrative-type. Paradigmatic-type inquiry uses the *analysis of narratives*; the researcher collects stories and methods are employed to produce “descriptions of themes that hold across the stories or in taxonomies of types of stories, characters, or settings” (p. 14). For narrative-type inquiry *narrative analysis* is employed. Narrative-type narrative inquiry “gathers events and

happenings as its data and uses narrative analytic procedures to produce explanatory stories” (p. 14). In essence, analysis of narratives moves from stories collected by participants to common themes, and narrative analysis moves from elements to stories (Polkinghorne, 1995). I employed both approaches to analyze the data.

This process was especially helpful considering the student and mother was the unit of analysis. Therefore, mother and student interviews were kept in dyads to be analyzed first. I performed narrative analysis by exploring elements, or pieces of information, in each participant’s narrative that would contribute to the construction of a storied poem using poetic transcription. Chase’s (2005) narrative strategy, also emphasizes attending to particular elements within each unit of analyses. When interpreting narratives gained through interviews, Chase suggested researchers begin with the narrator’s voices and stories. “Rather than locating distinct themes *across* interviews, narrative researchers listen first to the voices *within* each narrative” (p. 73, emphasis in original), Chase advised.

I performed poetic transcription as my first stage of analysis, narrative analysis. The use of arts as a tool in research has grown steadily over the past several decades (Furman, 2006; Glesne, 1997; Langer & Furman, 2004; Poindexter, 1998). Furman observed that researchers from various disciplines use poetry as a form of data representation noting that “these researchers begin with traditional qualitative research methods and form poems from their data. Although the use of poetry might have been intended from the onset of the inquiry, poetry is used only after data have been collected” (p. 562). I decided on this method for the first stage of my analysis after incessantly reflecting on my closeness to the research. There was this persistent concern over how I would represent the data in a way that preserved the voice and uniqueness of participants. My journal entries capture my frustrations and worries related to how much of my

experience as a single-mother would obscure the meaning participants made of their own lives. Ultimately, the goal for drafting the poems was to “represent faithfully” (Furman, 2006, p. 562) the stories participants shared. In a meta-analysis of 234 poetic inquiry sources pertaining to her many findings Prendergast (2009) found, “Poetic Inquiry is like narrative inquiry with which it shares many characteristics interested in drawing on the literary arts in the attempt to more authentically express human experiences” (p. 561).

As I immersed myself in scholarship related to this approach, I experienced a sense of freedom, but also a new-found sense of responsibility. Cahnmann (2003) wrote that “developing a poetic voice prepares scholars to discover and communicate findings in a multidimensional, penetrating, and more accessible ways” (p. 29). In reflecting on her own journey to poetic research, Nielsen (2004) noted that research, in general, is a way of acknowledging the lives and journeys of others “of truly listening in our smaller and larger communities” (p. 42). Poetry, she furthered, “demands the deepest listening of all” (p. 42). Nielsen offered the following six observations as a means of support for novice researchers exploring poetry as both a form of representation and pursuing inquiry: (1) poetry and inquiry asks us to listen deeply; (2) language is always inadequate; (3) there are rhythms to the inquiry process as there are rhythms in poetry; (4) less is more; (5) the complex and the difficult are necessary; and (6) our apprenticeship never ends. Likewise, Butler-Kisber (2002) provided helpful insights for researchers interested in using arts-based qualitative inquiry. Both Nielsen’s and Butler-Kisber’s recommendations were helpful as I journeyed this poetic space.

Arts-based research is claimed to demonstrate and illuminate the complexities of the human experience and social phenomena (Butler-Kisber, 2002; Furman, 2004, 2006). It is a method that “facilitates the expression of powerful emotions that might not always be easily

expressed in a clear or linear fashion” (p. 561). Poetic inquiry also reflects the ingenuity Collins (2000, 2009) discussed is necessary to investigate the subjugated knowledge of African American women. This kind of creativity is encouraged because Black women have had to develop a distinct standpoint by using alternative ways of producing and validating knowledge. Minoritized groups “have long had to use alternative ways to create independent self-definitions and self-valuations and to rearticulate them through our own specialists” (Collins, 2000, p. 252). Describing her decision to use poetic transcription Madison (1998) wrote:

Poetic text is consistent with the black tradition of acknowledging that words are alive with sounds that condition their meanings. By placing words on a page in a way that resembles the rhythm of the human voice and the speaker as a social-historical being who colors each word based on that existential fact, the text comes closer to capturing the depth inherent in the indigenous performance of black speech. (pp. 216-217)

As Faulkner (2009) observed, researchers who frequently use poetry view it as an ideal way to present and capture the human experience in a “powerful, emotionally poignant, and accurate form” (p. 22). Poetry, then, becomes a method to enhance research. Distinguishing it from other forms of poetry, Langer and Furman (2004) described research poems as poems that utilize the participant’s exact words in compressed form, excluding any reference to the researcher. Butler-Kisber (2002) defined found poetry similarly, noting how found poems use only the words of participants to create a “poetic rendition of a story or phenomenon” (p. 232). Essentially, “found poetry is poetry that is ‘found’ in the environment” (Walsh, 2006, p. 990). The interview transcripts constitute the environment in this research project. Like Butler-Kisber, I decided to create found poems because I did not want to drift too far away from the

transcripts and wanted to use participants' words to re-create their lived experiences, thereby maintaining an emic perspective.

Poetic transcription was used to analyze key data from the transcripts. Glesne (1997) described poetic transcriptions "as the creation of poem-like compositions from the words of interviewees" (p. 202). It is a process where categories or themes develop inductively out of the data (Leavy, 2015). Glesne's (1997) process for poetic transcription began with three rules: 1) words in the poetic transcription would be the participant's not the researcher's; 2) phrases and words from anywhere in the interview can be moved and juxtaposed; and 3) maintain enough of the participant's words together to re-present participants' speaking rhythm and style. Glesne's process began with reading and re-reading transcripts, coding and sorting text, and developing themes based on different aspects of the participant's life. Next, after reading all of the participants' words under each theme, she attempted to understand "the essence conveyed, the hues, the textures, and then drawing from all portions of the interviews to juxtapose details into a somewhat abstract re-presentation" (p. 206).

Walsh (2006) followed a similar process akin to poetic transcription to create found poetry. She read the transcripts several times while making notes, outlining the themes that emerged. Detailing the process, she shared, "I culled words and cut and pasted segments of conversation into specifically labelled files, then played poetically with the segments of conversation in an attempt to distill themes and write succinct versions of them." (p. 990).

Walsh would also reorder phrases to improve clarity for the reader.

Leavy (2015) described her approach to poetic transcription using interview data from a study she conducted on the relationship between sexual identity and body image among college-age females and males. Interviews were transcribed verbatim, assigned numbers, and

systematically coded by two coders for inter-coder reliability. Only the participants' exact language was used in poems for the final representation; however, as the researcher, Leavy retained "interpretive control" (p. 89) by selecting the specific parts of the data that would be used. This process dramatically reduced the amount of data while also emphasizing "aspects of it, that when crafted, become quite emotional and represent very personal experiences" (Leavy, 2015, p. 89). Compression, or the economy of words, is essential to creating poetry. It helps the poem become more potent, allowing the reader to focus on the essence of participants' lives (Faulkner, 2009; Langer & Furman, 2004; Nielsen, 2004).

My data analysis began with reading the verbatim transcripts while listening to the audio recordings. The goal was to familiarize myself with the data. Listening to the audio recordings allowed me to focus not only on the words but also the sound and rhythm being evoked, thereby attending to *how* something was said, in addition to *what* was being said. Collins (2009) described the significance of sound:

The sound of what is being said is just as important as the words themselves in what is, in a sense, a dialogue of reason and emotion. As a result it is nearly impossible to filter out the strictly linguistic-cognitive abstract meaning from the sociocultural psychoemotive meaning (p. 264).

Reading the transcripts a second time, I made note of my general impressions. In the margins I wrote any questions, thoughts, and emotions I had about the data. The third round of reading involved a line-by-line analysis of the text. I began to underline words and phrases that resonated with me (Prendergast, 2015). Here is where I began to code and sort the data using colored highlighters. Clandinin's and Connelly's (2000) "narrative coding" helped me gain a sense of important aspects occurring in the field texts. Prendergast's (2015) method to create

found poems also guided me as I sifted through transcripts. Though there were unique elements in all participants' transcripts, some guiding characteristics or qualities that struck me included:

- Personal stories
- Family
- Community
- Societal Perceptions
- Resistance
- Surprises and the unexpected

Next, I went back over the highlighted text and cut and pasted every excerpt into a separate document. I removed statements that were not important to the topic, being careful and reflective about this process, knowing that what could be irrelevant to me may not have been for my participant. This reduction process also included removing ideas that were repetitive or overlapping (Moustakas, 1994).

Lastly, I reordered and arranged participants' phrases into thematic stanzas which seemed to represent and capture the essence of their experiences. The result is a found poem for each student and mother using their actual words. No changes were made to what they said, or how they said it (Poindexter, 1998). All the words in these poems can be found in the original transcripts (Prendergast, 2006).

Up to this point, the data analysis described has focused on individual participants. The second, and final, level of data analysis involved looking across interviews to "produce taxonomies and categories out of the common elements across the database" (Polkinghorne, 1995, p. 5). This entailed using the elements found within each mother and student dataset and underscoring categories or themes that held across stories. For this stage, I went back over participants' transcripts and used Auerbach's and Silverstein's (2003) methods to discover repeating ideas and group together related passages of text. The research questions guiding the study were used to compile and organize the findings. This analysis highlighted the inter-related

factors associated to how students and mothers perceive and make meaning of academic success. Unlike the first level of analysis, the data presented in Chapter 5 does not use poetic transcription. Since it is organized in traditional qualitative style, there will be some repeated text in Chapter 4 and Chapter 5.

Fundamental in narrative inquiry is the focus on the lives as lived and told through the inquiry. As such, I begin and end with the stories told (Kramp, 2004). Notably, the knowledge gained in narrative inquiry is textured by particularity and incompleteness, not generalizations and certainties. The aim is to recognize the possibilities within participants' experiences.

### **Art, Practice, and Politics of Interpretation and Evaluation**

The final phase of the process is a discussion of how I incorporated quality into my study. As researchers consider ways to build quality into their study a guiding question has been: "How can we best listen to, work with, and represent the people our work is intended to serve?" (Freeman, deMarrais, Preissle, Roulston, & St. Pierre, 2007, p. 30). Strategies for ensuring quality and rigor in qualitative research begin at the study's conception. Qualitative research has the potential to yield valid and reliable results, however not in the same way as quantitative research. In the sections that follow, I will discuss the methods I used to maintain the quality or trustworthiness of the study: validity and reliability.

#### **Validity**

Creswell (2013) suggested thinking about validation in qualitative research as the process by which researchers "employ accepted strategies to document the 'accuracy' of their studies" (p. 250). Validity or credibility is addressed in qualitative research from two perspectives: internal and external. Internal validity asks the question: "How congruent are one's findings

with reality?” (Merriam & Associates, 2002, p. 25). To enhance the internal validity of this study, I used two methods: 1) member checks with narrators (participants) and 2) awareness of bias. Member checks involve sharing initial interpretations with participants and revising these interpretations if necessary. Since narrative inquirers live in relational ways with participants from the beginning of the study to the end, participants had ongoing engagement in examining the data and co-constructing the final product (Clandinin, 2013). Throughout data analysis, I checked with the participants to see if the data and my understanding of it were plausible. This included giving participants copies of the transcripts.

Given my closeness to the research, I had to be keenly aware of the assumptions and perspectives I brought to the research. Awareness of bias was addressed through the researcher’s subjectivity statement. In my statement, I clarified, up front, the bias I brought to the study. Peshkin (1988) viewed subjectivity as “virtuous, for it is the basis of researchers' making a distinctive contribution, one that results from the unique configuration of their personal qualities joined to the data they have collected (p. 18). Bias or subjectivity, therefore, is not something we can rid ourselves of, but we should be mindful to attend to our bias carefully.

External validity, or transferability, refers to the degree to which findings from the study can be applied to another context (Merriam, 2009). In other words, how “generalizable” are the results of a particular study? Among qualitative researchers the notion of generalizability may seem paradoxical (Merriam & Tisdale, 2016). Merriam and Tisdale pointed out that part of the difficulty in understanding generalizability in qualitative research lies in thinking about it in the same way as in quantitative research. Although there are a number of conceptions of generalizability that are congruent with the philosophical underpinnings of qualitative research, one of the most commonly held is reader or user generalizability. It involves “leaving the extent

to which a study's findings apply to other situations up to the people in those situations" (Merriam & Tisdale, p. 256). That is, persons reading the study determine whether the findings can apply to their situations (Merriam & Tisdale).

External validity was enhanced by providing rich, thick description of details and maximum variation of participants. Rich, thick description refers to a detailed account of the setting and participants in the study, as well as a thorough portrayal of the study's findings. Researchers using thick, rich description provide sufficient information about the study so that what has been learned can be transferred to other settings (Merriam & Tisdale, 2016). Another strategy I used to enhance transferability is maximum variation. Patton (2015) noted that maximum variation (even in a small sample) involves identifying diverse characteristics and criteria for constructing the sample. The sample in this study demonstrated variation along the following dimensions: residence (urban and suburban), school districts, and mothers' age, educational level, and type of employment.

### **Reliability**

Reliability refers to whether the findings of the study are reflective of the data gathered (Merriam, 2009). It is concerned with whether or not the study is consistent and "makes sense" (Merriam, 2002). For this study, reliability was safeguarded using peer review and an audit trail.

Peer review is a method used to help keep the researcher and research honest. My major professor and methodologist assisted in this capacity. They examined the data, offered alternative ways of looking at it, and reviewed my inductive analysis of it.

In addition to having my major professor and methodologist examine the data and assess my findings, I established an audit trail. An audit trail describes in detail how the data were collected, how decisions were made, and how themes were derived. My audit trail was

maintained in a Microsoft excel spreadsheet. It began when I started the recruitment process and includes my thoughts and ideas about the data collected during interviews, the issues I faced, and my comments about the study processes overall. I also recorded information pertaining to my communication with individuals who were a part of this study, including those who assisted with the recruitment of participants.

### **Limitations of the Study**

The findings of this study reflect my exploration of academic success as perceived and experienced by African American students and their single mothers. Sampling was, therefore, driven by the desire to learn in greater detail and depth about the experiences of particular individuals. The drawback of this approach is that the size (small and nonrandom) and nature (purposeful) of the sample selected limit generalizability in the statistical sense (which is a limitation of much of qualitative research). Moreover, transferability of the findings is restricted because all the participants are from one Southeastern state.

Another potential limitation of the study involves my status as an “outsider.” Though I honor and embrace my status as a single mother and am grateful for the “insider” access it provided me into participants’ lives, my role as a researcher could have been a hindrance. As a social work researcher (and stranger) asking about intimate details of their lives, participants may have censored their responses. It is also possible that they tailored their responses to reflect what they thought I wanted to hear, thereby influencing the authenticity of the findings.

My inability to schedule follow-up interviews with participants also posed a limitation in this study. Two families were unable to participate in follow-up interviews, resulting in less data from them than from other families. No follow-up interview also left me unable to gain more clarity related to certain aspects of their stories. Overall, given the complexity and range of

participants' experiences, conducting more interviews might have produced more rich and complex data.

Possibly the most significant limitation is related to my being a single researcher conducting this study. My closeness to the topic, limited worldview, and biases become important concerns as the sole researcher responsible for data collection and most of the data analysis. As stated earlier in this chapter under Art, Practice, and Politics of Interpretation and Evaluation, while peer review and other strategies to support the researcher in analyzing the data are beneficial, a team approach could have yielded different and more robust findings.

## CHAPTER 4

### RESEARCH FINDINGS: NARRATIVE ANALYSIS

*The idea is to write it so that people hear it and it slides through the brain and goes straight to the heart.*

-Maya Angelou

#### **Introduction**

Chapter 4 serves as one of two analysis chapters. It reflects the first stage of my data analysis. Polkinghorne (1995) distinguished between two types of analysis using narrative data—narrative analysis and analysis of narratives. This chapter employed narrative analysis, which organizes experience into stories to create individual narratives of each participant. Inspired by the use of arts as a tool in research, I re-present these stories as narrative found poems. Narrative poems, similar to research poems, are interested in storytelling (Faulkner, 2009). I offer these poems as a re-presentation of what participants shared during our interviews. While analyzing each interview, I stayed close to the language used, emotions expressed, and “speaking rhythm” (Glesne, 1997, p. 205) of participants. The result are poems in the actual words found in the transcripts of mothers and students.

Participants stories are acknowledged as diverse and multiple. I intentionally do not provide any meaning or explanations for the poems. Commenting on her own work, Rath (2001) wrote, “In crafting poems from the transcriptions of interviews, I do something with data, rather than saying something about it (p. 117). Recognizing my subject-position, I invite the reader to interpret and make one’s own meaning of these poems. These poems serve as re-enactments of the interview, capturing the complexity of personal experience. Unlike traditional methods of

data analysis, poetry offer a way of “representing holistically what otherwise might go unnoticed” (Butler-Kisber, 2002, p. 234). The narratives begin with a brief summary of the family, followed by two poems. First is the mother’s voice, the second is the student’s. The stylistic arrangements of poems will differ. These various styles represent my efforts to capture the rhythm and flow of participants’ voices.

### **Family 1**

Maya is a 34-year-old mother of two sons, Malcolm 17, and Masai, 11. She was born and raised in Macon, Georgia, and lived there until she came to Southeastern City with her sons and younger sister in 2008. In addition to raising her sons, and sister, Maya recently took in Malcolm’s 17-year-old paternal brother, Quincey. She took in Quincey because he was not doing well in Macon, and she believed she could give him a better experience. Much of Maya’s life is filtered through being a mother. She is unapologetic when it comes to putting her children first, and repeatedly expressed her determination and motivation to create a better life for her family. Better than what she experienced growing up. Though Maya made it clear that she does not make a habit of sharing her business, insisting “I just don’t go around talking to people,” she spoke freely and candidly, even when sharing details about difficult experiences.

Malcolm is a 17-year-old high school senior at Malcolm X high school and is also dual enrolled at Southeastern University (SEU). He is an active participant in several community organizations and a three-sport (football, basketball, and baseball) student-athlete. At the time of our interview, Malcolm was entering his second round of interviews for POSSEE, a college access and youth leadership development program that provide full collegiate scholarships. Despite his many obligations, Malcolm maintains a 3.1-grade point average. He admits it has been difficult managing his busy schedule while maintaining his GPA, but says “I just try and do

my work first. I feel if I do my work first, then I can have more time to play sports, do whatever I want, and have fun on the weekend.” Malcolm’s father was killed when he was in the 9<sup>th</sup> grade. Despite the absence of his father in his life, he says “he was trying” and described his death as one of the biggest challenges in his life and even a teachable moment: “It made me value life more. You can be here one day and gone the next.”

### **Maya- I’m a Mother First**

#### **1.**

I literally  
eat,  
sleep,  
and breathe my children.  
I am determined  
to not have my kids go through  
what I had to go through.  
I got pregnant at an early age.  
I was out on my own at 18  
and was just determined.  
People told me  
                    not only did I ruin my life,  
                    but I brought another life  
                    in this world to ruin.  
Everybody said he wasn’t gonna be...  
they just thought we were going to be...  
a little teenage mama from the projects,  
kids from the projects running around...  
It motivated me  
to be the best mama ever,  
if that's possible  
I'm going to give my children everything  
I didn't have and just go from there.  
I still graduated from high school,  
also graduated college.  
High school graduation,  
I took a picture of [Malcolm]  
and showed everybody.  
Look at me!  
I've got a baby  
sitting right there in the audience.  
It was a good feeling.  
It was me doing everything people said I couldn't do



## Malcolm- They Counting on Me

I'm Black.

Society feel like we are placed on earth just to play sports,  
But I take academics more seriously than I take sports.  
We need more people in other fields besides sports.  
I don't want to play because I feel like I can do more.  
In most instances- I don't want to say white people,  
but basically people of authority  
using black men for labor,  
whether it's sports or working and stuff.  
I just feel like we can do more than that.  
Not saying nothing wrong with playing sports,  
but it's more to it than just playing sports.

It's like when you African Americans  
and you go to a high school,  
the first thing somebody ask you,

"You play football?"

"You play basketball?"

Why don't they never ask you something like,

"You on the honor roll?"

"Are you in different clubs?"

They instantly go to football or basketball.  
Most places I go,  
people were like,

"You must be on the football team."

"You must be on the basketball team."

Like yeah, that's a good thing to have.  
That's a thing to be proud of,  
but at the same time, why ain't you ask me,

"What's my GPA?"

"What college am I trying to go to?"

"What am I trying to major in?"

Their first thing they ask you,

"Do you play sports?"

Do you got any offers?

If so, what schools you got offered to?"

It's just like, why not the other way too, though?

I want a lot for myself and my family.  
I want to make a lot of money  
I feel like everybody counting on me  
A lot of people got their eyes on me  
to be successful  
I can't let anybody down.

## **Family 2**

Originally from Tampa Florida, the second family interviewed for this research is mother Sonia and daughter Shannon. Sonia, 43, is the proud mother of two daughters, Shannon, 17, and Sarai, 15. Though Sonia says her life is “pretty boring,” being a mother of two teenage girls means there is no shortage of entertainment in her home. “I like hanging out with them. They're pretty funny on good days,” she chuckled. Sonia, who has worked as a corporate trainer for 17 years, has always wanted to live in [Southeastern City “since I was 18-years-old.” So, when her job offered her the opportunity to transfer two years ago, she jumped at the chance. Before moving her daughters to Southeastern City they stayed with their dad in Tampa. Sonia has been divorced from their father since Shannon was four. He remains a constant figure in their lives. Though she says the road to being successful co-parents was challenging, they have reached a point where they get along “extremely well.” She described their relationship as “kind of a tag team.”

Shannon, a senior at Stonebrook high school, boasts a 3.0 grade point average, and is a Class Senator in the Student Government Association. Shannon described academic success as “Dedication, and faith really, because it takes more than just doing the work, because sometimes you're not going to understand it.” Since moving to Southeastern City her junior year of high school, Shannon’s grades has continued to improve and she attributes much of that to being at a predominately Black school. Upon graduation, Shannon hopes to attend Howard University in Washington D.C. She appeared slightly nervous at the beginning of our conversation, but after a few minutes warmed up and began to share information freely. Shannon’s story reflects a blossoming spirit of self-determination, as she recounted proudly moments where she moved past her comfort zone with increased confidence.

## Sonia- It's the Expectation

1.

Where we are from,  
there is no such thing  
as all-Black schools  
or predominantly Black schools.  
Its predominately White  
I thought it would be a great opportunity  
to experience a different type  
of school environment.

2.

She gave me the most pushback  
But when she got here  
she adapted the fastest.  
There's been a change.  
total shift  
The effort of wanting to go to school,  
and wanting to go to a HBCU  
the excitement of it  
is now there  
where it wasn't before.

3.

I went to A & M.  
The first opportunity I had  
at a predominantly black school.  
Education for me became different.  
Black professors,  
and all Black people  
I became  
more attached  
to the educational process  
I saw that happen when she got here

4.

I'm not a super-strict parent,  
but I do expect for them to do well  
I want to see A's and B's  
That would be awesome  
I want you to show effort  
even if you're making a C.  
I'm not one of those  
"You've got to have 4.0."  
I want you to do well,  
but I don't want to beat you down.

## Shannon- Learning About Myself

1.

Stonebrook is not the best school  
in the world,  
but that's the thing  
I like most about it.  
At my other school ...  
I don't think they cared  
as much  
as they do here.  
Having these people behind you  
that are constantly encouraging you.  
That's what I feel helped me the most.  
I think I'm learning  
more about myself  
after the move.  
My confidence has gone up.

2.

It's a race thing  
It's more African Americans here.  
They get it.  
They understand.  
They see it every day.

You just have this certain bond  
that you just automatically get.  
Having people around you  
that look like you,  
I think they understand  
they've also been through the same things  
we're going through.

3.

Hearing that they both went to college,  
really wanted me to attend,  
even though not their schools,  
an HBCU.  
Hearing certain conversations  
they had with adults or their colleagues.  
Hearing how they talk professionally  
I was just like, "Okay, wow!"  
That really encouraged me  
to try to be up there with them.

## Sonia- continued

5.

College.

It has never been a choice,  
from the time they were little girls,  
"When you go to college", not  
"If you go to college."

It's the expectation.

The drive, she now has            her own.  
self-motivation                       her own.

6.

We have a little village.

Their dad,

even though we're  
divorced

he's always been very active  
physically active,

emotionally,  
mentally there,

financially

he's never been missing,

sometimes he's there too much.

Definitely not absent.

7.

Some people have that

preconceived idea

of what that looks like.

Some of them may think

we're on welfare,

or none of them have education,

they don't know who the father is,

It has a certain            stigma,

people have this tape

that plays                       in their head

about what that looks like.

I definitely don't want that dynamic

to spread off on my girls.

They might say ...

"My mom's single."

How do other people perceive them?

And then how do other people treat them,

based on that                       perception?

## Shannon- continued

4.

It's a stereotype

that we struggle in school

or that we just barely make it by

that's not always the case.

Some just don't even try.

I know there are some black students  
individually

who don't try

or they skip class

but that could be any student,

any race.

It's not right to label us that

as a whole.

There are some out here like myself

who are working hard to try

and become somebody

and to go the extra mile,

to make sure that I'm successful.

5.

I think a lot of students,

kids, can benefit

from living in a single-parent home.

It's not as bad or such a sob story

as some people make it out to be.

We can do

anything

that people who have a mother and a father

in one home could do.

### **Family 3**

Lee, an IT professional, was born and raised in a small town in Arkansas. She completed high school at 16 and received her bachelor's degree from the University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff. Lee's life revolves around "her boo," Langston. Langston is an only child, and Lee admits he is a bit spoiled. "He's had a computer since he was two," but he is also responsible. Responsibility and other values Lee instilled in Langston were echoes of the values her parents imparted on her. Lee talked about her parents extensively throughout our conversation; using the lessons that were taught to her as a way to help build a solid foundation for Langston.

Langston is a 17-year-old senior also at Stonebrook high school. Along with his high school courses, he is also enrolled at a technical college nearby and maintains a 3.3 GPA. One of Langston's proudest academic moments is when he had the highest GPA all throughout middle school, fifth to eighth grade. Largely influenced by his uncle who is a retired industrial engineer, Langston aspires to be a civil engineer. His number one choice for college is Vanderbilt University; he recalled falling in love with Vanderbilt's campus while attending a summer engineering program at Tennessee State.

Langston did not give extended answers to many of my questions, despite my attempts to encourage more in-depth responses. Nevertheless, throughout his interview, Langston expressed an unyielding focus, bolstered by his mother's "nagging," to accomplish his goals. For Langston academic success is "Doing the best you can do in the field of study you're doing, whatever it is." Unfortunately, I was unable to schedule a follow-up interview with Lee and Langston. Below I offer a set of narrative poems crafted from my initial interview with Lee and Langston.

## Lee- My Mom Always Said...

1.

He's the love of my life,  
an only child.  
Everything I do is to help and improve him.  
Everything he's in, I'm in.  
I just work  
to make sure he has his  
foundation

**<sup>1</sup>It's all in how you raise your  
child, whether it's a two-  
parent or single.**

3.

As I've gotten older,  
it's a combination of giving back  
to the community,  
getting to know who you are,  
getting to know if you're not that great in one  
area,  
that doesn't mean that you won't have success  
at something else.  
Just don't sell yourself short in everything.  
Look at the whole picture

4.

In other words,  
as my mom used to say,  
"You've got to have a balance of it all."  
I think that's what success is.  
My mom used to always say,  
"You can have book sense but no common  
sense."  
I know a lot of people like that.  
Just smart,  
but then when you come to where there's talk  
about something,  
or engage in something,  
they don't have that.

2.

He's my number one priority.  
Work knows that.  
I've been there 28 years.  
Even when he was small,  
when the daycare was closed,  
I would take his Pack n'Play to work  
and have the managers watch him.  
They know him as being a [corporate] baby.  
I don't miss no more than about two days,  
three at the most.  
If he's not sick,  
I'm not sick.  
If he is,  
I work from home  
the only thing that would make me  
snap,  
crackle,  
pop...  
if you're pushing me at work  
and I can't get to him.  
If you leave me,  
I'll give you everything I have.

**<sup>2</sup>It can be two people in the  
house,**

**<sup>3</sup>but if they're not doing  
what they're supposed to...**

**6.**

I know he's different.

When he was small ...  
I looked at all his  
fingers and toes and said,  
"Oh, you got all of them,  
but when you turn 18,  
you're up out of here."  
I don't want to be an enabler,  
Can't do that.  
You got to be able to  
stand on your own two feet.  
So he can get to the next level,  
whatever that level may be.

**5.**  
If you're not exposed,  
how do you know  
what parsley is?  
A kid has to be...  
or even grown people ...  
have to be  
exposed

... it's not just books.  
It's everything,  
family,  
exposure,  
how present yourself to the public.  
Mom used to say,  
"Your what nots and your do nots."  
I used to say, "Mama, my what?"  
That don't even make sense,  
but it does as you get older.

**<sup>4</sup>My mom always said,  
"You're better off if you're by yourself."**

**7.**

It's not so much  
that he has to be the greatest,  
but you have potential  
don't let that go  
those are yours,  
don't let anybody  
take those away from you  
or slack on that  
The other thing is  
you have to want to  
and he wants to.  
You can put all the tools  
out in front of anybody,  
but if they don't have it in them to do it,  
then they're not going to do it.

## Langston- Hurry Up

I always [wanted to be successful]  
if not, my mom wouldn't be happy.

I had to get  
good grades  
so I can

get

out

and

go

to college.

I don't want to be held back.

I want to be number one.

Anybody can do what they want,  
if there's a loving support system around you

My mom,  
my family  
pushed me

Get good grades or else!

Be better than them.

I've always had the **|blindness|** on  
I'm very *determined* to get something done.

I work hard at it so I can get an "A"

I always wanted to

**hurry up**

and

get out of school.

[My mom] wants me to

**hurry up**

and get out of her house.

She says as soon as I graduate

I got to

**hurry up**

and do something.

She tells me the same stuff

**over**

**and**

**over**

**again.**

I'm like,

"I heard it the first time,"

You got to have an education.

It's important to get a job

You won't get anywhere in life

without an education.

## Family 4

Opal and Octavia were the fourth family interviewed for this study. Opal is a 50-year-old mother of seven. Originally from Trinidad, she “left the islands” by herself when she was fifteen-years-old. She did not discuss how or why she left Trinidad, and I did not ask her to elaborate on the matter. One of Opal’s favorite hobbies is crocheting. She showed me her beautiful crocheted blankets during our second interview. She learned as a teenager while living in a group home from a senior volunteer. She recalled vividly being resistant to learning, but the volunteer remained persistent: “They say, ‘You cussing at her.’ She said, ‘Whatever, I’m a grandma for a reason. Sit down.’ She sat me down and she taught me how to do it.” Opal describes herself as a loner who can’t sit still for too long; moving around brings her feelings of comfort and joy. Despite her nomadic lifestyle, Opal has tried to give her children a sense of stability, something she never had. For Opal, being stable is not necessarily associated to being stationary, but an understanding that, despite place of residence, she will always be there for her children, unconditionally. As Opal shared stories about Octavia, I quickly learned that these stories were just as much about her other children. Though Octavia was the intended focus of our conversation, I came to know the lives of her other children just as well.

Octavia is a 17-year-old senior at King high school with a 3.1 GPA. She is the youngest of her seven siblings, but in many ways considers herself an only child because of the age difference between her and her brothers and sisters. After graduation Octavia intends to go to college to pursue Veterinary Science. She spends most her Saturday mornings attending college prep seminars and looking for scholarships. At the time of our conversation, she had already been accepted into two schools and was in the process of applying to more. Octavia credits her siblings for keeping her focused and motivated. They set the bar high, and she is determined to exceed it.

## Opal- They Have Always Wanted More

1.

I never thought about it.  
You know,  
it's like it happens.  
Wasn't supposed to,  
but it did,  
so going on with the program.  
I was with their dads,  
we were supposed to stay together,  
raise the kids together,  
and then we didn't get married,  
they changed their minds,  
so it's like, oh, well, life goes on.

2.

I love to move around.  
I don't feel like any place is home,  
period.  
I don't feel like I have a home  
or belong  
I made a promise to Octavia  
when she started high school  
I would stop moving.  
Middle school has three grades  
and every year  
she went to a different school.  
I made her a promise  
I would let her finish high school  
where she started  
I wish I didn't make it.

3.

I work  
three to eleven  
most of the time.  
As a nurse's aide  
you don't get paid that much  
I have to work an extra job  
or I do a lot of overtime.  
Doubles.  
Seven to three,  
three to eleven,  
I'm getting tired of doing that.  
I've been doing it  
on and off for 28 years.

I don't sleep well at night  
because I did nights for over 20 years.  
When I do fall asleep  
Octavia say  
"Can you give me a ride  
to school?"  
For a while that  
was the only time  
we get to see each other.  
She grew up  
seeing me  
working.  
When she was two years old  
she didn't know I was her mom.  
I was just the lady  
she go to sleep next to.

**4.**

I have seven children.  
four girls and three boys.  
Seven of them  
and one of me.  
I had my first daughter  
two weeks before I turned 17.  
I was in a group home.  
We had 13 girls on the third floor.  
I lived on the third floor.  
Seven girls on the second floor.  
First floor was community,  
the kitchen, the dining room, living room.  
I was very angry as a young person.  
You look at me the wrong way, we fight.  
I was mad at the whole world.

**5.**

See, they beat me down.  
I won't let nobody beat my kids down.  
I wanted to be a better mom  
than the mom I had.  
And I tried real hard to do that.  
Whatever they want, I encourage them to do.  
When you have knowledge  
and want something, you just go for it.  
Can't nobody take it from you.  
They have always wanted more.  
I wish I lived up to that advice  
instead of letting people stop me.

## Octavia- I Know I'm Different

1.

I've always planned things  
and somehow end up doing what I plan.  
When I was younger  
I used to want to be a lawyer.  
I was like,  
"Lawyers be in school for a long time  
so I got to get used to being in school  
so I got to do all of my work now."  
That's what had me doing good in school...

2.

I love to learn  
I've always been like this.  
With what I want to do  
I have to go to school.  
Not only go,  
I have to do good at school  
focus  
in order to get there...  
to disappear.  
I want to be able to do my own thing  
and travel the world,  
I can't do that depending on people.  
I got to do good on my own.  
how tennis works  
you're your own team  
You have to rely on yourself  
I always wanted to do the best  
that's it.  
Challenging myself  
pushes me to keep doing it.

3.

Talking to my mom,  
she'll be like  
if she did things different,  
or if she chose different actions.  
It made me think to try to make the best  
choices that I can and see how that goes.  
It made me want to do better.

4.

Nomadic mom  
My mom move a lot.  
I'm used to moving...  
having to adapt.  
to different places  
new environments.  
I had to move  
with one of my oldest brothers  
and my oldest sister.  
I was living in two places at once.  
They was helping me in school,  
and they made sure I was focused.  
Even when I moved back home  
with my mom,  
they would keep track on me,  
what I'm doing in school,  
my grades and all that.

5.

I know I'm different  
and I think different.  
It's not so much of a higher thinking  
it's just thinking different.  
It's not so much grades to me  
it's more so understanding  
what's being taught to me.  
I always ask why.  
why is this like what it is?  
Sit right next to the teacher...  
wanting to know.  
When I ask why  
they'll break it down.  
When I get it  
I get it.

## Family 5

The fifth family interviewed for this project was Audre and Damon. They came to Southeastern City in 2011 from St. Louis, Missouri. Audre works at what she described as a “traditional corporate” 9 to 5 in the day, and at night, is an entertainment manager. Graciously, Audre offered to have the interview in her home. When I arrived, it was hard not to notice and marvel at the picture of her and Stevie Wonder prominently displayed on her bedroom table. Enthusiastically she recalls, “I sang with Stevie Wonder, and you can't tell me nothing about life!” Audre spoke candidly and freely during our conversation, often sharing intimate details about her life. Audre has had her share of difficulty throughout the course of her life, but she has always done her best to buffer her children “from the reality of the situation.”

Damon, the focus of our conversation, is her “renaissance man.” Damon describes himself as a spoken-word artist, one that brings to life his dreams and realities using rhythm and rhyme. As he shared his story, I came to recognize the poetic nature of our conversation. He speaks of his life with movement and color, making it easy to become enthralled with the meaning he makes of his life and academic success. Damon is a senior at John Lewis Learning Academy, the only all-male high school in the city. He is also dual enrolled at Southeastern University (SEU) where he takes all his classes. He eagerly anticipates returning to his high school in the spring so that he can end his senior year with his peers. Damon has a 4.0 GPA and is in the running for valedictorian of his high school. Though he believes “I'm going to be val, like in my soul,” he resolves that “If I wasn't val, I would still be doing the same thing because no matter where my passions are I know that I'm going to do me. It doesn't matter if that's val.”

The found poems below represent different aspects of Audre's and Damon's life. Damon wrote the concluding poem. He shared it with me at the end of our initial interview and has given me permission to use it in the study.

## Audre- I'm Not the One to Inspire You to be Great

1.

Monday through Friday, I get up,  
I go to work,  
I get off work,  
I work some more.  
That's me.

2.

I'm 36.  
Don't start doing no bunch of math.  
I'm very open.  
I had my first child when I was 14.  
Having her made me go set down  
somewhere.

I was born in Memphis.  
Grew up in Missouri,  
Kansas City for a while.  
Lived on my own  
since  
I was 13.  
It wasn't my plan  
to have kids at 14.  
I don't see it as much of a burden  
as most people do.  
there's some positives to it,  
I'm definitely a single mother  
I've never been married,  
I get to be the sole  
influencer of you.  
Not sole,  
because  
it does take a village.  
There's other people  
that touch your life.

3.

I'm dealt this hand.  
I'm trying to play it the best I can.  
You know what I'm saying?  
You're going to be safe.  
You're not going to have unsafe conditions  
or unsafe anything that's going to derail you

4.

I've got five kids,  
There's not a lot of time for fun  
Family time is probably more  
sitting around in my room  
watching Netflix.  
or getting a DVD.  
We have themed dinners on Friday.  
No one has left [the house] yet.  
I think I'm doing something wrong here,  
or something right.  
Depends on how you look at it.  
I want to give you the best start that you can  
have.

5.

Once they find out that you do have kids,  
the number of children,  
you get a particular look.  
I have five,  
so I get the five kid "look."  
The obvious teenage mother "look."  
Clearly, you had these children very young,  
you look like you they sister "look."  
Yeah, I'm a single mother.  
Yeah, I have five kids.  
Yeah, I started having them early, but  
yeah, I don't get no check.  
Yeah, I don't get no food stamps.  
Yeah, I don't have no Section 8.  
I go to work,  
I do what I'm supposed to do,  
and I take care of mine.  
You get it everywhere.  
all the time.

This is my body.

This is my life.



## Damon – Just Where My Mind Is

1.

At first, it was kind of surreal.  
We're living a life  
that's not really ours.  
I got my hoodie on,  
with my Adidas pants,  
I'm matching,  
got on some nice shoes.  
I never used to have nice shoes  
but now I got on the Jordan's  
cause I got a job.  
It felt like it wasn't my life.  
But it felt good.  
You can't really put that into words,  
the feeling.  
They talk about how you can achieve  
this thing called *Flow*.  
You're so focused on what you're doing  
nothing else matters.  
It's just like when I'm taking a test,  
I don't think about nothing  
but what's on the paper  
and me getting right answer...  
after the right answer.  
That's Flow.

2.

I read a poem  
about an alcoholic  
describing what it was like  
to be an alcoholic.  
He was talking about  
how it was so good  
when you were doing it,  
but then when it was over  
it's just despair.  
Imagine the "it"  
feeling good  
all the time.  
That's success for me.  
I never thought to be anything else.  
A lot of people  
smoke weed to be happy  
for me, all I need is to feel like this.  
That's how it feels to me.

3.

Sometimes I just live life on a whim.  
Whatever the whim brings,  
I'm going to do.  
Other times, it's like  
"All right, stop playing and do it."  
That's how I feel when school comes around.  
That's when you have to really focus.  
I'm real big on positive energy  
Vibrations  
That's the ultimate goal,  
for you to do better than what you always  
have.  
That's just where my mind is.

4.

I moved to the South  
some of the white people  
thought I was real black,  
and the black people  
thought I was real white.  
It was like "Why are you all so backwards  
down here?"  
When we lived in Missouri,  
nobody really said anything about it.  
I used to be real sensitive about it.  
I'm good now.  
A spoken-word artist  
used to say stuff that was so out there,  
"I'm a suspicious mulatto  
and I'm trying to get a job!"  
It's like you don't say stuff like that  
out loud!  
That got my confidence up.  
If he has the balls to go out  
and say stuff like that,  
why can't I feel like that on the inside?

5.

Dr. Seuss?  
He says some stuff!  
Today, you are you and that is truer than true.  
There's nobody alive that is you-er than you.  
I was just like  
MAN, WHAT!?

**6.**

I'm a real avid reader.  
It's fun for me.  
I like fiction books.  
Fiction takes me somewhere outside of the  
world,  
not reality.  
Reality is tough enough.  
Edgar Rice Burroughs is that dude to me!  
I fell in love with his writing style.  
You can't just write a book like that  
without feeling something.  
He had to have something  
going on in his life.  
That kind of inspired me.  
Cause I got stuff going on in my life-  
teenage stuff-  
and I write about it.  
Then when I look back and read it,  
it's like, "Man, I was in a completely different  
situation!"

**7.**

I want to be an educator,  
I'm good at teaching,  
but I plan on getting an  
engineering degree first.  
I'm good at teaching.  
As an educator,  
the challenge-  
to learn my students.

**8.**

I have a high empathy level  
because I just understand your situation  
and when I understand your situation,  
you can just do so much more.  
Carl Rogers said,  
"Hearing has consequences."  
When you actually just sit there  
and hear their own personal meanings  
and not just what you *want* to hear  
but what they're *actually* saying  
it opens up this whole new level of  
understanding and love  
it's, like, you just feel them.  
Not just mentally but, like, FEEL them.

**9.**

I embody the hood  
I'm a part of it.  
I play basketball every day.  
I walk around going to the store  
like 1 in the morning.  
I eat Hot Cheetos.  
It's all stereotypes  
but it's like, that's me.  
I'm from the hood,  
I live in the hood,  
I am hood, and I don't got a problem with it.

## I dream,

but the dreams I have are far too exquisite to be shared within five minutes  
so the wonderland that resides inside of my mind will burst from the seams.

It will press against the roof,  
break down the walls and crumble the ground.  
The ideals that I found in my subconscious are wild enough to make the corporate accountants  
crunching numbers in their cubicles break out of their boxes  
like the rockets created by the astrophysicists designed to soar around the globe  
will also be able to turn snow into gold.  
And self-confidence will be at an all-time high.

Because when I say I can,  
I will.

And then I do.

And there will be no difference between me and you on this level  
because you and I are brothers.

And I don't mean by complexion or genes  
I mean by the lines that create your storybook  
and anything you can find that's in between

I dream.

But what does it mean in a world where it seems that the adolescent scream often goes unheard.

And you soak your fears trying to get to the bottom of this bottle of beer,  
and you get high just to get away from the hate.

You pass it around thinking it will soon fade away  
but little do you realize rent out rules to emotion you didn't even know you had.

And that's why I dream.

And I want to give my dream to you  
because I'm just one man.

There's not much that I can do alone,  
so I'm going to rally my forces, put together my troops.  
Create a militia or army of the so called average Joes and John Does.

And we'll muster enough courage to fight on this margin  
called hope.

Maybe then we'll cease to float on this ever-existing river of castigation.

We'll finally get rid of this plague and this mis-representation.

Or at least we'll try.

We'll put together a demonstration to show people the most complex word we know is now  
supercalifragilisticexpialidocious.

It's "I."

I live,

I love,

I cry,

I scream.

And if anyone is too close minded to realize  
that this is the type of potential that I hold inside of my soul, I'll just tell them that I'm me.

And I dream.

## **Family 6**

Rosa and Raegan were the sixth family interviewed. Forty-three-year-old Rosa is originally from Queens, New York. She is one of eight children whose mother immigrated from Puerto Rico, and her father from Guyana. At 18, after graduating high school in New York, Rosa moved to Southeastern City with her ex-husband, Raegan's father. She started college, but due to marital issues was unable to finish. Despite not finishing college and divorcing her husband, Rosa was determined to create the best life for her and her daughter. Rosa has worked in the medical field for over 20 years. She started as a dietary aide delivering food to patients, but is now the business office manager for a surgery center. Raegan and Rosa do a lot together; they are a mother and daughter dynamic duo. Rosa is a self-professed "helicopter mom," and admits she lives vicariously through Raegan, but she says it is because Raegan is her only child. Raegan is the "only one person to give all my time and my attention to."

Raegan is seventeen-year-old senior at Ella Baker high school. She is enrolled in a Science Technology program that gives her experience in the medical field and is already accepted into two colleges. Raegan has a 3.3 GPA and is working hard to make it to the top 10% of her graduating class. Raegan refers to herself as well-rounded student. Having a good balance between grades and other activities are important ingredients to a successful future. "I'm doing everything right... I have my academics good, my sports good, my extracurricular good. I feel really good now."

My study was designed to interview mothers and students separately in hopes that it would allow for more authentic expressions of their experiences. Rosa, however, asked if she and Raegan could remain together for their interviews. Rosa wanted to do it this way because it was important to her that Raegan is fully aware of everything she did to build a foundation for Raegan's future.

## **Rosa- My Part**

### **1.**

I come home,  
we eat dinner together  
we talk.  
We don't do a lot of TV watching.  
We talk a lot.  
She's talking and dancing, telling me about her day  
I'm telling her about my day.  
We get our hair done together,  
We get our nails done together.  
We shop together,  
We do a lot together  
I try not to be overbearing  
I can be very overbearing  
We do most things together.  
I show her how to manage money,  
how to balance her account  
We do a lot together.  
It's just her  
That's about it, that's really about it.  
Every now and again  
I hang out, but not a lot.  
There's just not the time for me.  
There's some parents that do a lot of hanging out,  
it's just the time for me right now.

### **2.**

I left her dad ...  
We got divorced when she was about 18 months.  
It wasn't her fault that her father and I got divorced.  
She has friends that have both parents living at home  
and they have all these things,  
I didn't want her to feel slighted  
because there's only one parent  
she doesn't get the same thing that her friends would receive.  
I've always tried to step in as mom and dad  
and just because your friends have this,  
you can get it too,  
but you got to work for it.

### **3.**

There's nothing else for you to do,  
but to do well  
You don't have a job.  
You don't have any siblings that you have to take care of.

You have no responsibility,  
no job, but to do well.  
When I was coming up  
I had to walk home from school,  
I had younger siblings I needed to help my mom  
I had to go to the grocery store,  
I had to make dinner.  
... I mean I had a lot of stuff, a lot of responsibilities she has none.

**4.**

My parents come from two different countries.  
They worked hard.  
We had hard times.  
My parents were adamant about never  
having financial assistance,  
government assistance,  
They just worked hard and if my people did that  
why can't I do it?  
That's why I'm so structured.  
If you follow the rules everything will happen the way their supposed to happen.

**5.**

I don't want my daughter to follow in my footsteps  
It's all about planning.  
I don't want to let her down because  
I didn't plan properly.  
It's my obligation as a parent to give her  
all the tools she needs to be successful  
If she goes to the wayside now it's on her.  
I did my part.

**6.**

I'm expected to be there.  
I don't want to let her down because it's only just me.  
I'm in the trenches with her all day everyday.  
I've tried to create a balance with Raegan  
and I'm not going to disappoint her  
I'm going to make sure the lights are paid,  
the bills are paid,  
and we have money to go do different things.  
As long as she's doing her part  
I'm going to do my part.

## Raegan- What Pushes Me

When she comes home,  
we work out,  
we go to the gym.  
we eat dinner.  
She's really anal for some reason.  
all in my business.  
I'm just like,  
"Relax."  
She likes to make sure it's done.  
My mom,  
that's all I have really.  
She has nothing else to think about  
but me.  
She don't do nothing but work  
and deal with me,  
Sometimes she struggles.  
I don't want to struggle.  
I want to live life and be happy.  
I don't want to have to worry.  
That's what pushes me.  
I really care about my future.  
Ever since I was little, I've been doing the work.  
I don't want anybody showing me up.  
I want to be better than other people.  
I don't want no one doing better than me.

Some people are raised,  
"Oh you need a husband and a wife to do this.  
The husband has to do this.  
The wife has to do this."  
Honestly, you could do it by yourself.  
It's hard, but it can be done.  
I can independently do my work  
and still be successful.  
I don't need anybody's help  
You just need to put in the work to do it.  
The man has to cut the grass.  
The man has to fix this.  
The man has to do that.  
Me and her do it all the time.  
We don't need anybody.  
Sometimes she does it by herself when I'm not there.  
You don't need anybody to motivate you.  
You don't need anybody to do something for you.  
You can do it by yourself

## **Family 7**

The seventh, and last, family interviewed for this study was mom, Tari, and daughter, Toni. Tari is a 38-year-old mother of three and grandmother of one. Tari and her family live in a neighborhood southeast of the city. When I arrived at their house, Toni met me in the driveway and walked with me inside. As Toni and I entered the living room, sitting on the couch was Tari entertaining Toni's six-month-old daughter, Kenya. Kenya is a beautiful baby, mahogany skin-tone like her mother, and judging by her length will be just as tall. Tari has an associate's degree and currently works overnight as a certified nursing assistant. During the day, she helps watch Kenya while Toni is at school. Tari appeared shy and was reserved throughout most of the interview. She did not provide lengthy responses despite my best attempts to make her feel more at ease and encourage more in-depth responses.

Toni is a seventeen-years-old senior at John Lewis high school. Though she is still working through the disappointment of being a teenage mother, she has not allowed motherhood to slow her down academically. In fact, it has motivated her more: "I want to do more and better myself every day more for her." For Toni, getting good grades in school is not an option, it's a requirement, "stuff that I have to do." Toni has 3.7 GPA, is a member of the National Honor Society, and is in the running for salutatorian. At the time of our interview, Toni had been accepted into one college and was busy filling out more college applications and applying for scholarships. Now that she is a mother, she will have to go to a college that is local, but she has resolved "I have that drive... Hopefully [Kenya] sees that and is like 'My mommy's in college, so I'm going to go to school, too.'"

Toni and Tari were unavailable for a follow-up interview. The poems below capture their stories shared during the initial interview.

## Tari- Just Go With the Flow

All I do is work.  
I have two daughters, a son,  
and a granddaughter, Kenya.  
I have four babies  
My time is divided amongst them  
providing for them  
since I am a single parent.  
that's where my time goes.  
Work.

Scary.  
You want to do all the right things for the child that you didn't do with the others  
I want to make sure Kenya has everything that she needs.  
Being a single mom,  
financially, at times things fall short  
I work double the hours than the average person  
to make sure I can provide for them.  
You kinda don't think about it,  
you just go with the flow.  
Definitely.

I just have two black daughters  
and I want to make sure they have what they need to succeed.  
Toni is a go-getter.  
She saw my struggle growing up and she's like,  
"No, Kenya is gonna have the world and I can give it to her."  
She knows she can do that through education.  
Being a single mom and still in high school,  
that's hard.  
And to be doing as well as she's doing...  
she's just a strong, young woman.  
She's motivated and  
she doesn't let anything get in her way.

She's different from her friends,  
she's just focused.  
she tunes into what she's doing  
and she gets it done.  
Always.

## Toni- I'm Not the Average Girl

I always do what I'm supposed to do.  
People call me a perfectionist,  
I don't see myself as a perfectionist,  
but I know what I want to be in life.  
I have certain goals.  
I'm going to meet them regardless of anything that happens...  
Academics are not goals  
because I have to do that.  
I don't have the option to *not* be academically successful.  
It's life to me.  
It's every day.  
Wake up, go to school, study.  
This is me.  
Anything I put my mind to...  
I'm going to do  
That's who I am.

When I found out I was pregnant,  
I was disappointed  
It's something I'm trying to take one day at a time.  
My therapist was like  
"You can't hold that over yourself.  
You have to forgive yourself."

We went to church one day  
and they were talking about forgiveness,  
my mom was like,  
"This is for you."

At that moment,  
I was just like  
"I'm going to forgive myself."

But it still hurts,  
I know what happened,  
I messed up.  
I'm not looking at it as something bad, anymore.  
I'm trying to look at it as a blessing.

I don't want people to look at me as *that* girl,  
My goals when I was pregnant-  
I got to get all A's  
I don't want my image to be she's a screw up.  
Don't let me being pregnant look like I'm just a stupid kid  
I messed up,  
I made a mistake,  
but I'm not the average girl.

## Summary

I came to this research as a mother, social worker, advocate, and novice researcher. Despite my own personal connection and overall familiarity in this area, I was not sure of what I would learn and feel throughout the interview process. Would their stories be similar to mine? What would it feel like to be both an insider and an outsider— a Black mother and a researcher? “How does one understand the other when she is the “other?” (Jefferies & Generett, 2003, p. 3). I was not prepared for the ways in which their stories would color and shape my thinking and being as a single mother. Re-presenting their stories in poetic form was my attempt at capturing something that reflected the beauty, power, and complexity of these families. It was me taking a risk to create something that legitimized and privileged their specialized knowledge. It was an effort to respond to the “omission of facts” (Collins, 1986, p. 28) about Black women and Black students, and to reveal, as Audre Lorde (1984, 2007) observed, the necessity of their existence:

For women, then, poetry is not a luxury. It is a vital necessity of our existence. It forms the quality of the light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change, first made into language, then into idea, then into more tangible action.

Poetry is the way we help give name to the nameless so it can be thought. The farthest external horizons of our hopes and fears are cobbled by our poems, carved from the rock experiences of our daily lives. (pp. 37)

The mothers and students in this study come from a variety of demographic backgrounds and lived experiences. Yet, there are common threads which unite these experiences as it relates to academic success. Chapter 5 will explore these commonalities in more detail.

## CHAPTER 5

### RESEARCH FINDINGS: ANALYSIS OF NARRATIVES

*“I’ve never been convinced that experience is linear, circular, or even random. It just is. I try to put it in some kind of order to extract meaning from it, to bring meaning to it.”*

– Toni Cade Bambara

#### **Introduction**

The purpose of this study was to explore academic success as perceived and experienced by African American high school students and their single mothers. Specifically, this study’s intent was to understand the factors and underlying processes that contribute to the successful academic outcomes of African American students in single-mother homes. Four research questions guided this investigation:

1. How do African American students and their single mothers understand and explain the protective factors and processes contributing to academic success?
2. What do African American students and their single mothers report as potential barriers (risk factors) to academic success?
3. How has family structure shaped the academic success of African American high school students?
4. In what ways can existing and/or future social structures help support and facilitate academic success for African American students from single-mother households?

Black Feminist Thought (BFT) and Phenomenological Variant of Ecological Systems Theory (PVEST) were the theoretical frameworks guiding this study. These frameworks were instrumental in directing the study away from the deficit ideology framing Black student

achievement toward an acknowledgement and honoring of the successful academic outcomes of Black students from single mother homes. They were also helpful in making visible the mothering processes that frame students’ academic experiences. BFT and PVEST both emphasize placing participants’ lived experiences and the meanings drawn from these experiences at the center of analysis.

Chapter 4 introduced the 14 participants— seven mothers, four girls, and three boys— interviewed for this study through found poems. A table displaying participants’ characteristics was provided in Chapter 3; I offer a similar presentation of participant profiles in Table 3. Using poetry as the first stage of data analysis, I aimed to highlight the unique personality and perspective of each participant. The poems were written with the purpose of presenting data that are faithful to the essence of the experiences captured in the transcripts (Furman, 2006). In Table 3.

*Participant Profiles*

Family No.	Student/Mother	Student Sex	High School
Family 1	Malcolm Maya	M	Malcolm X High School
Family 2	Shannon Sonia	F	Stonebrook High School
Family 3	Langston Lee	M	Stonebrook High School
Family 4	Octavia Opal	F	King High School
Family 5	Damon Audre	M	John Lewis Learning Academy (single-gender)
Family 6	Raegan Rosa	F	Ella Baker High School
Family 7	Toni Tari	F	King High School

Chapter 5, applying Polkinghorne’s (1995) analysis of narratives, I returned to the original transcripts, reexamining them for “themes that hold across the stories” (p. 12). Chapter 5 displays the findings that emerged after looking across individual experiences. These findings highlight the patterns or commonalities that connect across both student and mother participants (SM), just students (S), or just mothers (M). Table 4 displays the categories of findings and their associated properties.

Table 4.

*Categories and Properties*

Research Questions	Categories and Properties
Protective factors and underlying processes contributing to academic success.	<p>“ALWAYS BEEN LIKE THIS” (SM)            Goal-oriented to the future (S)            Self-starter (M)</p> <p>DEEPLY INVESTED MOTHER (SM)            “I’m a mother first” (M)            “I want better for you” (M)</p> <p>SOCIAL-RELATIONAL SUPPORTS (SM)            Teachers (SM)            Family (SM)            Friends (S)            Community Organizations (S)</p>
Potential barriers (risk factors) to academic success.	<p>“CHALLENGES OF THE STREETS” (SM)</p> <p>RESPONSIBILITY OF SINGLE PARENTING (SM)</p>
The influence of family structure on academic success.	<p>“GO HARDER!” (SM)</p> <p>ACT STRATEGICALLY (M)</p>
Ways existing and/or future social structures help support and facilitate academic success.	<p>“A COMMUNITY THAT HAS OUR BACK” (SM)</p> <p>RECOGNITION OF OUR SUCCESS (S)</p>

## **Protective Factors and Processes Contributing to Academic Success**

Understanding the academic success of Black students from single-mother homes requires an awareness of the various meanings students and mothers ascribe to these schooling experiences. With the study's purpose in mind, three distinct themes emerged related to the protective factors and processes that contribute to academic success: "always been like this," a deeply invested mother, and social-relational supports.

### **"Always been like this" (SM)**

The statement "Always been like this," expressed by Octavia, captures the essence of how student and mother participants associated success as a function of the student's personality. Descriptors such as "confident," "competitive," "leader," and "determined" were frequently used by participants to illustrate the students' fundamental inclination to be successful in school. When students were asked to discuss their earliest memories of wanting to be successful in school, their statements reflected an overwhelming sense of agency and motivation. Toni's portrayal of her success seemingly exemplified the position of other student participants:

Honestly, I don't feel like I have the option to not be academically successful. This is me. That's just who I am... Do what you supposed to do. Listening, studying, learning, actually trying. I feel like, personally, anything I put my mind to I'm going to do... I guess that moment when I got that first C, I was like I don't like how this feels. This feels bad. This hurts my feelings. I don't want that for myself. I have to get an A or a B. Moreover, I want an A but if I get an 89, I know next time I have to do better, basically.

Toni's mention of "That's just who I am" reflects an internalization of attitudes and behaviors that promote academic success. Octavia also expressed an abiding inclination for academic

success in stating, “I’ve always been like this.” She also shared, “I love to learn and become knowledgeable about stuff.” Langston used the metaphor of a horse’s bridle to illustrate the intensity of his determination toward success in saying, “I’m very determined to get something done... I’ve always had the blinders on so I always wanted to hurry up and get out of school.” Damon, who at the time of our interview was vying for valedictorian, offered a similar sentiment. When asked to describe why he thinks he is so successful in school, he responded:

That’s just where my mind is. I never thought to be anything else. From the time I was really little, my Momma used to tell me all the time ‘You’re going to get these As, you’re going to bring them home. If you get a B I’m going to smack the Black in to you.’ And I was always like “Damn mama you going to do me like that?” She never really had to do or say anything like that. I always enjoyed it, so to me, I don’t need a push really.

This is what I like to do.

Mothers also expressed how students’ inherent persistence toward academic success has been ever-present. Audre, in describing Damon’s experiences, stated, “They’re [teachers are] always like, he’s very bright...from little on up. He is always very focused. He’s very serious about his schooling.” Tari also underscored how her daughter, Toni, has always been motivated to do well school: “[Toni] has always been that student that I didn’t have to say, ‘Do your homework.’ She was always excited about school.” Opal, Octavia’s mother, throughout much of our conversation made explicit that Octavia has “always been like that.” To emphasize her point she further offered, “When she came into this world she always came out smart.”

While this larger idea of “Always been like this” demonstrates students’ fundamental predisposition to succeed in school, students and mothers also pointed to different aspects of

personality characteristics. Students emphasized being goal-oriented toward the future, whereas mothers focused on the student being self-motivated.

**Goal-oriented to the future (S).** All student participants expressed how doing well in high school is, essentially, their “ticket” to a better life. Raegan referred to school success as a “stepping stone” toward a better future. The promise of something better, especially social mobility, encouraged students to maintain a sharp focus on academics. Malcolm put it this way:

I feel like I want a lot for myself and my family. I want...well I know money pretty much rules the world and I want to make a lot of money, so like that's one encouragement. I want to be successful; and two- I feel like what you make in school kind of determines your image. When you apply for college they don't really look at who you are as a person, they mostly just looking at your transcript. Me, personally, I just take grades and stuff serious, 'cause I feel like when I hand someone my transcript, I want them to think positive of me. I just look at it like this is an image. I just try my best in everything I do.

Malcolm's intention to create an “image” indicative of looking “good on the transcript” demonstrates an awareness of how transcripts represent more than grades on paper. That is, embodied within the academic “self” or image created by transcripts is a meaning. *Merriam Webster's Dictionary* defines “image” as “a reproduction or imitation of the form of a person or thing; *especially* (emphasis in original): an imitation in solid form.” Understanding transcripts as an image demonstrates how Malcolm has connected his “image” of success to future prospects.

Octavia offered a similar perspective related to her success in school stating, “With what I want to do I have to go to school. Not only go to school, I have to do good at school right now in order to get there.” She also noted how being successful in school offers her a freedom in

which she can take charge of her own destiny: “I want to disappear. I want to be able to do my own thing and travel the world, and I can't do that depending on people. I got to do good on my own.”

Some participants made explicit that their motive for academic success is so that they do not have to contend with the difficulties their mothers face. For example, Raegan noted, “I really care about my future. Life seems really, really hard. She [my mom] didn't graduate from college, but she's doing good for now. Sometimes she struggles. I don't want to struggle. I want to live life and be happy.” Several students and mothers used the term “struggle” throughout our conversations to denote various aspects of their lived experiences. Here, Raegan seems to point specifically to her mother not graduating college as a possible reason for the “struggle.” When asked why being successful is important, Damon offered a related idea but with the added intention concerning his own future family:

That's the ultimate goal, for you to do better than what you always have. I didn't have a bad childhood or anything, my childhood was really pretty okay. We didn't have the best of things, I didn't have the new J's [Jordan sneakers], I didn't have the new PS4 or anything but it was cool. But for my kids, I want them to have everything they could ever want in the world. Me being a good dad, I'm going to not give it to them. I'm going to feel good in my head thinking "I did it!" But they're not going to know. That's what I want. I don't want them to live in the hood, I don't want them to hear gunshots at night. I don't want them to go to school and kids are running around trying to fight them and bully them. I want them to have the life of young gods and goddesses.

**Self-starter (M).** While students connected their drive to do well in school with their future aspirations, the mothers in this study affirmed the self-driven nature of students.

Describing the qualities Shannon has that contributes to her academic success, Sonia stated:

The drive, now she has, in the past couple of years, she has her own self-motivation, her own drive. I haven't had to say, "When are you going to take the ACT; when are you going to take the SAT?" I turned around and looked, [Sonia] had already scheduled the ACT and SAT, and gotten her dad and my mom to pay for it, and then she's like, 'This weekend, I've got to take the ACT.' I'm like, 'Really? Okay.' She has this self-drive about it, now.

Opal recounted a similar experience in which Octavia took the initiative to participate in Upward Bound:

When she got into it, I didn't even know she applied for it until after I got the letter to tell me "Oh your daughter has been accepted into the Upward Brown program." I'm like "I didn't sign no papers." She [Octavia] say, "Yes you did, you just don't remember." But I sometimes said "Just go ahead and sign my name and just let me know what I signed my name to. Yes, she will talk about it and she will go ahead and do it... she knows exactly what she's doing, and what she wants to do.

Like Sonia and Opal, most mothers commended their child(ren)'s<sup>9</sup> ability to "get the job done" and to take action without external influence, especially from them. "He's very much a self-starter," Audre remarked, "He doesn't need a lot of motivation from me, which is a blessing."

Mothers also provided instances in which students were able to self-advocate, or speak-up on their own behalf, regarding their grades or other issues in school. Lee noted that if

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<sup>9</sup> I use singular and plural forms because five out of the seven students had siblings. These mothers did not speak on their mothering as exclusive to just the one child who participated in this study. As expected, they referenced their other children as well.

Langston has a problem in school with a grade or otherwise “he will send a teacher an email, he copies me on everything, and then we'll get together.” Rosa also shared a story of when Raegan disputed a grade:

[Raegan] had eye surgery in September. She had a retinal detachment and she missed an entire week of school. She's taking economics, pre-calculus, physics, and another class. She's taking three hard courses right now and they deal with a lot of math and we had her teachers email their lesson plan to us and even though she couldn't see out of one eye for a while and she was like I'm just going to have to figure this out on my own and she would teach herself the lesson plan and she would argue with the teachers because she was stressing me and the teachers out because she had an 88. I just knew that she wanted to exceed and excel so much. Her goal this year was, I 'm getting all A's. I'm graduating with cords.

A standout moment for Opal related to Octavia’s ability to self-advocate was when Octavia was having difficulty in a math class in which the school promised to provide tutors:

Last week she called me crying. I said "What's wrong?" [Octavia] said "I got a 55 on this test." She lost it. I'm like "Calm down, go talk to the counselor." She said "No. They keep saying they're going to give us a tutor. They haven't gotten us a tutor yet." I said "Would you like me to come to the school?" She said "No." Because she knows I'm not the calmest person. I must say I fight for my mine. She said, "No. I don't want to get a tutor now. This has been going on since school started. I don't want this class" and she went off. So, when I did go up to school and speak to the counselors with her, [the counselor] was like "Well we're going to get you a tutor." She said "Really, when?" And you know. I was like "Why am I here?" [The counselor said] said, "Well we're working

on tutors." [Octavia] said "You've said that since the day we started school. We haven't got nothing yet." She said "You're not messing up my GPA!" and she looked at me. I said, "What you looking at me for?" So, and she told them "Since you can't get us a tutor take me out of this class." So, they took her out of the class, they gave her statistics. So, I said "Do you feel better now?" She said "Yes. Now I know I can pass my class." But that's her attitude.

Like other participants, Octavia's attitude toward academic success is exhibited by her ability to take the initiative and to use the resources around her to foster success.

### **Deeply Invested Mother (SM)**

A deeply invested mother, the second category, was one of the most cited protective factors contributing to the academic success of students in this study. Both students and mothers discussed the various ways mothers were engaged in their child(ren)'s education. Participants highlighted a combination of mothers' involvement being demonstrated through frequent messages of encouragement and support, explicitly conveying high expectations to do well in school and exhibited by their presence in school and/or in school-related activities. For most students, their mothers served as a central figure to help them stay focused and motivated.

Describing his mother's involvement, Langston noted, "Yeah, everything I'm in she's in, or has a foot in it or something like that." Raegan described her mother similarly:

I have my mom. She pushes me, I could say. She don't understand the work that I do in school. She's like, "What is this?" I'm like, "I know. I don't know either." She does help me with scholarships, though. She's a good essay writer, so she edits my essays or something like that. Nobody really helps me out but my mom.

When asked to further explain what it looks like when her mother “pushes” her, Raegan responded:

She's really anal. Really really anal for some reason. I'm just like, "Relax." She likes to make sure it's done. She says, "Don't procrastinate." When I do my work, I do it right then and there, I can say I got that from her. When I get an assignment, I do it right then and there so the rest of the week I won't have to worry about it because I did it already. I can say the procrastination, I don't procrastinate when it comes to work. I get that from her telling me stuff. She gives me advice, but she's like, "If you don't do this, the outcome will be like that." I don't want my outcome to be like that, so I just listen to her advice.

Malcolm expressed a corresponding description of his mother’s involvement. Throughout our conversation, Malcolm frequently spoke about how his mother “never let me give up.” He believes that “Everyone is counting on me” to be successful in school and in life. Malcolm knows his mother is counting on him, too, and “that’s why she is so hard on me.” He went on to share an example of his mother’s involvement in school:

My mom is the type...when I used to get in trouble she used to come to school and walk me to every class. She'll still do it to this day. When I was in middle school she got a phone call, my mom literally stayed with me the whole day walked me to every class. So, I feel like she just push me. She know that I can be somebody and she will never let me be lazy. In the heat of the moment, it's like my mom...she getting on my nerves, but I know in the long run I know it's going to pay off.

When reflecting on their experiences, mothers expressed a comparable tenacity and persistence related to their involvement in their child(ren)’s academics. While mothers also

shared their high expectations, these messages were tempered with an understanding that they do not have to be, and probably will not be great in everything. Lee expressed it this way, “If he had any problem with anything, because he'll tell you English is not his strongest, I told him that's okay, because you're not going to be good at everything you do, but just try your best.” Similarly, Sonia explained that she “is not a super strict parent but I do expect for them to do well; I do expect for them to be respectful.” She went on to say:

I try to support them, and I'm big on wanting to praise them on everything- the A's, the B's, and the C's, and then talk through any time that you're not doing well. What can we do to help support you in that? I'm praying that that would be part of my influence. Like I said, I'm not the strict person in the books all the time with them, but we always have time, "Did you do your homework? Is that done? I need you to get that done," those types of things, and showing them, if you don't get it done, it's on you. Like I said, I've been to school. I already got my high school diploma and my degree. You got to do it now, I can't do it for you.

Sonia's comments illustrate the different ways mothers see their roles as facilitators in their child(ren)'s success. Because these roles might differ from conventional, or mainstream, methods of parent involvement they are no less meaningful. Audre underscored this notion when she stated:

I think that, a lot of people think that the successful kids are the ones where their mother sits down with them every night and goes over their homework and that's not me. It's just, Imma make sure you get it done, like, “Did you do it?” I'm not the sit down next to you and go over question by question ... I'm just not going to do that.

Mothers' discussion of their school-related efforts ranged. Whether their investment was demonstrated by emailing teachers as Rosa shared, or "meeting with counselors at least twice a year" like Lee expressed, or as Sonia described *not* being "the mom that shows up and she's there all the time [and] makes these little special cupcakes," mothers maintained an investment in their children's education that was vital to their success.

Overall, students and mothers expressed the diversity of ways mothers were engaged in their child(ren)'s schooling. Yet, in addition to this overarching awareness of a deeply invested mother, most mothers emphasized other dimensions of their involvement: being a mother is their main priority and a strong desire to want better for their children.

**"I'm a mother first" (M).** Throughout my conversations with mothers, I listened as many expressed how being a mother took precedence over other aspects of their lives and for some, even work. Maya explained it this way:

I'm willing to say "well I'm going to leave this job." I am a mother first. Those kids didn't ask to be here and I brought them here and again I said failure is not an option. So, I am willing to do that, I always say that I got time for my kids. Like people ask me on the weekends when they see me out, "Why you always got your kids with you?" And I turn around and say "Well where are your kids? Why DONT you have your kids with you?" So, I think that's like the difference between me and a lot of people. It's like we're forced into a situation where we got to choose. Are we going to work and make this money are or we going to see what's going on with our children? I'm willing to give up this money and figure out how we're going to live, how we're going to eat just to make sure my child is going to be successful.

Even when asked to share something about herself in my hope of learning more about her own personal history, Maya maintained the focus on her children:

That's me, [Malcolm, Quincey, and Masai]. The children, that's me. That day, I don't know if I told you or not but when they told me that I was not only ruining my life, I was ruining someone else's. That's when I just figured, okay so my life don't matter no more. I've got to focus on him. Make him. For myself, I take care of myself. I eat. I take a bath but just doing things for myself, I really don't. I really put my children first and other people's children too. I do. I really do.

Lee also discussed the subordinate position work has in relation to Langston noting, “He's my boo, my number one priority. Work knows that.” When I asked, “How do you explain that to work?” in a matter-of-fact way she replied, “I don't.” She further explained:

Yeah, he [supervisor] put that on my review last year. He says, “I don't know how you do it. Do you mind if I put that on your review?” I'm like, “Oh, okay.” I don't miss no more than about two days, three at the most. If he's not sick, I'm not sick. If he is, I can work from home or wherever I have connectivity, but the only thing that would make me snap, if you're pushing me at work and I can't get to him, but if you leave me, I'll give you everything I have.

Mothers also discussed other dimensions of their lives that became secondary (or less) to their children(ren)'s needs. It seems that mothers purposely sacrificed certain aspects of their own lives in order to fully attend to their child(ren)'s. Maya demonstrated this when she shared, “just doing things for myself, I really don't.” Sonia described this phenomenon in detail when she talked about dating. Below, she discusses how she intentionally delayed dating so that she could focus on her daughters:

I get that that's part of the deal, you do it. You just have to, and some of us do it in different ways like I don't shun anybody else that does it differently than me, we typically do things because of our experiences one way or the other. I feel like I have, as I've been going through this journey for the past seventeen years, even though at times it has been frustrating, I always felt like I have their best interests at heart, this is how I would want to do it because I think this is the best for them. Like you said, you never know how it goes. My intent may just be of my experiences and maybe that might not have been the right way.

Sonia's comments reveal the complexity of prioritizing what is perceived as the role of mothers over other aspects of these women's lives. Undeniably, being a mother is central to these women, but it is not always an "easy" positioning. As Sonia put it, "They're accustomed to you being in this space, and they want you to stay in this space. She's [Shannon] told me, 'Your life revolves around us.' Which is true. I don't do much."

**"I want better for you" (M).** Reflecting on their own lives, many mothers expressed that the motherwork they do to support their child(ren)'s academic success is, in many ways, driven by their intention for their child(ren) to have more—more than what they had growing up, and even more than what they have been able to provide their children. Opal illustrated this idea in a message she often shared with Octavia and her other children: "I'm your mom, you are going to be somebody." This sentiment seemed to capture how most mothers related their parenting to their child(ren)'s success. Thinking about how each generation wants better for the next, Opal stated:

I heard recently, I never heard it before, they say the next generation is supposed to be smarter than the past generation. And I was like yes, you want your kids to more

successful than you are. So yes, I kind of like that concept, you know. So, yes, I push them, you know.

Lee, who during much our conversation would reminisce about the lessons her parents, namely her mother, taught her offered a similar thought:

I've always told him, "I have my degree." I said, "This is something that you should want for yourself. Regardless if you do anything with it, but it's something no one can ever take that from you. Like my parents wanted better for me, I want better for you, so it's just a generation of each, somebody wanting something better, so what do you want for yourself? Where do you see yourself?"

Generally, mothers expressed that their role is to provide the means so their child(ren) are situated in better social and economic circumstances. Several mothers stated more candidly that they simply did not want their children to, as Rosa declared, "follow in my footsteps... I want her to do better than me." Essentially, mothers acknowledged that their motivation and persistence to support their child(ren) academically is in direct response to their own history. Audre, one of three women in this study who became a mother as a teenager, and who faced a significant amount of challenges in her own life noted:

You've got all these other situations going on. I think that a lot of times, people's home life just affects their academics so much that it doesn't, you can't get where you want to go, because there's so many outside distractions. Maybe you're not dressed the right way, or you know, your clothes ain't how they, ain't clean, or whatever's going on, you know, at home. I always said, we're not going to have any of these issues. That's not, if you don't succeed at school, it's not going to be because you're hungry, unclean, or having some situation at the house. You're going to be together, and that's just been a goal of

mine from the time they were born, that, you know, all the bullshit I had to go through that ruined my academic career that I knew could've been amazing, you're not going to have that. You're going to be safe. You're not going to have unsafe conditions or unsafe anything that's going to derail you. That's been my point, to make sure that you have the best situation I can give you to be successful.

Also a teenage mother, Maya remarked, “I was determined to not have my kids go through what I had to go through.” Like Audre, as a young mother Maya encountered frequent condemnation from her family, community, and larger society. Tears began to stream down her face as she expressed how Malcolm’s academic success makes her feel. “It’s just a blessing. I don’t know I’m about to cry I’m so proud of that boy...” And, for the people who ever doubted his (or her) abilities, his academic success validates her hard work and confirms everything she ever set out to achieve. Maya’s statements reflect her commitment to do what she perceives as best to maintain Malcolm’s success in school and beyond:

I’m going to do whatever. Call me or say whatever. As long as the end results are what I see fit, then I’m going to continue to do it... At the end of the day I am looking at the bigger picture. In the end, if he’s successful, if he graduates from school and he gets a good job well then we’re not going to be in this situation anymore. Because my time is limited, the way it’s supposed to be. I’m supposed to go before him and then he goes. So, you know we got to make sure he’s going to be OK in the long run.

### **Social-Relational Supports (SM)**

The third major category of this study highlights the importance of interpersonal relationships and support systems in addition to mothers. Many of the student and mother participants identified formal and informal support networks to include teachers, family

members, friends, and/or programs within their community that contributed to the students' success. The networks reported by the participants will serve as the dimensions in this category: teachers, family, friends, and community organizations. In every case, participants shared how their relationships with one or more of these supports had a positive impact on their schooling.

**Teachers (SM).** Several students and mothers reported relationships with teachers that were instrumental in the students' academic success. When discussing the roles of teachers, most participants reflected on what teachers did outside of the classroom as having the greatest impact. Sharing what she likes about her school Octavia replied, "It's not every teacher but once you get a teacher that cares about you they really engage their time." Octavia went on to explain:

Most of them went out of their way for me which is amazing. My mom, she went to go drive a truck so I had no type of transportation. Sometimes Mr. Woods would provide transportation or other teachers would do it for me. When I joined the tennis team ninth grade year I wasn't able to do it as much because I didn't have a physical, but my coach when I told him I wanted to do it he got me a physical and he took me home the majority of the practices and games.

Octavia's remark of how amazing it was that teachers went "out of their way" represents the saliency of understanding the needs of students and families beyond the classroom. Damon expressed an almost identical sentiment about several teachers who knew important aspects of his life:

It's like three teachers. Ms. Nichols, Ms. Sand, and Ms. Bray. They all only knew one aspect, or maybe two. Ms. Nichols, she understood that I was a man, or a young man and had all these ambitions outside of school and she understood that. She also understood

that I was very ... She understood my love for Dr. Seuss. If you can understand somebody's love for Dr. Seuss, then you gotta know that person. Everybody think Dr. Seuss is just for children. No, Dr. Seuss is that guy. Ms. Sand, she understood my relationship struggles and she understood that I'm hood. I'm from the hood so it's like, don't just treat me like I'm just this nerd, you know what I mean? I'm more than that and she understood that. Ms. Bray, she understood that I was real smart and that I enjoyed to learn. Not just to teach or to read. The learning process was fun for me, she understood that. When you got these three different teachers— 'cause you can't connect that deep with everybody and I understand that and that's probably why they only had certain aspects—Ms. Bray did this for me, Ms. Nichols did this for me and Ms. Sand did this for me, but all together it's just, like, they know me. If I can get to know three aspects of this kid, I might be the difference between him finishing high school or just saying, "I'm gonna sling this dope real quick cause it's easy."

Like Damon, other students noted the personal connections they had with their teachers. Shannon's discussion of teachers emphasized how they took a vested interest in her life, providing "personal advice, and not just general advice, like stuff directed towards me." When asked to talk about why she is successful in school, Shannon also highlighted the significance of having personal relationships with her teachers:

Oh goodness. I think it had everything to do with my environment, because when you have people around you, even teachers and stuff like that, who constantly encourage you to do everything you possibly can to get that C or that B or that A, it makes it a lot easier because now you've built up that confidence. Stone Brook is not the best school in the world, but that's the thing I like most about it, coming from my other school, because at

my other school it's not that they ... I don't think they cared as much as they do here. Teachers will pull you aside personally and have these conversations with you. That's what I feel what helped me the most is having these people behind you that are constantly encouraging you.

Shannon, who previously went to a majority White high school, said it was having Black teachers, in particular, that made the difference:

It's more African Americans here, which I feel is why I feel like I have that encouragement. Not that having primarily White teachers at my school in Florida was a disadvantage, but I don't know. You just have this certain bond and connection that you just automatically get. I think that did play a major role in why [I was successful].

Just like students, mothers also underscored the importance of having personal relationships with teachers. Tari referred to teachers and other school officials who “played a huge part in [Toni's] success” as “school parents.” Describing teachers as “school parents,” Tari illustrated the degree of warmth and care given to her daughter, Toni. For Tari, these teachers provided “anything from an encouraging word to basically tutoring,” all important to Toni’s success. Audre referred to teachers and other school officials that assisted her and Damon as her “supporting cast.” Audre expressed how certain teachers, probably unwittingly, interceded, serving in a supplementary parental role. Enthusiastically, she talked about one teacher in particular, Ms. Moore:

She has just been amazing. She fills in a lot of gaps, and she's always... it's one of the spots where I feel bad when I can't make it to the [track] meets and I can't make it to the, you know, whatever it [other school-related functions] is, because I just can't. When you have that other parent, you're able to say, okay, you can cover this bill, and I'mma take

off right here and go do this thing, or you can go instead of me. Somebody can be there.

You don't get to be at everything that you want to be at. You just don't. You just can't.

Though not a teacher, Maya's appreciation of a school counselor also illustrates the significance of school personnel in the lives of participants. Maya credited the counselor for getting Malcolm connected to various opportunities. "She triggered it!" Maya declared:

Like, starting in 8th grade I met a lady named [Ms. Butler] who recommended him for the early college program. It started there. So, when he went to high school he was dual enrolled, he was going to Southeastern University and he goes to high school. That was the start...and after that it was just opportunity after opportunity. Like the Arthur Blank program came up. I don't know if he told you but he's a Junior Youth Ambassador. He got to go to Germany. So, it's just like...you know I don't want to brag...but it's just like....

Maya went on to add "She just opened up that door and like I said everything else just started pouring in.

**Family (SM).** The majority of the participants reported that personal relationships with their immediate and extended family members encouraged them to achieve academically. Though the particular family members discussed by participants varied, still, it was the availability of supportive and caring relationships within their family that seemed to serve as an important factor promoting success. Malcolm, the oldest of three brothers in the home, discussed how serving as a role model for his brothers encourages him to do his best: "Both of them they are not as academically gifted as me, but one thing I do notice about them is that when they see me, and when I see them, they are trying." When asked about what helps keep him focused he stated, "of course my mom, my brothers...I give them somebody to look up to."

Octavia's experience was the reverse of Malcolm's. As the youngest of seven—the sibling closest in age to her is 9 years older, and her oldest sibling is 20 years older—Octavia's siblings served as a positive role model for her success. She described the role her siblings played in influencing her success:

I had to move with one of my oldest brothers and my oldest sister, so I was living in two places at once. They was helping me in school, and they made sure I was focused. Even when I moved back home with my mom, they would keep track on me, what I'm doing in school, my grades and all that. One of my sisters, she fell off, but she stayed on me so I wasn't doing what she was doing.

Octavia also shared how her siblings inspired her competitive nature:

I think it's all because of my siblings. I was always hearing about how they were doing so good in school and how they were doing this and that. I was like, I can't do nothing I have to be good and I have to be better. My siblings they be telling me "make sure I do good." In the long run it helps me more than hurts me. I like to learn already so I just put both of it together.

Langston, encouraged to become an engineer because of his uncle, stated "I just gravitated towards the engineering field... When I was younger, over the summer, I used to go to Illinois. He used to take me to his job and stuff like that." Although he does not visit his uncle as often as he used to, he frequently talks to him over the phone:

He helps me if I don't know something in math. He's real good at math. I don't have to send him the problem. I can just tell him the problem and he'll know how to do it like that. He says, "Oh, you don't know how to do it?" I'm like, "No, that's why I called.

Langston also credited his cousin for helping him in English, a subject he admits is not his strongest: “My cousin, she's good at English. I'll write the paper and then I'll send it to her so that she can revise it, and then she'll send it back to me and I'll go over it one more time.”

Mother participants, Maya and Sonia, pointed to the closeness of their family as important elements contributing to their child(ren)'s success. Opal referenced Octavia's relationship with her older siblings as an important factor to her success. Describing the influence of Octavia's brother she noted, “We used to use him when she act up ‘I'm telling your brother. ... it's like she has to live up to this image in his eyes, like that's her dad. She shared how she raised her children to “stick together no matter what.” Throughout our conversation, Maya often stated that her family “lean on each other.” Maya, whose family consists of herself, her three boys (which includes Malcolm's paternal brother), and her younger sister who she raised, attributes Malcolm's success to “the fact that we [family] just stick together. A lot of times you'll see Black families try to tear each other down and don't want to work together. The fact that we just support each other and stick together.” Maya's internalization of the negative stereotypes associated with Black families, coupled with her own harmful familial experiences seemed to motivate Maya to create a home environment that was close and supportive. Responding to how informed her family is on Malcolm's success, Maya stated:

We're close knit. My mom bails me out a couple of times when need be. We make it work but that's it. That's the whole family right there. It's not big and not a lot of people to go to. That's why I'm so close knit with my household that I like for us to get together and do things together. Even if it's just sitting at the table eating dinner. I just like that.

Likewise, in detailing the impact of her family, Sonia highlighted, “I had that support. My mom is very supportive, my brother ... Brothers, but my older brother ... Everybody.”

Sonia's job required her to travel frequently, so she often spent several days away from her daughters. During those times Sonia noted, "We have a little village taking care of the girls, including my ex-husband's people, too." Unlike other participants, Sonia and Shannon were explicit in also including the role of Shannon's father in her life:

I have a very strong family base. My family is very close. Their dad, even though we're no longer ... We've been divorced since the girls were young, like four and two, but he's always been a very active part of their life, so he's never been missing, and sometimes he's there too much, I think. He also went to college, so he also sees the importance in school. If anything, he's probably the one that's more stringent about getting this done, and what are you doing.

**Friends (S).** Student participants also discussed their relationships with friends as being an important factor contributing to their academic success. Most students talked about how their friends are "similar" to them. Students seemed to be selective about the peers they associated with, thereby creating a circumscribed network of friends. Octavia highlighted this selection process as she described her friends:

I don't speak to that many people because the way I am, if we don't have the same mindset ... We can have different mindsets but have the same goal. If we don't have the same goal then I shy myself away from the person. All of my friends we all want to go to college, we all already have a career we have in mind of what we want to do. We're all prepared to do that. We're all different but we try to put ourselves out there and engage ourselves in stuff.

Raegan shared an almost identical sentiment:

None of my friends ever failed a class before. I think the people you hang with, the people you are. My friends make different decisions than I, but we know how to handle our business when it comes to school. We do our work, we go to class. The people that I hang around with. When we see other kids, when they fail, we're just like, "You need to get yourself together." Failing is embarrassing to me and to the people I hang around with. That's embarrassing. You're failing.

Malcolm, a dual enrolled high school and college student, spoke about how college students and professors do not know he is in high school unless he tells them. On one hand this anonymity helps ensure that dual enrolled students receive the same kind of treatment as a typical college student; on the other hand, it can also create temptations that can distract from school. Though Malcolm admits that his first year in the program was tough, he credits his friends for helping to keep him focused:

Most of my friends, they are similar to me. I think they're important 'cause I know most times it's on me where I just wasn't feeling it. There have been times up here where I'd rather just go to the rec center and then my friend Raheem, be like, "No, let's do our work first. Then we can go." I think friends play an important role 'cause you got some friends gonna be like, "All right, let's go." You got some friends like, "Handle business first." I think it play a big role.

In a statement that seemed to sum up how most participants felt about their friends, Malcolm went on to say "That's what you got friends for, to keep you on track."

While the role of friends was almost exclusively referenced by students, a few mothers also spoke about the role of friends in supporting their child(ren)'s success. Sonia noted that when Shannon started in her new high school she began to associate with seniors. According to

Sonia, Shannon's motivation to do well in school was partially inspired by her peer group. She put it like this, "I think it has to do with peer groups. She got here, she attached herself to a lot of seniors that graduated this past year." Audre's comments about Damon's best friend pointed to how friends also challenge each other: "He has a very good circle of friends, and they're all like my children now... Him and his friends are very competitive and one of his best friends are like the one two punch [for valedictorian and salutatorian]." Audre's statement "They're like all my children now" hints at the ways a few mothers in this study also nurture the community. She also mentioned, "His friends... them my kids, too, you know?" Opal made a comparable statement about her relationship with Octavia's friends: "Yes, a lot of her friends come at my house... It's like I gave birth to seven, but I have 11 million kids they say, you know."

**Community programs (S).** Another factor contributing to the success of student participants is their involvement in community programs. Community programs offered a number of opportunities to support student achievement including access to mentors and leadership development. Two participants, Damon and Langston, belong to one of the largest mentoring organizations serving African American males, 100 Black Men. Langston shared this about his participation in this organization:

They push me to be a better man. They put me in the forefront at a lot of their events and stuff, so they take me to the national conference and stuff like that and meet other people from different chapters and stuff like that.

Similarly, Damon noted:

I have like three mentors with a Hundred Black Men. One of them is Mr. Ray. He took me to Notre Dame one summer. He's been working with me really closely, about a lot of stuff. If I don't have the money to pay my junior dues, he'll pay it for me. It's 'cause they

believed in me, and stuff like that, like with the Hundred Black Men, they're a real good resource.

In addition to mentorship, participation in community programs afforded students exposure through travel. Octavia, who noted “travel” as an important part of her life, talked about how meaningful travelling with Upward Bound—a program that provides support to students preparing for college—was in broadening her horizons and expanding her comfort zone. She explained how it might be helpful for other students:

I feel like some people just like to be in their comfort zone. They want to get out of their comfort zone, but they're not used to it, and they haven't experienced it, so they wouldn't do it. Being in Upward Bound, I been to about four different states already. All states are different. So being in Texas versus being in Georgia, the environment's different. Even if a person's never been outside the state of Georgia, the one time, if they went to Chicago, and they liked the area in Chicago, they'll know they want to travel out more to see what else is out there.

Malcolm, a member of several programs, has also been afforded the opportunity to travel, but he's gone out of the country. In describing recent travels, Malcolm shared, “This summer I went to Germany. We went to a school in Germany and did a couple projects there. This upcoming summer we either going to go to Costa Rica or South Africa.” When asked to talk about the influence of these programs, Malcolm explained how they show that kids “where I stay are not just statistics or what's going on in their neighborhood.” Responding to how his participation in these organizations supported his success Malcolm reported, “It just give me a different look... a different perspective from different things. He also expressed his appreciation to the people that connected him to these opportunities:

It makes me feel blessed and honored to know that people nominated me for different things and to know that people care about me... so it kind of just like gives me extra motivation...extra drive.

In summary, the factors and processes contributing to the academic success of African American students from single-mother homes centered around three themes: “Always been like this,” deeply invested mother, and social-relational supports. “Always been like this,” which highlighted the students’ inherent inclination toward success, included the properties: “being goal oriented toward the future” and “self-starter.” The category “deeply invested mother” detailed the various ways mothers supported the successful academic outcomes of their child(ren). This theme also included mothers specifying their role as “I’m a mother first” and being driven to position their child(ren) in better social and economic circumstances, as captured in the property, “I want better for you.” Social-relational supports, the last protective factor participants in this study discussed, was noted as being an additional layer, or system, of support for students. The role of these supports was elucidated in the properties teachers, family, peers, and involvement in community programs.

### **Potential Barriers (Risk Factors) to Academic Success**

Since resilience is a part of this study’s conceptual framework, understanding what Black high school students and their mothers report as potential barriers, or risk factors, to academic success is also important. The use of the word “potential” is intentional as it points to what is possible, not what is certain. Understanding risk factors in this way fosters the space where the subjective, or self-defined, meanings participants make of their experiences are situated at the core or center of analysis. Two categories of findings that emerged from data analysis related to potential barriers include “challenges of the streets” and the “responsibility of single parenting.”

### **“Challenges of the Streets” (SM)**

Four student-mother dyads (Malcolm/Maya; Octavia/Opal; Damon/Audre; Toni/Tari) live in low-income neighborhoods known for having fewer resources and high-crime rates. Though these communities had elements that, for outsiders, might seem to pose some measure of “risk” to students’ academic success, families expressed an alternative way to understand their neighborhood context. Damon and his mother Audre described an appreciation for their community despite these negative elements. Damon illustrated this appreciation stating:

People say it's real dangerous but it's not. As long as you carry yourself correctly. If you're walking up the street pants sagging, red bandana in the left pocket where it's not supposed to be, you're going to get shot. It's stupid stuff. If you're just a regular person and you're just walking up the street going and handling your business, you've got nothing to be afraid of. A dog, maybe. But it's really not that bad. You're going to hear gunshots, you're not in the suburbs. You're going to hear that type of stuff, you're going to hear kids running around all through the night. You get used to that type of stuff, you actually learn to appreciate it, because when you grow up that's not where you want to be and you're going to remember that.

Audre made similar connections noting, “It's an interesting thing, because I feel like, to be well-rounded, you have to see it all, actually. I don't think it's bad to see other people living that lifestyle and recognize that you have to make a choice.” Both Audre’s and Damon’s statements reflect an acknowledgement that while these environmental elements pose an “opportunity for you to make bad decisions,” as Audre shared, it also provides the opportunity to develop an awareness that this does not have to be your life, if you so choose. Audre, using her father’s words, clarified this idea further:

My father always said, you know, you can live in the ghetto, and just because you're in it doesn't mean you have to be of it. That always stuck with me. You know what I'm saying? You can live anywhere, and just because I live in a particular place, town, area, I don't have to be of it. You do what you got to do as far as money is concerned, and this is what I can afford, so I'm going to live where I can afford, the best situation I can, where I can afford, and I really don't ... While I am a part of my community to the point of I go to the local little store around the corner, and I say "Hi," but I'm not going to live that lifestyle.

Explaining further how he avoids potential threats, Damon noted:

For me, everything is real mental. As long as I keep my eyes focused on where I'm going, when I walk, I walk with my face straight up, I'm focused on my destination. Whenever I'm thinking about school or something, that's what I'm thinking about. If I'm thinking about my sport, that's what I'm thinking about. Whenever I'm walking through the neighborhood, I don't focus on anything but where I'm going. I think that's, I could have been in a lot of trouble if I didn't do stuff like that.

Malcolm and his mother Maya expressed virtually the same idea when discussing their community environment. Like Damon, Malcolm described a mental fortitude that keeps him focused despite "challenges of the streets." Detailing his experience she explained, "I see everything. I'm just staying focused because a lot of kids I went to elementary school with don't go to [school]... they just out there." Being an athlete and involvement in the community has made Malcolm popular in his neighborhood, but he has kept his distance from anyone who could distract him. Describing his walks through the neighborhood Malcolm stated, "They speak to me, I say 'what's up' and I keep it moving. I try to stay focused." Malcolm's discernment, "I

just know right from wrong. I know what to do, I know what not to do,” is a quality that several students expressed and one that his mother, Maya, is grateful he possesses.

When asked if there were various elements in the environment she wanted Malcolm to avoid, Maya exclaimed, “Everyday! Drugs, gangs, uh, try to make the right decisions when I’m not standing right over you!” She also shared an additional concern related to the unique challenges of having a Black son: “Especially him being a Black boy. And this is my main thing with things going on today...is don’t put yourself in a situation... and it’s sad to say...I don’t want you in a situation where you have to deal with police.” Maya’s statement reflects another dimension of risk and concern that Black mothers face: the fear of police violently arresting or killing their children. Maya frequently reminds Malcolm to “be very mindful about who you are around, cause sometimes being around the wrong people going to put you in a situation you can’t get out of.”

Like Malcolm, other student participants discussed the presence of negative peer influence in their communities, but more specifically how they were able to avoid it. When asked to discuss what, if anything, he intentionally avoided in his environment to maintain his focus on school, Damon replied:

There was these dudes, the troublemakers I guess. They just patrol the streets sometimes... you start messing with them, you're going to fall off. All of them have dropped out of high school, some of them work at Dominoes. I see a couple of them all the time when I go to the store and they have their Dominoes hat on delivering pizza. All of them hang together, and it seems like they’re a contagious disease. People hang with them, they fall off. So, when I see them, I kind of throw my hood on and walk real fast.

Audre confirmed that “it could've gone a whole other way, because we are in [the Greenback community]. It could've went a whole other way. I see some of the boys, you know what I'm saying, and it's like, ‘Oh, thank God.’ He gravitated to the right people and it worked out.” She added, “There was that risk of it going the wrong way, but it went well.”

At the time of the interview Octavia and her mother were looking for a place to live because their current apartment complex was shutting down within two weeks. While describing her neighborhood, Octavia revealed that in the ninth-grade she was robbed at gunpoint in her complex by a student in her school:

My mom was at work because she was working 11 to seven. My friend was staying with me at the time because of what she was going through at the time. They were knocking at the door and stuff. I guess that moment just wasn't for us or something. We went to the door and the person took her phone. The person hit me. I was just looking at the person. I still couldn't react. In the end though the person took my phone and my friend chased the person. When I realized that I tried to get my friend. Then we came back. We realized we had to call my mom somehow. We had to go to our neighbor downstairs. My mama made it before the police did but the police live across the street and she worked further away. I didn't have no reaction to it, it was just like it happened. It didn't scare me it was just like maybe it was my fault somehow and I slipped up. I didn't have no reaction to it.

While Octavia’s perception of the robbery as her fault is concerning, this moment of self-blame quickly shifted to her talking about how she handles negative peer influence:

People try to influence others. They feel like it's so cool now, it's something to do now because everybody's doing it but it's not beneficial. I don't engage myself in it in any

type of way. I had this one friend in the neighborhood she was surrounding herself with other people and I was edging myself away. One time she was with people and she was holding guns and stuff. I was like, I'm not going to talk to you no more. We can't be friends. We can be friends inside of school when we do work but I can't be friends with you in the neighborhood because that's not what I want to be around.

### **Responsibility of Single Parenting (SM)**

Another potential risk factor to academic success is associated with the increased obligations required of mothers, particularly responsibilities related to financially supporting their families. Being the sole bread-winner, several mothers had to work more (i.e., more shifts, two jobs) to provide for their families. As a consequence, this often meant less time attending to their child(ren)'s academics. While several students expressed concerns and frustrations with their mothers' limited availability, they were also aware of their mothers' duty to support their family. Damon illustrated this point:

She always used to work, so she didn't use to come to all of my award ceremonies and things like that. I used to get real mad. I didn't used to like Momma. Now that I'm grown up... If she wasn't working then I would have had to been working. And then my brothers would have had to be working. And then we all would have been in a whole different situation. So, she had to do what she had to do, and I might have had less connection with her, but I know Momma loves us and I know she cares about us. That's what you think about. You don't think about her not being there. You think about her doing what she's got to do. That's kind of a motto for me, if Momma can do what she got to do, and I'm a man. I gotta do what I gotta do even more.

Damon's concluding statement, "I gotta do what I gotta do even more," suggests another

outcome related to mothers' working a lot, students' increased autonomy. Students understood that their mothers' limited availability required them to be, among other things, self-reliant about their school work. Toni illustrated this independence noting:

When I was younger, watching my mom go to work and stuff, when I started school my mom was always working and busy, so I never had that person who was there actually helping me along, so I had to figure that out on my own. It made me independent. All I knew was when I did my work and I got my good grades, that's what I wanted. I just, all I knew was to do it on my own and to just get through it.

Mothers also underscored the challenges related to being the primary income earner in the household. Tari, Toni's mother, illustrated this reality when she noted, "Just being a single parent, a single mom, financially at times things fall short and I work basically double hours than the average person to make sure I can provide for them." Opal also shared how working impacted her family dynamic stating, "She grew up always seeing me working," so much so that when Octavia was a little girl, Opal says "she actually didn't know I was her mom." Octavia spent so much time with her brothers and sisters while Opal worked that Octavia came to know her as "just the lady you go sleep next to." Opal chuckled while sharing "for her to be this close to me now is kind of surprising because the child was never around me!" Opal stated that even now, as a "nurse's aide, you don't get paid that much so sometimes I have to work an extra job or overtime." As a result, Opal recounted, there were times when the only time she would see Octavia is if she needed a ride to school:

When she gets up to go to school in the morning, she will wake me up and let me know she's leaving. Or sometimes she might say "Can you give a ride to school?" And for a while that was the only time we get to see each other. So, she wants me to take her to

school every day. So, I will do that, so at least I'll get to see her before she goes to school. And that's when I'm only working three to eleven. Then when I need extra money, then I would work sometimes seven to three.

Maya, appearing a bit frustrated, shared “When we do run into problems it is financial.” Expounding on how work impacts her family she relayed, “I've got to go work a little bit harder and a little bit longer and they've [work] got to take away my focus on raising my sons or making sure he does his homework because mama can't be there at night.” She further stated, “We're put in situations where we can't thrive.” Maya's mention of thriving suggests an awareness of societal perceptions and structures that inhibit the successful outcomes of Black single-mother families. Audre made a related connection in noting that “being a single parent, there's only... you only have one income. There's only so much money, and there's only so much that you can do.”

Mothers also responded to questions pertaining to if/how their experiences would be different if they were in a two-parent family structure. Tari noted the emotional benefit of having a male in the household in saying, “They [children] need the male present. So, I think that that would ... I think emotionally it helps.” Audre also pointed to the emotional impact of having a man in the household in her statement, “My God. I think it's something about having that man say they're proud of you. It does something to you, whether male or female, but especially for boys. You need a man to say, "I'm proud of you, son.” Audre expressed, as well, how having a male partner in the home would have allowed her to be more present in her son's academics:

I would have had way more time, you know what I'm saying, to show up and be more involved. I just think the more involved you are in your children and in their academics,

the more successful they are. While he's wildly successful, clearly ...How much greater could he have been if I had the time to go along with him already being predisposed to being academically great?

Although Opal stated it would have been “Not too much,” difference if there were two parents, she also voiced how having a man in the home would have took some of the pressure off of her. “The only difference it would've been somebody to share the burden with me.”

Another element related to single parenting is how mothers navigated challenges they designated as their own. Mother expressed their concerns related to the potential negative impact their issues might have on their child(ren)'s success. For example, responding to an inquiry around challenges her family faced that could have negatively impacted Damon's success, Audre responded, “a lot of the challenges and obstacles were probably more about me than them.” She went on to clarify:

As far as where I chose to live, who I chose to deal with in relationships, what job I chose to take, how much time I'm going to be away from home, things like that. Always, it just always felt like those things would be the bigger determiners, like am I there to make sure you did your homework, or am I running around working all night? You know what I'm saying? It was choices that I made to stop working two jobs, because I was never home.

Audre admitted that many of the “bigger challenges were always kind of going to be more interpersonal stuff with me and situations that I chose.” These challenges included the men she was in relationships with, one she described as an “alcoholic crackhead that beat me at night.” Though she noticed that during these challenging times there was a change in Damon's behavior,

she did her best to “buffer some of the reality of the situation” until she was able “to get into a better situation for myself.”

Rosa also pointed to interpersonal issues related to single parenting when asked about the difficulties her family faced. She reflected on a hazardous relationship with a man she safeguarded Raegan from:

I dated a guy for years ... he can treat me any way that he wanted to, but he's not going to mess with her. That's when I draw the line. I never let her be affected by either my bad decisions or my stupid decisions or things that I probably shouldn't have done or if I'm acting the fool she never knew of it and I never let any of it affect her.

Protecting and buffering their child(ren) from seemingly threatening experiences was a topic echoed by Maya as well. However, Maya also noted that while she protects Malcolm, it is also important to expose him to certain things that, although seemingly negative, are important learning tools for his own life. Discussing a time where she and her family were homeless, Maya shared, “We’ve been homeless... and all, we had the problems that most people had, but like I said it’s just fuel to turn into a positive.” During difficult times, whether it was experiencing temporary homelessness or otherwise, Maya believed Malcolm needed to know what was going on. She explained:

I’m going to protect them everything I can protect them from, but at the same time I’m not going to let him be oblivious to the real world. Like he needs to know what’s going on cause in his adult life he can be faced with the same decisions, choices, or stations that we’re facing now. NO I try not to hide nothing from him. I try to keep it as real as I can keep it. Because I rather that I teach it to him than somebody in the street.

For Maya, protecting Malcolm did not mean completely sheltering him from the realities of their lived experiences. It also involved exposing him to these realities as opportunities for learning.

To conclude, the categories “challenges of the street” and “responsibility of single-parenting” described participants’ narratives of perceived barriers to academic success. Though participants spoke about challenges in their community, interpersonal issues, and the financial burden associated with mothers being the primary income-earner, students appeared to circumvent these issues by being independent, remaining focused, and having mothers who protected and buffered them from the harshness of these challenges.

### **The Influence of Family Structure on Academic Success**

Findings related to the influence of family detail the connections participants made between their family structure and academic success. When asked to discuss the ways living in a single-mother home impacted students’ academic experiences, two categories emerged: students and mothers both mentioned the motivation to “go harder!” and mothers also highlighted how they had to “act strategically” to support their children.

#### **“Go Harder!” (SM)**

Growing up in a single-mother home, Malcolm declared makes him want to “Go harder!” For all students, this expression seemed to represent their awareness of how hard their mothers worked. To go hard, or do their best in school, appeared to be a demonstration of empathy and reciprocity. For example, Malcolm shared that his school performance is something his mother does not have to be concerned with:

I mean it just it pushed me...I know my mom has to work, she has to work for everything

I got, like clothes food, everything. So, I feel like if I do good in school, that is one less

thing she got to worry about. So, it just kind of pushed me. I know what I got to do, I know what I need to do.

Toni also spoke about how seeing her mother's hardships inspires her to do well, to "go harder":

I want to help my mom. I see my mom struggling every day to raise me and my sister and to help my brother, as best she can. I don't want that for her. I'm always, when I get older, any money I get I'm going to give to my mom. I'm going to be sending her money. Whether she accepts it or not, she's going to get it. I want her to be happy. I know that the only way I can make her happy is by doing what I need to do.

The drive to "go harder" meant something different to other participants. Shannon described her mother as a role model for hard work when she stated, "Seeing how hard my mom works has really encouraged me to try harder." Octavia expressed how being in a single-mother home "made me want to do better." She further offered, "Talking to my mom, she'll be like if she did things different, or if she chose different actions. It made me think to try to make the best choices that I can and see how that goes."

Rosa also expressed how her experiences might serve to inspire Raegan: "She [Raegan] sees me hustle and grind and knows that she can do it too. I wear a lot of hats and I would hope that this would motivate her. It's hard, but it's not impossible." Tari also made points that connected her experiences with Toni's school success:

Well, her dad is incarcerated and he's been incarcerated since they were ten so she's seen the struggle financially with me being a single mom and she's gonna do everything... well this is what she said to me, she's gonna do everything in her power to be properly educated and just try to fulfill her dreams so she won't have to go through the financial stresses.

For other mothers, the notion their child(ren) “go harder” was in direct response to what they understood as society’s belief that their family structure is deviant. In other words, doing well in school was a way to resist mainstream beliefs that their children do not do well in school. Opal pointed to this when asked how she believes being raised in a single-mother home influenced Octavia’s achievement: “The thing about the society thinking you're not going to amount to anything. And just, just basically being yourself and proving to them that it has nothing to do with being in a single-mother home.” Opal also noted that she informed her children how their performance in school would be viewed as a reflection of her as a mother: “And I've told all of them, ‘If you don't do good they're going to say it's my fault.’” She continued, “Because I'm a single mom, especially that I'm black.” I said, “And I hate that.” I said, “So what you going to do?” So, they have always wanted more.”

Maya’s response also illustrated a defiance to society’s expectations. When asked how her family structure impacted Malcolm’s academic achievement she exclaimed, “Go harder! It’s like when so many people expect you to fail, it’s like you got to go harder to show them you’re not going to fail.” After being asked if she thought life would be different if her family was a two-parent structure, reluctantly Maya replied, “I think some things would have been easier, yes, I do believe that.” She further stated:

That is just what society paints the picture as- two parent home, picket white fence, and all that stuff, so I feel like if [Malcolm] would have come from that background then probably more opportunities would have opened up in a ‘better place’ but I am happy with the way things did work out for us, coming from a single-parent home.

## **Act Strategically (M)**

In addition to mothers expressing that their single-parent family structure motivated students to work harder in school, they also indicated that they acted strategically to ensure their child(ren)'s success. All mothers detailed the particular methods they used to support their child(ren)'s achievement, but three mothers specifically discussed how these strategies were influenced by the absence of fathers in the home. Mothers of sons, in particular, Maya, Lee, and Audre mentioned how they put their sons in environments to expose them to positive male role-models. Audre shared that she enrolled Damon in a single-gender, all male school because she believed he would be exposed to male role models:

That was part of the reason why I sent him to [that school], because there's men there every day that tell him, "I'm proud of you, son." You know? I've seen them. I know they do. When I come up there, which I can't come up there much, so everybody doesn't know who I am, but they'll be like, "Okay, who is your kid?" I'll be like, "Damon" they're like, "Oh, my God, Damon!" That's the one, and I know, the way that they respond to me, I know that they're giving it to him. They have to. That was part of the reason why I sent him there, to make sure that there were going to be those Morehouse men, those 100 Black Men that are going to be like, "Come on. You're getting it, son." If you could have that at home... how much greater would that have been?

Maya also expressed putting Malcolm in environments where he would be exposed to positive male role-models:

By me being a coach he comes across a lot of males and I'm not going to say I did it by myself.... I put him in situations where he's always around a male or had a male role model...now I'm not going to bring a male into my home, but don't think that because I

am a single mom that he doesn't have any male input in his life, he does. He probably picked up different things from different guys 'cause everybody is going to affect you differently. And like I say, I just try to keep as much positive stuff around him as I can.

Rosa, who has been divorced from Raegan's father for 16 years, seemed to feel guilty about their divorce and the impact she believes it had on Raegan when she commented, "I want to make sure okay, she doesn't have both parents in the household, I made a decision to separate from her father, she shouldn't have to go through the consequences of it. You know?" She added, "I didn't want her to feel slighted because there's only one parent." As a result, Rosa has "always tried to step in as mom and dad." Though Rosa did not clarify how she attempted to fill both mother and father roles, she did talk about the methods she employed to fill-in for the parental gap:

I know this sounds ... I don't mean to sound racist when I say this, but I talk to a lot of Caucasian people. I want to see how they do. I did I worked with a lot of Caucasian people and I am like well what do you do with your kid? How do you all do it? I did emulate a lot of their structured ways because it made sense and their kids were doing well. Well in life and I just wanted to ... They did well. I asked questions.

In summary, data analysis revealed that the influence of family structure on the academic success of students centered around two major themes: "go harder!" and acting strategically. The motivation to "go harder" denoted students' efforts to reciprocate and model their mothers' hard work. Mothers' efforts to act strategically seemed to be partially influenced by the lack of a paternal figure in the home.

## **Ways Social Structures Can Help Support and Facilitate Academic Success**

When asked to discuss the ways the larger society can support and facilitate academic success among Black students, some participants responded in more concrete terms, offering specific suggestions while other responses were vague. Participants' narratives pointed to responses that can be categorized by two themes: "a community that has our back" and "recognition of our success."

### **"A Community That Has Our Back" (SM)**

Students and mothers expressed how, generally, students (and their families) need more support to achieve positive academic outcomes. The type of support recommended varied across participants. As Shannon reflected on the various aspects of her life that contributed to her success she offered, "I think just having parents who support me, family and friends who support me and push me and encourage me to do greater." Shannon, as well as other student participants, believed that what students need is essentially what they had access to:

A community, like I said, who has their back, support them and encourage them, because I think sometimes we just get discouraged. Having people who support you and ... They could buy you pencils and paper, supplies and things like that. That could be a way of support to help you do what you can to graduate or become successful.

Langston's response echoed this notion of students needing a community of support. He believed that for students to be successful in school they need to "have someone pushing them. I think anybody can do what they want if there's a loving support system around you can do whatever you want." Recognizing that what helped him be successful in school was "my mom, my family pushing me to be better than them," Langston concluded that other students can

benefit from “a support system, because their mother may not be pushing them as hard as mine is, so they need somebody pushing them as well to do the best that they can do.”

Though several students did not identify specific people or things in the community or society-at-large that could provide academic support, there was, nevertheless, the belief that students need someone to encourage them. Raegan offered:

They probably need somebody to push them and tell them, maybe a speaker or someone, to tell them you have to do good in high school. You have to do good in everything that you do. You can't just slack off and expect greatness to happen. They need someone to tell them you got to do the work, and you got to work hard, if you want to be successful because slacking off is not going to get you anywhere.

Speaking about students in her immediate environment, Octavia also expressed that students need more motivation. Octavia's insight also pointed to students' limiting beliefs regarding their abilities, when she noted, “The environment I'm in, it's not many people care enough to try.”

Recounting a conversation with a friend she added:

I've had a friend that I had to stop talking to because we wasn't on the same page as we kept getting older. He lives in a single mom home, and at first he didn't, but he just stopped caring after a while. I'd be like, "But you know you in a situation, why won't you try to change it or do something?" He'll be like, "It is what it is. I'm just going to accept it." I'll tell him, "Why would you just accept it instead of keep trying to get out of it?" A lot of people think they way he does.

Like most student participants proposed, to help improve these circumstances, Octavia contended “they need somebody like a positive person they look up to, someone who stays on them to know someone cares about what you doing. What you do is going to affect you in the

long run even if it's little.” Toni’s response also pointed to the responsibility of both students and adults in the community to facilitate academic success:

It's just up to you to do what you're going to do to make it in society and in the real world. When I hear the words “black student” I think of how myself is. How you can either strive for it or you cannot strive for it.

Toni’s statements also underscored the self-limiting beliefs among her peers:

Going to [King] I see a lot of my friends from elementary and middle school who are just sitting down doing nothing, they're just "Oh I'm going to do this. I'm never going to get outside of [Southeast City]." At [King], there are students who never been off of [Caplan] Avenue, they're just like "Oh I'm going to be on [Caplan]. I'm going to die on [Caplan]." That's just how they are.

When asked what she believes students need to help them think better about themselves, Toni advised:

I feel like, a lot of those kids need somebody to give them more drive and ambition. I feel like some of the men, the young men, need a male figure to actually push them and I feel like some of the females need a good female role model that's going to push them that they can relate to.

Several students made more specific suggestions regarding the type of support needed by students. These students pointed to the role of school officials. While some students, as mentioned earlier in this chapter talked about their personal relationships with teachers, others stressed the need for teachers to be more supportive. Malcolm talked extensively about what he perceived to be the role of teachers:

I feel like teachers in the schools need to know students' situations better. Like if you come in the office and you know students don't have any motivation at home, they live in a single-parent home, and have brothers and sisters where they are not getting the attention they want or need, or they don't have a lot motivating them and you come at them sideways... the first thing they are going to do is run from the situation or just don't care. So, I feel like teachers got to be more supportive...considering the fact that students might come into the classroom and that might be the only attention they get that day, from that teacher. When people support people, it brings out the best in them.

The positive impact of Damon's close relationship with his teachers made him acutely aware of the "need for more Black educators." Damon's insight also illustrated the dynamic interplay of supports that assisted him in school. He shared, "All the stuff that I do, it didn't come from me. It came from somewhere else. A lot of the kids don't get that." Rather poignantly Damon added:

Especially if you don't have a dad, it's like now you're just at home. You can do what you want because your mom is working. I was just an extenuating circumstance when I knew what I wanted but a lot of kids don't. Now, your mom is at work, you can do what you want to do. You can go out and sell dope if you want to. But if you had that dude, or even that person to come and be like, "This is what you need to do. It might not be what you want to do but it's what you need to do right now." Stuff like that is what single parent households need. As far as the black community goes, anybody here needs that. Even if you have that, you need more. You've been listening to me, I've got one, I've got two, I've got three, four, five [mentors] because my head is screwed on tight. But

everybody's head isn't. And that's not fair that just because I know what I want I get that. Everybody should get that.

Mothers also made suggestions about the supports needed to encourage academically successful students and their families. Maya spoke more broadly, proposing that families need “education on different things.” This education included what she termed as “simple stuff” to support families:

No one ever taught me how to grocery shop properly and take care of my kids. It's simple things like that. Instead of just sitting there and I guess let me be wasteful or not mindful of the benefits that are being provided... a lot of simple stuff like that. Instead of downing each other, why can't we help each other out?

Audre expressed the opportunity to support successful students resides “in building better families wherever they're standing.” Being more supportive of families, Audre detailed, includes reexamining how school functions are scheduled. She explained, “Trying to get us to come to school during school hours is not successful, because guess what? I'm at work.” Audre went on to discuss the associated stigma when parents are unable to come to school because of their work schedules:

You get that stigma that you're, like I said, that you're not interested, because you're not available. It feels like if there was going to be a better resource, can we have the parent stuff in the evening? I'm not in a situation where there's another parent, where one of us can take off, or take turns taking off, or whatever it is, to show up to this thing. If you don't see me at the awards ceremony, if you don't see me at the, you know, whatever it is you're trying to do at 2:00 in the afternoon, you get that vibe that I don't care, and that's not the case. You want to give out report cards and they got the president's club and

perfect attendance, why not do that at 5:30 ... Different stuff like that, where you're actually more supportive of what's going on in people's life, and having that work/life balance that they say at work. The schools really don't, they don't really care about that as much.

### **Recognition of Our Success Us (S)**

Students' responses also appeared to speak directly to societal stereotypes related to their academic abilities. They spoke about the importance of recognizing their success and the achievements of Black students, overall. While making their points, several referenced the reputation of their schools. Toni shared, "I feel like we don't get credit for the good things we do." Speaking about her school, she further explained:

How our test scores keep going up and everybody is still like "Oh that's [a bad school] and stuff." We don't get recognition for the things we do and how we always have someone to come speak at our school to uplift our students or how we're just always having school things like, we had, last, this Friday just passed, we had a program that the students putt together about high school. What high school life is about. I remember when I was in 10th and 11th grade, we did a play both years. We don't get recognized for the stuff, any student's productions, we don't get recognized for being able to come together and stuff.

When asked to discuss why it is important for students to get recognized for their achievements, Toni offered:

I feel like if they're not, some students need that recognition to know that they're doing good because if they don't get it they're just going to probably either be like "Oh, nobody cares anyway, it's not going to matter" and then just slack off.

Octavia also spoke about the significance of seeing successful Black students., when she said, “If a person sees majority of Black students willing to learn, they’ll think a lot of us is like that.” Unfortunately, however, she recognizes that “Most people tend to see the bad.... Because it gets broadcasted more.” Like Toni, Octavia referenced her high school to illustrate:

The majority of the students are actually trying. It's also like, you know how they say one bad apple can ruin a bunch. That's how it is. We went up with our scores and everything, but then you hear on the news a student broke into a house that's in the neighborhood of the school. People not going to hear about our scores improving. They going to hear about the kids breaking into the house.

She went on to describe how the focus on negativity impacts her emotionally:

It makes me mad. It's like yeah, there's students that doesn't do it, but there's a lot of students that want to learn, that's willing to learn that do a lot for the school, but they don't get no recognition. Or they be like you go to this high school, so it don't count, when it counts the same.

Malcolm talked at length about mainstream perceptions of Black students. He used his own experiences of being typecast as just an athlete to emphasize the stereotypes associated with Black students:

Like I was saying, it's like when you look at most African Americans and you go to a high school, the first thing somebody ask you, "You play football? You play basketball?" Why can't they ask you ...Why don't they never ask you something like, "You on the honor roll? Are you in different clubs?" They instantly go to football or basketball.

Malcolm's speculation into why people don't ask him questions related to his academics echoes the observations made by Toni and Octavia. Malcolm also reflected on the negative images associated with his high school:

People don't look at that part. They don't look at we got over ... I want to say got over 30 students who go off campus to dual enrollment. People don't look at that part. They just look at it like, "It's a bad school." They don't look at the part where like, my school, I know for a fact my school, I got a basketball team of 15 players and all of us got higher than 3.0.

Shannon's statement, "It's a stereotype that we struggle in school or that we just barely make it by and that's not always the case" essentially captures the position shared by all students. Shannon went on to say, "I feel it's not right to label us that as a whole. There are some out here like myself who are working hard to try and become somebody and to go the extra mile, to make sure that I'm successful."

In conclusion, it was interesting to hear participants discuss the ways that society can support and facilitate the success of Black students from single-mother homes. Though lacking specificity, students often pointed to the need for mentors to encourage academic success. Mothers highlighted how schools and society should aim to better understand the unique needs of single-mother families. Students also reported the importance of societal recognition of their success. Students were aware of the societal stereotypes associated with Black student achievement and expressed the importance of highlighting their academic accomplishments.

### **Chapter Summary**

The purpose of this study was to explore academic success as perceived and experienced by African American high school students and their single mothers. An exploration into how

Black students and their mothers perceive and experience academic success necessitates an understanding of the protective factors and processes contributing to students' achievement. Analysis of the data revealed the following factors contributed to academic success: "always been like this," a deeply invested mother, and social-relational supports

"Always been like this" highlighted the students' predisposition, or inherent inclination, to be academically successful. Participants reported that as far back as they could remember students were always motivated to do well in school. Students mentioned that their drive toward success is due, in part, to their future aspirations. They see academic success in high school as a "stepping stone" to social advancement. The prospect of having something better is what motivates them to do well in school. Mothers noted that students were self-starters and did not require external motivation to excel in school. This was manifested in students' ability to advocate for themselves and take initiative.

A second factor contributing to student success was having a deeply invested mother. For students, their mothers were a fundamental force that kept them focused on performing well in school. Mothers expressed an investment in their children's academics that placed their role as a mother first in their lives. This sometimes meant sacrificing other aspects of their lives to accommodate their child(ren)'s needs first. Their investment was also driven by their desire to want better for their children. Similar to students' drive to improve their social status, mothers were also determined to support their child(ren) for the sake of their future social and economic standing. Participants also reported the impact social-relational supports had on academic success. These supports included teachers, family members, friends, and participation in community organizations.

Findings related to potential barriers, or risk factors, to academic success centered around two themes: “challenges of the streets” and responsibility of single parenting. Four families, in particular, spoke about the potential threats, which included negative peer influences present in their communities. However, they also acknowledged that while these threats exist their keen focus on success helps them avoid these elements. The responsibility of single parenting highlights the challenges associated with being the sole income earner. Mothers expressed having to work more hours or more than one job to support their family. This, in turn, impacts their availability to attend to their child(ren)’s academics. For students, their mothers’ work was associated with a heightened sense of self-reliance.

Detailing the influence of family structure on academic success, student and mother participants both expressed the determination to “go harder,” while mothers alone pointed to the need to “act strategically.” Students were keenly aware of their mothers’ efforts to support the family and their persistence to “go harder” was a reflection of their mothers’ hard work on their behalf. Mothers expressed “go harder” as a way to motivate students to dispel mainstream tropes about their academic abilities. Notably, mothers seemed to emphasize going harder in school as a form of resistance. They also discussed the various strategies they employed to support their children’s success, given the lack of a paternal figure in the home.

Lastly, analysis of the data related to how social structures can help support and facilitate academic success revealed the significance of two themes: “a community that has our back” and recognition of our success. Generally, “a community that has our back” indicates that a multifaceted approach is needed to facilitate academic success. Most students seemed to discuss the need for more mentorship in their communities and mothers expressed the importance of understanding the unique needs of families. Students also voiced the need for society to

recognize their successes. Students expressed frustration over Black students not being acknowledged for their achievements and wanted to illuminate the fact that they do care about their education.

## Chapter 6

### CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

*“[I]t seems to me that I am always about a most sobering task, the task of survival, for myself, and for those who may carry what I offer to them, into their own lives. And because we coexist on a planet long defiled by habits opposite to love, it seems to me that the task of surviving and/or the task of providing for the survival of those who are not as strong as I am, is a political undertaking: Vast changes will have to be envisioned, and pursued, if any, let alone all, of us will survive the destructive traditions of our species. Enormous reversals and revisions of our thinking patterns will have to be achieved, somehow, and fast. And to accomplish such lifesaving alterations of society, we will have to deal with power: we will have to make love powerful. We will have to empower the people we love so that they can insist upon the validity of their peculiar coloring or gender or ethnicity or accidental economic status, so that they can bloom in their own place and time like tiger lilies growing beautiful and free.*  
—June Jordan from “The Creative Spirit: Children’s Literature”

#### **Introduction**

The purpose of this study was to explore academic success as perceived and experienced by African American high school students and their single mothers. The research questions guiding this study were: (1) How do African American students and their single mothers understand and explain the protective factors and underlying processes contributing to academic success? (2) What do African American students and their single mothers report as potential barriers (risk factors) to academic success? (3) How has family structure influenced the academic success of African American high school students from single-mother homes? and (4) In what ways can existing and/or future social structures help support and facilitate academic success for African American students from single-mother households?

The theoretical frameworks guiding this study were Phenomenological Variant of Ecological Systems Theory (PVEST) and Black Feminist Thought (BFT). PVEST directed the study toward an understanding of not only the contextual experiences that frame student

achievement, but also the meaning making of these experiences and how they relate to academic outcomes. BFT emphasized placing the experiences and ideas of Black mothers and their children at the center of this research. It also required that this study address the interlocking systems of oppression that create the inequitable conditions these families often face. Narrative inquiry was the strategy of inquiry that directed the methods for collecting and analyzing the data. Fourteen participants, seven students (4 girls, 3 boys) and seven mothers, were purposively selected and interviewed for this study. Student participants attended different high schools located in the southeastern United States. The semi-structured interviews-as-conversations ranged from 30-90 minutes, and provided the primary source of data for this study. Follow-up contact (face-to-face, email, and telephone), interview notes, and artifacts generated supplemental data.

### **Summary of the Findings**

Several themes addressing each of the four research questions emerged from data analysis. Themes capturing the factors and processes contributing to academic success included expressions that students have “always been like this,” the role of a deeply invested mother, and assistance from social-relational supports. Themes associated with potential barriers to academic success included threats in the community or “challenges of the streets,” and the responsibilities associated with single parenting. Themes congruent with the influence of family structure on academic success involved students being motivated to “go harder” and mothers acting strategically to fill-in for the lack of a paternal influence in the home. Lastly, themes related to how social structures can support and facilitate the academic success of Black students from single-mother homes included participants’ need for “a community that has our back” and recognition of their success.

In Chapter 6 I present the conclusions drawn from these findings, situating them within the literature on Black student achievement and Black single-mother families and the study's conceptual framework. I also discuss implications for practice and offer recommendations for future research.

### **Conclusions and Discussions**

Based on the study's findings presented in Chapters 4 and 5, three theoretically significant conclusions were derived related to how academic success is perceived and experienced by African American high school students and their single mothers. First, there were numerous protective factors supporting academic success, which outweighed perceived barriers. Second, mothers' central role in student success counters the way they are largely depicted in existing literature. Third, PVEST and BFT comprise a powerful theoretical framework for meaning making.

#### **Protective Factors Supporting Academic Success Outweighed Perceived Barriers**

The first conclusion in this study is that the protective factors supporting academic success outweighed perceived barriers. The majority of research reporting on the academic experiences of African American students from single-mother homes focuses on risk factors and their association with poor academic outcomes. Studies have also compared Black students from single-mother homes with their European American and/or two-parent family counterparts to elucidate the prevalence of this failure. While understanding the causes and consequences of academic underachievement is important, the fixation on negative outcomes has created two serious issues: (1) the perpetuation of the deficit gaze and harmful misrepresentations of Black students' abilities, and (2) considerably less being known about the factors influencing Black student achievement (Hill, 2012; Strayhorn 2010; Williams & Bryan, 2012, 2013).

Using academic resilience and PVEST as part of the conceptual framework, this study explored the dynamic interplay between environmental factors, personality traits, and meaning-making processes facilitating academic success, despite the presence of real or perceived risks (Cicchetti & Curtis, 2007; Masten, 2011; Spencer, 1995, 2008). In this study, four families (Maya/Malcolm, Audre/Damon, Opal/Octavia, Tari/Toni) live in low-income communities. These participants, in particular, reported community-level risk factors or “challenges of the streets,” such as drugs, violence, and negative peer influence which posed a potential threat to academic success (Ernetus & Prelow, 2015; Patton, Wooley, & Hong, 2012; Vega, Moore, & Miranda, 2015). The majority of participants also acknowledged stressors, namely financial, associated with the responsibility of single parenting as potential barriers to academic success (DeNavas-Walt, Proctor, & Smith, 2013; Jackson, Brooks-Gunn, Huang, & Glassman, 2000; Pong, Dronkers, & Hampden-Thompson, 2003; Williams & Portman, 2014; Wilson, 2014).

Though participants were faced with these perceived barriers, the findings in this study—“always been like this,” deeply invested mother, and social-relational supports—highlight the protective factors supporting academic success that offset potential risks: (Cunningham & Swanson, 2010; Ford, 1994; Strayhorn, 2010; Williams & Bryan, 2013). These findings are congruent with resilience research that identified protective factors across three levels of functioning: individual, social, and community/society (Werner, 1995; Windle, 2011; Wright & Mastem, 2009).

All study participants reported the presence of individual-level factors supporting success. Students’ positive sense of self, belief in their abilities, and inherent motivation for academic achievement were important elements driving success. Several researchers (Cokley & Chapman, 2008; Cunningham & Swanson, 2010; Ford, 1994; Griffin, 2006; Witherspoon,

Speight, & Thomas, 1997) have found significant connections between students' high sense of self (e.g., self-concept, self-efficacy, self-motivation, and internal locus of control) and high academic achievement. The motivation displayed by the students in this study can be explained by self-determination theory (Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier, & Ryan, 1991). According to self-determination theory, a behavior is self-determined when "the person perceives that the locus of causality is internal to his or her self" (Deci et al., p. 327). In the sphere of education, self-determination, in the form of intrinsic motivation and opportunities for autonomy, facilitate successful academic outcomes.

The current study's findings are congruent with the research conducted by Cokley (2003) and Griffin (2006), who used self-determination theory to better understand African American students' intrinsic motivation to excel academically. Cokley's findings revealed that African American students are intrinsically motivated, but not necessarily in the same way as European American students. Griffin's examination of nine successful Black students found that participants connected their motivation to their internal drive and desire to be successful. Griffin also noticed that while participants described themselves as being internally driven, they were also externally inspired by the desire to achieve career goals, make their families proud, and be a positive representation of the Black community.

All participants in this study illustrated students' intrinsic drive toward success when they shared how students have "always been like this." "Always been like this" refers to students' ever-present motivation to do well in school. Lee, recounting a time she recognized Langston wanted to be successful in school, noted "it's all the while I've been seeing it in his grades and stuff." Student participants frequently demonstrated their penchant toward academic success when they expressed there was no other option *but* to be successful in school. Essentially, doing

well in school was their only choice. Mothers captured the inherent nature of students' motivation when they noted how their children are self-driven, resourceful, and able to advocate for themselves. Describing her daughter, Tari commented, "That's just how Toni is. Toni is a go-getter." Similar to the findings in Griffin's (2006) and Gayle's (2005) studies of academic resilience among three Black males, students' motivation to succeed in school was also externally driven. Students' desire to have a successful future seemed to be a significant driving force to their achievement. As Malcolm so eloquently stated, "I got my mind made up that I want to do something, I want to be somebody."

Mothers were also an important factor in the academic success of their children. Consistent with research conducted by Williams and Bryan (2013) and Robinson and Werblow (2013), student participants often noted how their mothers "pushed" them to do well in school. They perceived this "push" as mothers' demonstrating high expectations of them. Further discussing the influence of his mother, Damon stated, "There wasn't ever a time that she would hesitate to yell at you about a bad grade, even if it was a 'B.' That type of stuff made me better." Most students were also able to recall specific messages their mothers communicated about doing well in school. In a sarcastic tone Langston said his mother tells him "the same stuff over and over again. I'm like, 'I heard it the first time.'" According to Langston, his mother's messages usually included "Get good grades, or else." Shannon also recalled her mother telling her to do well in school because it is "very important and could determine everything that happens in your future." The findings in this study also affirm Hayes's (2012) study of parent involvement that found parents who frequently communicated with their children about school had adolescents who performed better academically.

Akin to the mothers in Robinson's and Werblow's (2012) study, the mothers in this study

emphasized putting the needs of their children first. They often spoke about how their children were their number one priority. Mothers demonstrated this by compromising or putting on hold other aspects of their lives (i.e., work, social events) to ensure the well-being of their child(ren). Opal, an occasional truck driver, expressed she does not like to stay in one place too long. She decided to not “get back in the truck” or move so that Opal could stay at one high school. Lee underscored being able to “do those things [social groups]” now that Langston is about to graduate from high school.” She went on to say, “I’ll be right back where I started before I had him. Then I’ll be able to do those, whatever that is, which probably won’t be much of anything because I don’t like to spend money.” Several students were cognizant of their mothers’ keen focus on them. Raegan illustrated this when she shared, “She has nothing to think about but me.” Though mothers perceived putting their children ahead of their own needs as necessary, Collins (2009) suggested this value can contribute to the controlling image of the “superstrong Black mother” (p. 188). hooks (2000) and Collins (2009) pointed to how Black mothers have taken on aspects of being strong because they have had to prove themselves worthy in a society that routinely portrays them as bad mothers.

Mothers’ deep investment in their children’s education is partially motivated by the desire for their child(ren) to have a better life than they themselves have had. Lee’s reason for supporting Langston is “so he can get to the next level, whatever that level may be.” This idea of “leveling up,” or mothers’ understanding of education as a tool for upward mobility, aligns with findings from studies by Cooper (2007) and Chapman and Bhopal (2013). Most of the mothers in Cooper’s (2007) study about school choice and educational advocacy stressed the desire for their children to be “more prosperous and face fewer hardships than they themselves have” (p. 499). The women in Chapman’s and Bhopal’s study also viewed education as a means for their

children to “do better” than themselves.

In addition to students’ inherent inclination to be successful and having devoted mothers, social-relational supports were also important for academic success. The network of these supports included teachers, other family members, friends, and students’ involvement in community organizations. This finding aligns with other research highlighting the link between personal connections with school personnel and improved academic performance (Land, Mixon, Butcher, & Harris, 2014; Olsson et al., 2003; Vega, Moore, & Miranda, 2015; Wright & Masten, 2005). Students and mothers described how the genuine care and concern teachers and other school officials displayed, even outside of the classroom, was a major contributor to their success. Specific behaviors from school personnel included connecting students to academic resources, providing personal, specific advice related to a range of topics, acting as parental figures, and encouraging students to do and be their best. Toni described how one school official served as a parental figure:

Mr. Woods is like the father figure for us, so if he yells at us and stuff, it hurts. He's like that person that, he's going to keep us on track. He's not going to let us stray off and stuff like that.

Participants also discussed how extended family members (e.g., siblings, uncle, grandparents) contributed to academic success. Specifically, extended relatives provided encouragement, help with homework, financial assistance, and for older siblings like Toni, Malcolm, and Damon, the opportunity to model positive behaviors. This acknowledgement supports Sterett’s and colleagues’ (2015) exploration of co-parenting relationships among African American single-mother families. These authors described co-parenting as the “coordination and negotiation of childrearing efforts” (p. 456) that involves a broader inclusion

of individuals as family members. Thus resulting in a wide array of individuals who are involved in care-giving.

Friends also served as an important source of academic support for students in this study. Students frequently described their friends as “like me.” This depiction is consistent with the works of Horvat and Lewis (2003); Marsh, Chaney, and Jones (2012); and Williams and Bryan (2013). All found that strong, positive relationships with friends who valued education were critical to academic success. Students in the current study were quite intentional about surrounding themselves with peers who had like aspirations. Friends motivated them and helped them stay focused on their academic goals.

Extracurricular activities, including participation in social organizations, also contributed to student success, which Williams, Greenleaf, Albert, and Barnes (2014) found in their review of literature. The narratives of the students in the current study endorse this finding. Several students detailed the benefits they received from participating in community organizations. Specifically, their involvement provided opportunities to travel, exposure to new experiences, fostered the development of leadership skills, connected them with mentors, and assisted in their preparation for college. Toni recalled her experience participating in an all-women’s leadership group:

We did some business program things where we talked to business people and entrepreneurs and they gave us tips on stuff. We did a bunch of different stuff like that to help us, as women, to be leaders and stuff.

In summary, various circumstances of participants’ lives were perceived as potential challenges to academic success. Resilience researchers (Cicchetti & Curtis, 2007; Luthar et al., 2000; Masten, 1994; Masten, Cutuli, Herbers, & Reed, 2009; Wright & Masten, 2005) have

addressed the dynamic, multi-dimensional protective factors that facilitate positive outcomes in the face of risk. Researchers who have used resilience to frame their studies (Kim & Hargrove, 2013; William & Bryan 2013, William & Portman, 2014) have also emphasized the assemblage of individual and environmental protective factors that influence academic resilience.

The finding in this present study “always been like this” underscores students’ inherent inclination toward success. It also challenges deficit views that suggest Black students do not care about their education. Students’ deeply invested mother distinguishes the role of mothers in supporting their child(ren)’s academic achievement. Participant narratives highlight, as well, that relationships beyond the individual and immediate family facilitate positive academic outcomes.

### **Mothers’ Central Role in Student Success Counters Their Depiction in Extant Research**

The second conclusion for this study, mothers’ central role in student success, refutes how they are portrayed in research and draws attention to the dearth of literature exploring Black single mothers’ pivotal role in the academic success of their children. Not only has research focused largely on the poor academic outcomes of Black students, it has also pointedly associated academic shortcomings with single-mother family structure (Collins, 2009). Simply put, research and public discourse has persistently connected Black single mothers to Black student failure. The present research sought to provide a more informed understanding of Black single mothers and their families by giving mothers and students the space to consider *their* experiences and the relationship of these experience to academic achievement. Findings from this study recognize and affirm both the success of Black high school seniors as well as the guidance and support they receive from their mothers.

Exploring academic success as perceived and experienced by African American high school students and their mothers requires paying attention to how the intersection of race, class and gender influences mothers' perceptions about and involvement in their children's education. This intersection also necessitates consideration of how interlocking racial, class, and gender oppressions have fueled the deficit-based ideologies and stereotyped images of Black single mothers as uninvolved and apathetic, thus a hindrance to their child(ren)'s academic success (Cooper, 2009). Black Feminist Thought (BFT) was vital in illuminating the social, cultural, and political dynamics underlying mothers' experiences with their child(ren)'s schooling (Cooper, 2007).

The literature exploring parental involvement strategies among parents of color offers insight into why there is little research exploring the positive role of Black single mothers in their child(ren)'s education (Auerbach, 2007; Baquedano-López, Alexander, & Hernández, 2013; Chapman & Bhopal, 2013; Cooper, 2007, 2009; Hayes, 2012; Fields-Smith, 2005; Jackson & Remillard, 2005; Meyers, Dowdy, & Paterson, 2005). This research points to issues of equity and deficit paradigms related to race, class, and gender. Moreover, it contends that parent involvement has been socially constructed to privilege White, middle-class norms and disparage Black parental involvement (Auerbach; Baquedano-López, Alexander, & Hernández; Cooper, 2009). Fields-Smith explained:

However, 50 years after the *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court decision, the discourse on parental involvement tends to favor the perspectives of white, middle-class families, whereas views regarding African American parental involvement tend to be negative. In fact, teachers often perceive African American as uninvolved and disinterested in their children's education. (pp. 129-130)

“Parent involvement” as defined by schools and national policy is generally understood as an activity visible to school officials, such as volunteering in the school or attending school-sponsored events (Lawson, 2003). Hayes (2012) contended that despite evidence parental involvement is multidimensional, most researchers continue to examine one type of involvement without exploring the effects different parental involvement behaviors have on student outcomes. Since the type of parent involvement demonstrated by Black parents (e.g., communicating high expectations) tends to be different than mainstream expectations (e.g., attending school-related activities), research and mainstream discourse on Black parents is rife with accounts of poor parental involvement. However, Cooper (2007, 2009) and other scholars (Abdul-Adil & Farmer, 2006; Auerbach, 2007; Chapman & Bhopal, 2013; Fields-Smith, 2005, Robinson & Werblow, 2012; Yosso, 2005) counter these “stock stories” (Chapman & Bhopal, p. 568) of the indifferent Black parent. Participant narratives in the present study are consistent with this line of research and highlights the varying strategies Black single mothers employed to support their child(ren)’s academic success.

It should be noted that mothers in this study were not a monolithic group. They came from various socio-economic backgrounds. Though some of their narratives related to parental involvement activities differed from mainstream practices, they were no less significant (Cooper 2007, 2009). Sonia, a trainer for a major bank who has made a comfortable middle-class living for her family, made explicit that she was “not the PTA type of girl. I pay the PTA dues, but I do not go to the PTA meetings.” She also shared, “I’m not the one to bring cupcakes. I’m not. I go to work.” Sonia’s comments about not actively participating in school functions do not imply she is less interested in Shannon’s education or unaware of its importance for Shannon’s future

success. In fact, as Sonia frequently reminds her daughters, “in my house... everybody's going to college.”

As discussed earlier, the interlocking systems of racial, class, and gender oppression with which Black single mothers contend can create an educational climate that prevents school officials from appreciating and valuing their efforts (Auerbach, 2007). Maya’s comments underscore this point:

It’s been challenging. I feel like a lot of times when I do show up for him [at school], and by me being so young or looking young, they are like first of all that’s not her child, and when they get past that, when did you have him? I feel like they are just pre-judging, “Oh he just got a young mama.” And he’s not going to be anything.

Robinson’s and Werblow’s (2012) study found a number of “common characteristics” (p. 52) the women in their study employed to help their sons “beat the odds.” For one, mothers surrounded their sons with positive role models (i.e., teachers, coaches) and relied on them to provide support as needed for their sons, a finding supported by mothers in the present study. Mothers of sons in particular—Maya, Audre, and Lee—reported being intentional about putting their sons in environments so they could be around positive male role models. Audre’s comments reflect the intentionality of all mothers in this study to do what they believe is necessary to enhance their child(ren)’s potential:

I want you to be great, but I'm probably not going to get in the trenches with you and inspire it. I might not inspire you, but somebody else will, so I'm going to put you in a great place so somebody else can inspire you like that.

Though the focus of this study was to explore students’ academic success, it also entailed investigating the lived experiences of their mothers. Collins (1994, 2009), hooks (1982), Davis

(1981), and other Black feminist writers, poignantly reveal the complex, painful, and beautiful positionality of being both Black and a mother. Alexis Pauline Gumbs (2016) began her chapter in the edited text, *Revolutionary Mothering: Love on the Front Lines*, describing this complicated positioning:

My mother is Black. So the means through which I was produced is a matter of national instability. My mother is Black so the trace of slavery waits every moment to ink my body with meaninglessness. My mother is Black. So my living is a question of whether or not racism will be reproduced today. My mother is Black. This same piece of information threatens my survival. But my mother is Black, which is at the same time the only thing that makes my survival possible. (p. 117).

Black women have been brutally punished and stigmatized for mothering. Yet, despite the stereotypes and obstacles faced by Black mothers, they have continued to use their experience and knowledge to develop qualities, create communities, and build networks that help them care for and raise their children. The personal histories shared by mothers in this study reveal their perseverance to survive. Audre candidly discussed her experiences as a mother of five children. She exhibited frustration with the “instant stigma” that comes with being 36 years old and a mother of five children as she shared the details of a recent doctor’s visit: “I went to the doctor. I wanted to talk about birth control, and she only wanted to talk about sterilization. ‘Well, you've already got five kids. What's wrong? You don't want anymore, do you?’ Ma'am, don't tell me how many kids I want.” After divorcing Raegan’s father, Rosa described her resolve to create a good life for herself and Raegan on her own terms. She illustrated this determination and independence when she noted, “Sometimes you have to be cognizant of your worth and your essence and do for yourself and make sure that your kids know to stop asking

people for stuff. Do it yourself!” It became evident that Rosa’s daughter is a reflection of her mother’s resolve when Raegan affirmed, “I can independently do my work and still be successful.... You don't need anybody to do something for you. You can do it by yourself.”

Every mother in this study expressed how some aspect of her lived experience and persistence to “survive” influenced the role she played in their child(ren)’s education. The significance of mothers’ resilience and its centrality in their child(ren)’s lives is also demonstrated in their accounts of protecting their child(ren). Studies conducted by Brodsky and DeVet (2000) and Cooper (2009) confirmed that protecting their children is an integral parenting strategy for mothers. For some, protection was described in terms of shielding them from threats in the community or their own dysfunctional romantic relationships with men, whereas, for others it meant instilling important values. Lee explained, “I don't want to be an enabler. You got to be able to stand on your own two feet. I'll help you as much as I can, but I will not, even with you being my son, allow you to just use me.”

Mothers’ protection was also evident in their advocacy efforts at school (Cooper, 2009). Maya described confronting a teacher during a conference: “I’ve actually had one teacher tell us that [Malcolm] doesn’t have a solid platform, so that he wouldn’t be nothing.” Maya explained that the teacher’s comments about her son not having a solid platform was related to his single-mother family structure. Maya boldly told the teacher:

Baby, Malcolm is standing on concrete! With one mother, a brother, and an aunty in the household...and my mom helps out, too. He standing on concrete! You can’t never tell me my son’s foundation not solid. You just don’t believe it, everybody else believe it.”

There is a growing body of literature challenging the deficit thinking associated with Black single mothers that misrepresents them as apathetic or as an impediment to their children’s

success (Chapman & Bhopal, 2013; Cooper, 2007, 2009; Robinson & Werblow, 2012, 2013). This research, along with Black feminist scholarship (Collins, 1994, 2009; hooks, 1982, 2000; Dickerson et al., 2012), has addressed society's assault on Black single mothers and has elucidated their resilience and perseverance to survive. Findings in this study are congruent with this range of research and reveal the various strategies mothers use that are fundamental to their child(ren)'s academic success.

### **PVEST and BFT Comprise a Powerful Theoretical Framework for Meaning Making**

The final conclusion in this study, PVEST and BFT comprise a powerful theoretical framework for meaning making, underscores the advantages of using both frameworks for recognizing and honoring how Black students and Black single mothers make sense of their lives. The synergy between PVEST and BFT accentuated my understanding of participants' lived experiences. The theories, if used alone, would not have provided as clear a lens to comprehend their worlds.

Given the lack of research related to the strengths, abilities, and agency of Black students and Black single mothers, this study's pursuit of understanding participants' subjective experiences is especially important. PVEST explains how development evolves within the bidirectional relationships between individuals and their environment. Individuals act on their environment based on how they experience it as well as the expectations they have from and for it. Thus, development depends on how persons perceive their life context (Spencer, 1995, 1999, 2011). BFT articulates the lives, experiences, and identities of Black women. It contends that race, gender, and class oppression intersect in a matrix of domination that affects the lives and experiences of Black women. BFT asserts that it is Black women's right to interpret their realities (self-define) and define their objectives (self-determination). Self-definition and self-

determination are fundamental to their empowerment and survival (Collins, 2009; Dickerson, et al, 2012; Guy-Sheftall, 1999).

PVEST and BFT were particularly useful in understanding participants' awareness of stereotypes related to Black student achievement and Black single-mother families. While these harmful misrepresentations posed a risk to achievement, participants resisted them with increased resilience (Andrews, 2012; McGee, 2013). Like Malcolm stated, "Society feels like we [Black men] are placed on earth to play sports. I take academics more serious." Mothers' statements regarding societal perceptions of Black student achievement seemed to parallel. Opal noted she frequently tells her children, "Society can say you're a minority, you're not." She further insisted that society needs to "Stop putting limits on them [Black students]."

Opal's resistance to stereotypes, as well as the resistance of other mothers in this study, can be explained by Collins's (1994) "motherwork" (p. 48). The subjective experience of mothering for women of color is inextricably linked to their unique concerns about survival, lack of power, and complex racial identities. Historically, Black mothers, unlike White mothers, have had to negotiate racist social contexts while fighting for the physical survival of their children and communities (Collins, 1994; Cooper, 2007). Maya illustrated this negotiation when she shared:

So, sometimes I tell him what people say, or what people label him as...not only him, me, too...what they label us as, and what "society" thinks that we are going to be and show him that we can be better than that. And not only are we going to be better, but we can bring other people with us. And that's how we got involved in the community. If I can do it, me being 16, pregnant, I just feel like why can't I share that with everybody else.

PVEST maintains that youth outcomes be understood from the perspectives of adolescents within their social and developmental systems (Spencer, 2011). The authentic expressions of high achieving youth of color, in particular, are often misinterpreted. Therefore, using their voice provides an avenue for understanding their diverse experiences (Cunningham & Rious, 2015). The findings in this study revealed how students and mothers define and make sense of academic success. Academic success is usually based on measurements, such as GPA and standardized test scores (Carter, 2008; Guskey, 2007). However, the participants described academic success as more than “good” grades. Students appeared to understand academic success in terms of one’s overall effort. For instance, Malcolm described academic success as “more about improvement and it’s more personal... Like it can be from making a 60 to making a 70, so I feel like it’s more personal.” Octavia expressed a similar sentiment when she said, “It’s not so much grades to me it’s more so understanding what’s being taught to me.” She further explained, “Say I started a class and I’m struggling so my grade is not looking that good but by the end of it my grade pulled up. It’s not the best grade but it’s an improvement grade.” Damon’s description of academic success seemed to capture a more holistic idea of effort: “To me academic success is being successful on a day to day, wake up, and you do what you have to do.”

Mothers also described academic success as more than grades. Audre noted that academic success “isn’t about being smart enough. It’s a matter of removing obstacles, especially coming from that non-traditional background.” For Audre, academic success was about having access to opportunity. She went on to state, “I think the biggest gap between success and not success is opportunity.” Lee offered, “Academic success is a combination of giving back to the community. Knowing who you are, balance, and exposure.” Maya also

underscored community in her understanding of academic success: “It’s just the way he [Malcolm] carries himself as a whole. I would judge his success by not him just going for his self, but how many others did you bring along with you.” Given the diversity of participants’ backgrounds and social contexts, their unique understanding of academic success seemed to be influenced by their interactions within these contexts (Spencer, 2008). Their understanding of academic success aligns with Carter’s (2008), who used the term “school success” to characterize both academic *and* social success. According to Carter:

School success should not simply be measured by an individual’s academic performance but also by achievement in the extracurricular activities in which he or she participates and by an individual’s ability to maintain acceptance by the social groups of which he or she desires to be a part; thus, school success is a holistic outcome of positive child development. (p. 478)

PVEST and BFT used together to elucidate how study participants make meaning of their lives, including their understanding of stereotypes and academic success, also provides useful insights into students’ ongoing development. Students and their mothers clearly comprehend the challenges they face. More importantly, they recognize and affirm students’ capacity for success in school and beyond. Societal misrepresentations of students’ abilities persist, despite indisputable evidence to the contrary. Given this backdrop, of which both students and mothers are keenly aware, there is a collective sense of what must happen to facilitate achievement in all Black students. This includes having a community they can count on for support and one that acknowledges and celebrates their academic success.

To conclude, both PVEST and BFT create a dynamic framework to explore the complex individual-context interactions of Black students and their mothers and the meanings made those

interactions. Findings from this study emphasize the value of recognizing and honoring how people define and construct their lived experiences. They also address the influence these interactions and definitions have on how students navigate their educational pursuits and how mothers support them.

### **Implications for Social Work**

Social workers must locate themselves within the social relations of domination and oppression. Social work's mission statement specifically states, "Social workers are sensitive to cultural and ethnic diversity and strive to end discrimination, oppression, poverty, and other forms of social injustice" (NASW, 2008). Therefore, social workers must critically reflect on their social locations and become aware of how their attitudes and behaviors can perpetuate and reinforce the very injustices and oppressive systems they are ethically mandated to eliminate. Understanding intersectionality is useful for practitioners because it promotes an understanding of the complex interplay among oppressed and privileged identities and how these interactions occur within a context of connected systems and structures of power (Azzopardi & McNeill, 2016; Hankivsky, 2014). When social workers and other helping professionals adopt an intersectional understanding of human existence they become more adept in addressing the socio-structural mechanisms and institutional processes impacting the lives of socially marginalized groups.

Significantly, how social workers think about African American students and parents influences practice with and research on this population. Whether implicit or explicit, oppressive attitudes and behaviors directed at Black single-mother families must be critically explored and addressed. This dissertation highlights for practitioners how systems of oppression influence how society sees Black students and their mothers, and more importantly how they see

themselves. Social workers must be keenly aware about the impact of privilege on individuals' subjectivities and their world views. To do so, they should position themselves in relation to class, gender, race, ethnicity, age, ability, sexuality, language, religion and other identities (Pease, 2006). As I mentioned earlier in my subjectivities statement, though my targeted position as a Black single mother is often most salient to me, I am also acutely aware of my privileged status as an able-bodied, heterosexual, cisgendered woman in academia. The interplay of these identities afford me a particular view of the world and places me in relationships of power with certain others. As I approached this study, I was mindful of how my social location would influence the study and my relationship with the participants. As I bring this research to a close I see clear implications for social work practice, education, policy practice, and research.

Social work practitioners are well positioned to recognize the unique factors contributing to the academic success of African American students raised in single-mother homes, given the profession's focus on individual well-being in a social context (NASW, 2008) and its commitment to a strength-based perspective (Hill, 2008). The school social worker, in particular, as Germain (1999) noted, "stands at the interface not only of child and school, but family and school, and community and school" (p. 36). School social work focuses on "coordinating the efforts of schools, families, and communities toward helping students improve their academic achievement and social, emotional, and behavioral competence by using its unique perspective of viewing the person in his or her environment" (NASW, 2012, p. 1). The findings of this study can help school social workers and social workers in other practice domains view these families through a more informed lens.

Problem solving, program development, and community building in schools require that social workers develop skills that actively engage Black students and their families (Brake & Livingston, 2016). Students and their families must be viewed as experts in their own lives. Cultural humility is an advantageous guiding principle because it is an approach that underscores authenticity, respect, and humbleness in helping relationships. The cultural humility approach “liberate[s] workers from expectations of cultural expertise about others, and actively engage[s] clients, inclusive of their cultural differences, in the service delivery process (Ortega & Faller, 2011, p. 27).

School social workers and others who work with Black students and their families must learn to identify deficit thinking and avoid stereotypical labeling of children as “at risk,” “disadvantaged,” and “underprivileged.” Auerbach (1995) cautioned that even “strength-based” (central to social work practice) thinking and practice approaches may continue to function within a deficit framework. Recognizing the manifestations of deficit thinking will help prevent locating causes of academic underperformance as problems within students, families, and communities. Since deficit-based views of African American students and mothers can result in biased and discriminatory treatment, school social workers, indeed all social workers, must develop a critical posture that challenges them to be aware of such oppressive practices. But awareness alone is not sufficient, as the NASW Code of Ethics (2008) makes clear. Social workers must also be actively involved in the pursuit of social justice and social change.

This study has implications for social work education as well. To work effectively with Black students and Black single-mother families, social workers must be equipped with comprehensive knowledge, skills, and attitudes in order to understand and appreciate their lived experiences (Azzopardi & McNeill, 2016; Marsh, 2004). This includes knowledge of the

historical-social-political-cultural contexts framing their experiences, an appreciation for these contexts, and how they define these contexts.

Another area for which this study has implications is policy practice. To truly support and facilitate the academic success of African American students, social workers must attend to the systems that disenfranchise them. Engaging in policy practice is at the core of this approach. Social workers have an obligation to challenge structures that impede growth and development of groups that have been marginalized (Joseph, Slovak, & Broussard, 2010). Being micro-oriented, or focusing solely on the immediate needs of students and families, is like running on a hamster wheel; it does not get to the root problems or influence large-scale change. A blog written by Karen Kimsey-House (2012) for the Huffington Post described the hamster wheel as “a pernicious condition...where we lose relationship to context — that is, what meaningful reason we’re doing something” (para. 3) She went on to write that you know you are on a hamster wheel when your “focus narrows and becomes singular. You get reactive instead of proactive.” (para. 7). Social workers must be aware of the systemic context framing student achievement. Getting off the micro-orientation “hamster wheel,” is a redirection of efforts that promote systems change. Jansson (2014) offered four skills that policy practitioners need: (1) analytic skills to evaluate social problems and develop policy proposals; (2) political skills to gain and use power and to develop and implement a political strategy; (3) interactional skills to participate in task groups, such as committees and coalitions; and (4) clarifying skills to identify and rank relevant principles. Because social justice is a core value of the profession, policy practice is central to all social work domains.

Finally, this research has implications for theory. The theoretical frameworks guiding this study, Phenomenological Variant of Ecological Systems Theory (PVEST) and Black

Feminist Thought (BFT), are valuable tools to equip social work researchers with a more informed lens to explore the experiences of marginalized groups, namely Black students and Black single mothers. Both frameworks advance non-stereotypical approaches to research, attend to the individuals and their interactions within socio-political-cultural contexts, and promote using their perspectives and voices to further understanding.

In sum, African American students and their families value education. What has been learned from this dissertation research offers insight and knowledge to guide social work practice, policy, education, and research that promotes academic success. Moreover, it fulfills the professions mandate to promote social justice.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

The purpose of this study was to explore academic success as perceived and experienced by African American high school students and their single mothers. Based on the findings of this qualitative study, I offer the following recommendations for future research:

First, the sample in this study consisted of seven students and seven mothers from one metropolitan area in the southeastern United States; all students attended public schools. The study took place over a five-month period and most participants were interviewed twice. It would be beneficial to repeat this study not only with a larger sample size, but also with students in different types of school settings, such as private, charter, and homeschool. Conducting the study over a longer period of time would also be advantageous for future research. A longitudinal study, consisting of a series of interviews that collects information about students throughout their high school years might offer a deeper understanding of how specific events and the meanings made of these events shaped their performance in school.

Second, this study used individual, face-to-face interviews, to collect data; mothers and students were interviewed separately. The intent of this data collection approach was to create a comfortable place for students and mothers that would encourage more candid expressions of their perceptions and experiences. Future research in this area would benefit from a design that, in addition to individual interviews, includes interviews with students and mothers together, as well as in focus groups. A plan that utilizes more than one method of data collection may yield findings with greater depth and breadth.

Third, though this study explored academic success among African American boys and girls, it did not attend to specific gender-related, meaning making processes and outcomes. As I researched literature related to African American students, I quickly discovered that the overwhelming body of research pertains to African American boys. Girls' experiences using their own voices are rarely examined. While the focus on boys is important, it relegates the perception and experiences of Black girls to the margins. A recent report from the National Center of Education Statistics (2016) indicates that Black women led every other race and gender group in college enrollment and graduation. It is essential that future research seeks to better understand the perceptions and experiences of Black girls in their homes, schools, and community. It is also worth noting that while Black girls and women are succeeding in schools and in their careers, they still contend with pervasive inequality.

Fourth, as discussed in Chapter 2 under "Resilience: Cautions and Considerations," future research on Black students could also investigate their academic experiences using the construct of resourcefulness. Mackinnon and Derickson (2012) employed this construct of resourcefulness to problematize the unequal distribution of resources and placed emphasis on how community members identify their needs and priorities. Using resourcefulness to frame

future studies on Black student achievement may illuminate other ways of knowing related to inequity, including the ways Black students and their families understand their experiences.

Fifth, I encourage researchers, particularly social work researchers, to use PVEST to frame future studies related to Black students and other students of color. The person-in-environment (PIE) perspective is a well-known principle guiding practice in social work (Hare, 2004; Simmons, 2012). From this perspective the individual and his or her multiple environments are viewed as a dynamic interactive system in which each component affects and is affected by the other (Hare). Social work researchers should find PVEST similar to their understanding of PIE; however, the bidirectional dynamic processes of PVEST, combined with its emphasis on meaning making, can provide researchers with a deeper understanding of an individual's response to and overall development within these contexts.

This last recommendation may be the most important one. Researchers must conduct more community-based, participatory research. As it redefines who has the expertise to effect change. This approach to research with Black students and mothers offers numerous benefits which include: (a) giving Black students and mothers the space to re-negotiate harmful misrepresentations; (b) focusing on issues important and relevant to these students and mothers, and (c) developing interventions and practice strategies that incorporate cultural values and norms.

### **Chapter Summary**

The academic underachievement of African American students is well documented in the research literature. A status quo myth is that Black students do not value education and their single-mother family structure is a detriment to academic performance. Like revisionist scholarship that captured the strengths of Black families and Black single-mother families, in

particular, there is a new generation of scholarship that attends to the strengths, resilience, and achievements of Black students and their families. The present study is consistent with this shift in discourse as it investigated student achievement from the point of view of academically successful high school students and their mothers.

Based on the analysis of interviews with seven Black, academically successful high school seniors and their single mothers, three broad conclusions were drawn: (1) there were numerous protective factors supporting academic success, which outweighed perceived barriers; (2) mothers' central role in student success counters the way they are largely depicted in existing literature; and (3) PVEST and BFT comprise a powerful theoretical framework for meaning making. Discussion of these conclusions included their relevance for social work practice, education, policy practice, and research. Six suggestions for future research were also offered.

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Appendix A

Recruitment Flyer

## Are You an African American High School Academic Achiever Raised in a Single-Mother Home?



### We Want to Recruit YOU & YOUR Mother for a Research Study!

Contact: Nicole Corley  
PhD Candidate, School of Social Work  
The University of Georgia  
Email: [CorleyDissertation2017@gmail.com](mailto:CorleyDissertation2017@gmail.com)  
Cell: [\(404\)213-5694](tel:(404)213-5694)



*Education is the passport to the future, for tomorrow belongs to those who prepare for it today. — Malcolm X*

Principal Investigator:  
Dr. Patricia Reeves  
Professor, School of Social Work  
The University of Georgia  
279 Williams Street  
Athens, GA 30602

Does this sound like you?

- ✓ Self-identify as African American or Black;
- ✓ A high school senior in the Atlanta or surrounding metro areas;
- ✓ Enrolled in at least one AP or Honors class;
- ✓ Have a cumulative GPA of 2.75 or higher;
- ✓ Participate in at least one extra-curricular activity;
- ✓ Have taken or plans to take the ACT or SAT;
- ✓ Raised in a single-mother household;
- ✓ Have post-high school plans (i.e., college, technical training, military)

Let us hear your story of achieving  
**SCHOOL SUCCESS!**

**MAKE CONTACT TODAY!**

Receive a \$20 gift  
card for your  
participation.



IRB ID# [STUDY0003521](#)

## Appendix B1

### Telephone Eligibility Screening Consent Script

Thank you for calling to find out more about our research study. My name is Nicole Corley, and I am a researcher at The University of Georgia's School of Social Work.

The purpose of this research study is to explore academic success as perceived and experienced by African American high school students and their single mothers. We hope that the study will contribute to the development of programs, services, and interventions that will help others become academically successful.

Do you think you (if talking to mother- your child; or if talking to adult student- your mother) might be interested in participating in this study?

**{If No}**: Thank you very much for your time.

**{If Yes}**: But before enrolling people in this study, we need to ask you some questions to determine if you are eligible for our main study. And so what I would now like to do is to ask you a series of questions about your schooling to ensure you meet the requirements for participation in the study. This should only take about 15 minutes of your time.

There is a possibility that some of these questions may make you uncomfortable or distressed; if so, please let me know. You don't have to answer those questions if you don't want to.

All information that I receive from you during this phone interview, including your name and any other information that can possibly identify you, will be strictly confidential and will be kept under lock and key. Remember, your participation is voluntary; you can refuse to answer any questions, or stop this phone interview at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

Do I have your permission to ask you these questions?

Thank you. If you have any questions about this research project, please feel free to call me,

Nicole Corley at 404-213-5694 or email Patricia Reeves, my faculty advisor, at

[ReevesP@uga.edu](mailto:ReevesP@uga.edu). Questions or concerns about your rights as a research participant should be directed to the UGA Institutional Review Board, 629 Boyd GSRC, Athens, Georgia 30602-7411; telephone (706) 542-3199; email address is [irb@uga.edu](mailto:irb@uga.edu).

Appendix B2  
Screening Interview

**Personal Information**

- 1. Age \_\_\_\_\_
- 2. Sex: Male Female
- 3. Race: \_\_\_\_\_
- 4. Grade Level: \_\_\_\_\_

**Educational Information**

- 5. What is your high school cumulative G.P.A.? \_\_\_\_\_
- 6. Have you taken the ACT or SAT? Yes No
  - a. If yes, what was your score? \_\_\_\_\_
  - b. If no, when do you plan to take it? \_\_\_\_\_
- 7. Do you participate in any Educational Placement classes?  
\_\_\_\_\_ Honors \_\_\_\_\_ Advance Placement \_\_\_\_\_ No
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_

If applicable, please specify the subject or title of class(es)

\_\_\_\_\_

- 8. Do you participate in any extracurricular activities? Yes No

Please specify the activities you participate in:

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

- 9. What are your post-high school plans?

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**Mother's Information**

10. Race: \_\_\_\_\_

11. Marital Status:

Married, Divorced, Separate, Widow, Never Married

12. Do you have a live-in partner? Yes No

**Conclusion**

Thank you for your participation in the screening interview. Based on your responses you meet/do not meet the requirements for the study.

## Appendix C

University of Georgia  
Student Consent and Minor Assent Form

### **Shifting the Discourse: An Exploration of Academic Achievement Among African American Students from Single-Mother Homes**

#### **Researcher's Statement**

I am asking you to take part in a research study. Before you decide to participate in this study, it is important that you understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. This form is designed to give you the information about the study so you can decide whether to be in the study or not. Please take the time to read the following information carefully. Please ask the researcher if there is anything that is not clear or if you need more information. When all your questions have been answered, you can decide if you want to be in the study or not. This process is called "informed consent." A copy of this form will be given to you.

**Principal Investigator:** Dr. Patricia Reeves  
Professor, School of Social Work  
The University of Georgia  
Email: ReevesP@uga.edu

#### **Purpose of the Study**

Thank you for your interest in participating in a qualitative research project conducted as part of the requirements for dissertation research in the School of Social Work at the University of Georgia. The purpose of this research study is to explore academic success as perceived and experienced by African American high school students and their single mothers. Specifically, this proposed study aims to understand the factors and underlying processes that contribute to the successful academic outcomes of African American students in single-mother homes.

#### **Study Procedures**

If you agree to participate,

- You will be asked to partake in an interview regarding your academic experiences that will last approximately 60-90 minutes. Interviews will be audio recorded in order to ensure data accuracy and scheduled at the convenience of the participant and researcher.
- You may be asked to participate in a follow-up interview, 2-3 weeks after the initial interview, lasting 30-minutes, to further explain or clarify information from the initial interview.
- You will also be asked to participate in a focus group, 4 or more weeks after the initial interview, with other participants in the study to explore as a group the particular behaviors, methods, and processes leading to academic success. The focus group will last approximately 60-90 minutes. Your participation in the focus group is not conditional to your participation in the overall study. In other words, you can decline to participate in the focus group and still take part in other parts of the study. The focus group will also be audio recorded to ensure data accuracy.

- Additionally, you will be asked to bring a copy of your transcripts/report cards and any other documentation you wish to provide related to your academic experiences, such as certificates, awards, pictures, or news articles. These materials will be returned at the end of the interview. All information obtained will be treated confidentially.

### **Risks and discomforts**

- You may experience one or more risks associated with being in this study. There may also be other risks that we did not anticipate associated with being in this study.
- During the individual and group interviews we will discuss your life experiences and situations that may have been difficult for you. You may be uncomfortable talking about these things with the researcher or with the group. You may skip any questions you do not wish to answer and you may end your participation at any time. If you have any concerns about questions, your responses, and/or the areas discussed, please inform the researcher
- It is possible that the things you talk about in the group discussion may not be kept confidential. Although the researcher will emphasize to all participants that comments made during the focus group should be kept confidential, it is possible that participants may repeat comments outside of the groups at some time in the future.

### **Direct Benefits**

- We are unsure if there will be any direct benefits to you for participating in the study. We do hope that being able to talk about your academic achievement will be an empowering experience for you.

### **Incentives for participation**

- For participating in the study students will receive a \$20 gift card. Participants will be asked to sign a document indicating receipt of the gift card.

### **Privacy/Confidentiality**

- To help protect your confidentiality, collected data (i.e., transcripts, audio recordings) will be coded and identified using assigned pseudonyms (false names), not your real name. All forms, notes, and recordings will be stored in a locked container or in password protected computer files. Identifiable information will not be shared outside of the research team unless otherwise required by law. If we write a report or article about this study or share the study data set with others, it will be done in a way that you cannot be directly identified. To further protect your privacy, all audio recorded interviews and other identifiable information will be destroyed at the conclusion of the research.
- While the researcher will make concerted efforts to ensure confidentiality, there are legal limits to confidentiality between researcher and participants. As a mandated reporter, it might be necessary for the researcher to breach confidentiality to report child abuse/neglect or intention to hurt self or others. If the researcher suspects that a child is being abused or neglected a report will be sent to the Division of Family and Children Services (DFCS). The researcher may also have to breach confidentiality to protect participants from harming themselves or others. If participants have any intentions of hurting themselves or others the researcher will have to take every action at their disposal



## Appendix D

University of Georgia  
Mother's Consent and Parental Permission (<18 Y.O.)

### **Shifting the Discourse: An Exploration of Academic Achievement Among African American Students from Single-Mother Homes**

#### **Researcher's Statement**

I am asking you to take part in a research study and for your permission for your child to take part in the research study as well. Before you agree and give permission, it is important that you understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. This form is designed to give you the information about the study so you can decide if you want yourself and your child to be in the study. Please take the time to read the following information carefully. Please ask the researcher if there is anything that is not clear or if you need more information. When all your questions have been answered, you can decide if you want to be in the study or not. This process is called "informed consent." A copy of this form will be given to you.

**Principal Investigator:** Dr. Patricia Reeves  
Professor, School of Social Work  
The University of Georgia  
Email: ReevesP@uga.edu

#### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this research study is to explore academic success as perceived and experienced by African American high school students and their single mothers. Specifically, this proposed study aims to understand the factors and underlying processes that contribute to the successful academic outcomes of African American students in single-mother homes.

#### **Study Procedures**

If you agree to participate and to allow your child to be in the study:

- You and your child will be asked to partake in an interview regarding your perspective and experiences with your child(ren)'s academic achievement that will last approximately 60-90 minutes. Interviews will be conducted separately and will be audio recorded in order to ensure data accuracy and scheduled at the convenience of the participant and researcher.
- You may each be asked to participate in a follow-up interview, 2-3 weeks after the initial interview, lasting 30-minutes, to further explain or clarify information from the initial interview.
- You and your child will also be asked to participate in a focus group, 4 or more weeks after the initial interview, with other participants in the study to explore as a group the particular behaviors, methods, and processes leading to academic success. The focus group will be conducted separately (mothers in one group, students in the other group) and will last approximately 60-90 minutes. Participation in the focus group is not conditional to participation in the overall study. In other words you or your child can decline to participate in the focus group and still take part in other parts of the study. The focus group will also be audio recorded to ensure data accuracy.

- Additionally, your child will be asked to bring a copy of transcripts/report cards and any other documentation you wish to provide related to their academic experiences, such as certificates, awards, pictures, or news articles. These materials will be photocopied and returned at the end of the interview. All information obtained will be treated confidentially.

### **Risks and discomforts**

You and your child may experience one or more risks associated with being in this study. There may also be other risks that we did not anticipate associated with being in this study.

- During the individual and group interviews we will discuss your and your child's life experiences and situations that may have been difficult to discuss. You and/or your child may get uncomfortable talking about these things with the researcher or with the group. You and your child may skip any questions they do not wish to answer and may end participation at any time. If you have any concerns about questions, responses, and/or the areas discussed, please inform the researcher

### **Direct Benefits**

We are unsure if there will be any direct benefits to your child for participating in the study. We do hope that being able to talk about their academic achievement will be an empowering experience for you.

### **Incentives for participation**

For participating in the study you and your child will each receive a \$20 gift card. Participants will be asked to sign a document indicating receipt of the gift card.

### **Privacy/Confidentiality**

- To help protect your and your child's confidentiality, collected data (i.e., transcripts, audio recordings) will be coded and identified using assigned pseudonyms (false names), not your real names. All forms, notes, and recordings will be stored in a locked container or in password protected computer files. Identifiable information will not be shared outside of the research team unless otherwise required by law. If we write a report or article about this study or share the study data set with others, it will be done in a way that your child cannot be directly identified. To further protect privacy, all audio recorded interviews and other identifiable information will be destroyed at the conclusion of the research.
- While the researcher will make concerted efforts to ensure confidentiality, there are legal limits to confidentiality between researcher and participants. As a mandated reporter, it might be necessary for the researcher to breach confidentiality to report child abuse/neglect or intention to hurt self or others. If the researcher suspects that a child is being abused or neglected a report will be sent to the Division of Family and Children Services (DFCS). The researcher may also have to breach confidentiality to protect participants from harming themselves or others. If participants have any intentions of hurting themselves or others the researcher will have to take every action at their disposal to protect you and protect your intended victim.

**Taking part is voluntary**

Participation is voluntary and you can refuse to stop taking part at any time without giving a reason and without penalty. You and your child are free to withdraw their participation at any time should either become uncomfortable with it. If your or your child decide to stop or withdraw from the study, the information/data collected up to the point of your withdrawal will be kept as part of the study and may continue to be analyzed.

**If you have questions**

If you have any questions or concerns about the research feel free to contact me, Nicole Corley, at 404-213-5694. If you have any questions or concerns regarding your rights as a research participant in this study, you may contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB) Chairperson at 706.542.3199 or irb@uga.edu.

I hope you will enjoy this opportunity to share your experiences and viewpoints with me. Thank you very much for your help.

**Research Subject’s Consent to Participate in Research:**

To voluntarily agree to take part in this study and to allow your child to take part in this study, you must sign on the line below. Your signature below indicates that you have read or had read to you this entire Consent and Parental Permission Form, and have had all of your questions answered.

Your Child's Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Your Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Your Printed Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Researcher: \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Printed Name of Researcher: \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix E

### Initial Interview Guides and Follow-up Interviews Guides

#### **STUDENT – INTERVIEW GUIDE**

##### **Background Questions:**

1. Tell me about a typical day for you.
  - a. Walk me through your day.
2. What types of things do you like?
  - a. What do you enjoy doing?
3. Tell me about your school.
  - a. What are your classes like?
4. Tell me about your friends.
  - a. What are your friends like?
5. What is your relationship like with school administrators (teachers, principal)?
  - a. Anyone stand out?
6. Tell me about your schooling experience.
  - a. Think about a time you were aware that you wanted to be successful in school.
  - b. What was going on?
  - c. Was there someone pushing you?
7. Think about a time when you felt most successful in school, tell me about it.
  - a. What did you do?

##### **RQ 1. How do African American students and their single mothers understand and explain the protective factors and processes contributing to academic success?**

8. Tell me about success in school.
9. What does academic success mean to you?

10. What's it like being academically successful?
11. What do your friends think?
12. Tell me why you think you are successful in school.
13. What does it look like when you are preparing for an assignment or test?
14. Why is being successful in school important to you?
15. Tell me about your strengths.
  - a. How did these strengths help you succeed in school?
16. What resources and supports were available to you?
  - a. Individual, family community, schoolHow did these resources and supports help you?

**RQ 2. What do African American students and their single mothers report as potential barriers (risk factors) to their academic success?**

17. Tell me about a time you were faced with a major challenge.
  - a. Any challenges related to family?
  - b. Any challenges related to school?
  - c. Any challenges related to community?
  - d. Was there anything in your environment you intentionally avoided to maintain your academic success?
  - e. Where there any threats in your environment?
18. How did you overcome any challenges you experienced?

**RQ 3. How has family structure shaped the academic success of African American high school students?**

19. What was it like growing up in a single-mother home?

20. In what ways did living in a single-mother home influence your academic success?
21. Tell me what happened at home to help you be successful in high school?
22. What was it like for you when you talked to your parent(s)/family about high school?
  - a. What did/do you talk about?
  - b. What questions did they ask about high school?
  - c. What messages did you hear about education while growing up in your home?
23. Describe how being success has impacted your family and your relationship with family members.
  - a. Does everyone in your family know about your academic success?
  - b. In what ways are they supportive?
  - c. Did members of your family provide academic support (i.e., help with homework; volunteer at school; etc.)?
  - d. Tell me what you might like from your family that you are not getting.

**RQ 4. In what ways can existing and/or future social structures help support and facilitate academic success for African American students from single-mother households?**

24. What did you have access to that other students maybe did not?
25. What do African American children and adolescents from single-mother homes need to be academically successful?

**Closure.**

17. Tell me about something that was important in your academic success during high school that I forgot to ask you about.

## **MOTHER – INTERVIEW GUIDE**

1. Your family was selected because your child is academically successful, tell me about that.

Share with me a typical day in your life.

What do you like to do?

What kinds of things do you do with your kids?

What kind of work do you do?

What's it like being a single mother?

### **RQ 1. How do African American students and their single mothers understand and explain the protective factors and processes contributing to academic success?**

2. How do you define academic success?
3. Share with me your earliest memory of your child wanting to be successful in school.
  - a. As parents we have moments that stand out. Tell me about a time where you were really aware your child was academically successful.
4. Tell me why you think your child is successful in school?
  - a. upbringing?
  - b. modeling?
  - c. messages
  - e. expectation

Why is it important for your child to be successful in school?
5. In what ways did you help him (or her) be successful in school?
6. What resources and supports were available to you and your child?
  - a. Individual, family, community, school?

- b. How did these resources and supports help you?
7. What did you have access to that other students maybe did not?

**RQ 2. What do African American students and their single mothers report as potential barriers (risk factors) to their academic success?**

8. Think of a time where you and your family had a challenge and how you think it might have impacted your child's academics.
- a. In what ways did this challenge impact your child's academic potential?
9. What helped your child overcome these challenge(s) to be successful?
10. Was there anything in your environment you wanted your child to avoid in order to maintain his (her) academic success?
- a. What messages did you provide?

**RQ 3. How has family structure shaped the academic success of African American high school students?**

11. Does everyone in your family know about your child's academic success?
- a. In what ways are they supportive?
12. Did members of your family provide academic support (i.e., help with homework; volunteer at school; etc.)?
13. How do you think living in a single-mother home influenced your child's academic success?
- a. Would it be different if your child lived in a two-parent home?

**RQ 4. In what ways can existing and/or future social structures help support and facilitate academic success for African American students from single-mother households?**

16. What do African American children and adolescents from single-mother homes and their families need to help them be academically successful?

**Closure.**

17. Tell me about something that was important to you and your child during high school that I forgot to ask you about.