"That's Just Who I am": African American High School Seniors and Their Mothers Perspectives on Academic Success

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Abstract

Much of the research on African American students tend to focus on the causes and consequences of academic failure. This fixation on negative outcomes continues to perpetuate deficit views of African American student achievement. As a consequence, far less is known about the successful academic outcomes of African American students, generally, and those from single-mother homes, specifically. Social workers can learn a lot about how to support and celebrate African American student achievement by allowing them and their families to give voice to their own lived experiences. Centering and honoring the unique taken-for-granted knowledges of African American students and their families offers social workers a more authentic understanding of students and families, insights that can inform both micro and macro level practice approaches. 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, semistructured 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. Data analysis revealed that students' inherent drive toward success, a deeply invested mother, and assistance from social-relational supports were key factors to academic success. Implications for social work practice are included.

Keywords African American students · Academic success · Academic achievement · Black mothers · Qualitative · Narrative inquiry

African American students continue to persevere and succeed in school, even in the face of systemic conditions that create vast inequalities and impose limitations on their experiences and choices. Notably, many do it as an act of resistance (Andrews, 2009). Yet, despite the persistence and academic successes of Black students at every level of schooling, they continue to be caricaturized by a host of dismal educational statistics that focus on underachievement or "gaps" in achievement (McGee & Pearman, 2014). The prevalence of African American youth experiencing lower academic outcomes when compared to their counterparts

has prompted a large body of research focused on identifying and understanding the factors driving this disparity. The focus on disparities (while important) has, in both research and public interest, resulted in a preoccupation with negative academic outcomes (Hill, 2011). The fixation on negative outcomes continues to perpetuate 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.

This article is based on interviews with seven academically successful Black students and their single mothers. Understanding the various factors contributing to and the meaning making associated with the academic outcomes of African American youth have significant implications to social work practitioners who provide services to youth and their families. Attending to how African American students and their mothers make meaning of themselves, their family, community, and social expectations, as well as their prospects for success, is key to building positive or

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strength-oriented relationships and developing family-led, efficacious services. Exploring these families' stories of academic agency can be helpful to social workers in supporting, sustaining, and celebrating the academic well-being of all Black students.

Literature Review

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). Normative patriarchal assumptions insist 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) (Parsons & Bales, 1955). Therefore, it is presumed that African American mother-centered households perceived to be lacking the associated function of fathers, are labeled deviant and the primary cause of many of the societal issues facing African American youth, to include poor academic outcomes (Dickerson, 1995; Gonzalez, Jones, & Parent, 2014).

The association between non-resident fathers and family and community dysfunction among African American communities was advanced over 50 years ago in Daniel Patrick Moynihan's U.S. Department of Labor 1965 report, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*. Moynihan (1965) argued that the growing economic and societal problems experienced by Blacks was not because of pervasive societal inequalities (i.e., unemployment, housing segregation, concentrated neighborhood poverty, discrimination) but due to the breakdown of the nuclear family. Single-mother households, Moynihan alleged, were the fundamental source of the "most of the aberrant, inadequate, or antisocial behavior that… serves to perpetuate the cycle of poverty and deprivation" (p. 29). Notwithstanding Moynihan's intentional disregard of race, gender, and class oppression impacting Black female-headed households, his analysis has had a profound impact on subsequent empirical research and societal perceptions of African American families.

Studies capturing the experiences of single-parent families, generally, are largely guided by a deficit perspectives that primarily focuses on their problems, while ignoring their strengths and capabilities (Ford-Gilboe, 2000; Phillips, 2012). For example, 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 (McLanahan, 1999; McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994); have lower cognitive ability (Lang & Zagorsky, 2001); experience higher levels of emotional distress (Amato, 2005);

and, are more likely to use drugs and engage in delinquent and violent behaviors (Carlson, 2006). 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.

Literature on African American youth from single-mother homes, in particular, often highlights an increased risk for internalizing and externalizing behaviors when compared to their European American and two-parent family counterparts (Goodrum, Jones, Kincaid, Cuellar, & Parent, 2012). 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 (McLoyd, Toyokawa, & Kaplan, 2008). Externalizing difficulties, such as aggression, delinquency, and inattention to parents and teachers in adolescence have been linked to poor academic outcomes (Brady, Winston, & Gockley, 2014) with lasting effects into adulthood (Dubow, Huesmann, Boxer, Pulkkinen, & Kokko, 2006). Yet, as Mash and Dozois (2003) pointed out, although externalizing problems have been reported to be more common among African American children, this finding is likely an artifact related to socioeconomic status (SES). Since there is an overrepresentation of Black children in low-SES groups in the U.S., caution must be exercised in interpreting the relationships among SES, ethnicity, and aggression.

Though research shows single-mother families are susceptible to a variety of social and contextual risks, there are important limitations in research focused on this family structure. These limitations include the scarceness of studies that have examined the strengths and resilience of single-mother homes. Not to mention the problematic tendency to compare single-mother families to two-parent families and not examine within-group differences, such as single-mother households of different racial and ethnic backgrounds (McLoyd, Hill, & Dodge, 2005). The propensity for empirical investigations of African American families to use White, middle class families as the standard for comparison is methodologically misleading and fundamentally precipitates biased results (McAdoo & Younge, 2009). The underpinnings of this approach inaccurately assume that Black and White families are afforded equal opportunities and equivalent life spaces.

Billingsley (1992) 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, Gonzalez et al. (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). Portraying African American single mothers and their families as abnormal deviations serves to maintain the persistent image of the "normal," White American family as ideal.

Recognizing and appreciating the unique cultural and social dynamics of African American mother-centered families is essential to an understanding of Black student achievement. Centering the discourse on risk, shortcomings, and underachievement keeps research and societal perceptions locked in a deficit paradigm (Ladson-Billings, 2007). Deficit thinking consistently fails to examine the systemic root causes of underachievement. Instead, it locates the problem of disproportionate levels of poor academic performance within students, families, and communities (Dudley-Marling & Lucas, 2009).

Notwithstanding structural conditions, education for African Americans serves as an important mechanism to strengthen the individual, family, and community (Hill, 2011). 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. Research indicates that parents of successful African American students are more likely to discuss school experiences and future plans, communicate high expectations, checking homework, encourage outside reading, and making frequent contact with the school (Clark, 1983; Jeynes, 2005, 2012; Morales, 2010; Williams & Bryan, 2013).

Black mothers, especially, have always played a critical role in the academic success of Black children. Historically, even as Black families became separated during slavery, and continue to be as a result of mass incarceration and other social injustices, the primary source of family continuity, strength, and resilience has been through the mother. Studies have revealed that family demographic variables, specifically the presence of a father in the home, contribute little to Black students' achievement orientation (Allen, Bonous-Hammarth, & Suh, 2003; Clark, 1983; Ford, 1993; Johnson, 1992). Such findings counter the considerable body of research documenting academic failure among African American students from single-mother homes. Research also demonstrates that the strongest determinant of Black students' educational attainment was the attainment levels of Black mothers (Wilson & Allen, 1987, Allen et al., 2003). 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; Robinson & Werblow, 2013).

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, 1995). 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 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (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).

The propagation of the stereotyped underachieving African American student from a single-mother home not only perpetuates racialized false definitions of students' academic abilities, it also overlooks those who, despite societal inequities and perceived and experienced "risks," achieve academic success. More qualitative research is needed that highlights the various cultural, familial, and social factors at play that contributes to the successful academic outcomes of African American students from single-mother homes. Research that captures the voices and perspectives of both students and mothers. Centering and honoring the distinctive vantage points of both students and mothers offers a deeper understanding of the multiplicity of factors influencing academic achievement. Perspectives and knowledges which can inform community and systems-level approaches that address educational equity and help develop culturally-informed practice approaches that help foster and celebrate achievement in all students.

Over the last two decades an 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., Kim & Hargrove, 2013; Williams & Bryan, 2013; Wilson, 2014). The present study is consistent with this shift and adds to this body of literature because it focused on the ways in which students *and* their mothers make sense of and give meaning to academic success. The purpose of this study was to explore academic success as perceived and experienced by African American high school seniors and their single mothers. The following research question guided the study: How do African American students and their single mothers understand and explain the factors contributing to academic success?

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. Given this supposition, Phenomenological Variant of Ecological Systems Theory (PVEST, Spencer, 1995) and Black Feminist Thought (BFT, Collins, 2009) were used to frame this study. Used together these theoretical frameworks emphasize the complex interactions of social, political, cultural, and historical contexts and the role of race, class, and gender in their experiences.

Spencer's (1995) PVEST builds on Bronfenbrenner's (1989) Ecological Systems Theory by including a phenomenological approach, which examines *how* individuals make meaning of their experiences, linking both context and perception (Spencer, 1995, 2008). Unlike ecological systems theory which describes micro, meso, exo, and macro systems contexts directly, PVEST points to not just the interactions of these experiences, but also the meaning that individuals make of them. Black Feminist Thought (BFT) centers and articulates the taken-for-granted knowledge of African American women (Collins, 2009). BFT situates Black women 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). 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).

Method

Understanding the various aspects 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, narrative inquiry approach was used because it allowed mothers and students to participate in a discourse that has largely excluded their voice. Thinking narratively challenges the dominant, deficit-prone perspective that has often framed their experiences, and offers a more authentic means to explore their lives. For African American students and their mothers, narrative inquiry privileges the multiplicity of their realities (Kramp, 2004).

Participants

Participants included 7 students—3 boys, 4 girls—and 7 mothers. Students and mothers were purposively selected based on the particular purpose and question under study (Patton, 2015). Table 1 provides a profile of participants. Student participants were identified using the following criteria: (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 3.0 or higher, based on a 4.0 scale; (f) has taken or is planning to take the ACT or SAT; (f) raised in a single-mother household; and (g) has articulated and begun to prepare for post-secondary plans, such as entry into college and/or armed forces. Other studies on Black student achievement (c.f. Carter, 2008, 2012; Griffin & Allen, 2006; Williams & Bryan, 2013; Williams & Portman, 2014) have used similar criteria for their student participants. Referrers (school guidance counselors and program coordinators) were able to confirm that participants met the study's academic requirements (i.e., GPA, school activity, ACT/SAT) requirements. 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. Most mothers (5 out of 7) were never married. Both Sonia and Rosa, Shannon's and Reagan's mothers, respectively, were married and divorced from their spouses when their children were toddlers. Mothers who participated were a diverse group of women, in terms of occupation, income, age, and educational level.

Student participants attended five different high schools in a Southeastern metropolitan area in the United States. All

Table 1 Participant profiles

Family no.	Student/mother	Student sex	Age	GPA	High school/selected course work/activities
Family 1	Malcolm Maya	M	17	3.1	Malcolm X High; Dual Enrollment; Football
Family 2	Shannon Sonia	F	17	3.0	Stonebrook High; AP Composition & Micro Economics; SGA Class Senator
Family 3	Langston Lee	M	17	3.3	Stonebrook High; Dual Enrollment; 100 Black Men
Family 4	Octavia Opal	F	17	3.1	King High; AP English & Calculus Softball, Upward Bound
Family 5	Damon Audre	M	17	4.0	John Lewis Learning Academy; Dual Enrollment; 100 Black Men; Contemporary Ballet
Family 6	Raegan Rosa	F	17	3.6	Ella Baker High; Dual Enrollment; Beta Club; Volleyball
Family 7	Tari Toni	F	17	3.7	King High; AP Macro Economics; Beta Club

Note Pseudonyms were used to maintain participant confidentiality

schools had a predominately African American student body and were designated "low performing" by the state. Graduation rates ranged from 58 to 81% with 19–38% of the student body considered college ready (students who are likely to be successful in first-year college courses based on state-wide indicators). All five schools were also Title 1 funded (high numbers of students from low-income families).

Data Generation

All interested participants were initially contacted via phone call by the first author. First, they were screened to request their permission to ask questions related to their eligibility. After agreeing to the terms in the initial screening, participants were asked questions to determine their eligibility. At this stage, interested participants were informed of the study's purpose. Once told they met the eligibility requirements and they agreed to participate, meeting dates, times, and location was scheduled. All participants were provided written details pertaining to the study and the expectations of participants. Consent forms were given to students and mothers before the first interview. Signed consent forms were collected from participants prior to commencing the study and remained in the possession of the first author.

Interviews were the primary method used to engage students and their mothers in the process of storytelling. Using a semi-structured format allowed participants the freedom to define their world in their own unique way (Roulston, 2010). Interviews focused on gathering data about participants' experiences with schooling and the familial, community, and social contexts in which their academic experiences are situated. Two interviews (initial and follow-up) were conducted with 10 out of the 14 participants. Two families were unable to participate in a follow-up interview. Initial interviews with students ranged from 30 to 60 min, and interviews with mothers lasted between 45 and 90 min. Follow-up interviews were also conducted face-to-face and ranged between 20 and 45 min. Since the mother–child dyad is the unit of analysis, the mother and student were interviewed individually. 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.

Researcher as a Multicultural Subject

The first author, an African American woman and unwed mother, conducted the study and analyzed the data. As she began the emotional task of situating her subjectivities in this research, what became undeniably clear is the paradox of her social location. In what Collins (1998) referred to as "outsider-within," Corley came to this research "border[ing] spaces occupied by groups of unequal power" (Collins, p.

5). On the one hand, as a researcher, she has the privilege of operating within academic spaces and acquiring the benefits and status these spaces afford (Collins). Yet, on the other hand, she is 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); she is not afforded the full set of rights and privileges controlled by the insider group.

This juxtaposition of an outsider-within is further complicated by her position as a Black, single mother. From the perspective of the participants, her positionality may have looked similar or remarkably different. As a Black, single mother researching single Black mothers, she is an insider who may share similar experiences as them. Therefore, the first author had to attend to her 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.

Throughout this process, she remained cautious of the ways in which her positionality and experiences might influence this study. She attempted to maintain a critical awareness of how she navigated the political, social, emotional, and cultural spaces with participants and the impact this process might have on the study. Corley attended to her positionality through member checks and peer review. Member checks involved sharing initial interpretations with participants and revising these interpretations if necessary. Peer review entailed having ongoing conversations with the co-author about the data and the overall research process. Corley also captured her overall feelings and reactions about this research process in personal journals and digital voice recordings.

Data Analysis

Data analysis and data collection occurred simultaneously. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using a combination of methods adapted by Polkinghorne (1988), Chase (2005), and Auerbach and Silverstein (2003). Polkinghorne's (1988) method of narrative configuration helped establish two distinct stages of the analysis process. The first stage, *narrative analysis*, focused on recognizing the unique personality and perspective of each participant. 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). Attending to each participant's story allowed for greater insight and understanding of their lived experiences.

The second stage, *analysis of narratives*, identified themes across participants' narratives. This entailed using the elements found within each mother and student dataset and underscoring categories or themes that held across stories. Using Auerbach and Silverstein (2003) this stage began with selecting text relevant to the study's research concerns. Next, similar or repeating ideas that were expressed by participants were grouped together into categories. Finally, categories that held across students, mothers, or students and mothers were then organized into themes.

Fundamental in narrative inquiry is the focus on the lives as lived and told through the inquiry. Although the findings represent commonalities that held across participants' stories, important to note is that the knowledge gained in narrative inquiry is textured by particularity and incompleteness, not generalizations and certainties. The aim was to recognize the possibilities within each participants' experience.

Findings

These findings highlight the patterns that connect across both student and mother participants (SM), just students (S), or just mothers (M). Table 2 displays the categories of findings and their associated properties.

Factors 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 their schooling experiences. Three distinct themes emerged related to factors that contribute to academic success: "always been like this," a deeply invested mother, and social-relational supports.

Table 2 Categories and properties

Research questions	Categories and properties
Factors contributing to academic success	"That's just who I am" (SM)
	Goal-oriented to the future (S)
	Self-starter (M)
	"She pushes me" (SM)
	Being a mother comes first (M)
	Generational mobility (M)
	"They know me" (SM)
	Teachers (SM)
	Family (SM)
	Friends (S)
	Community organizations (S)

"That's Just Who I am" (SM)

The statement "That's just who I am," expressed by Toni, captures the essence of how student and mother participants associated success as purely a function of the student's personality. Descriptors such as "confident," "focused," "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" seemingly reflects an internalization of attitudes and behaviors that promote academic success. Tari, Toni's mother, affirmed her daughter's attitude when she shared "Toni has always been that student that I didn't have to say, 'Do your homework.' She was always excited about school… She's just focused. When she focuses it's like wow! She definitely tunes in."

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." His mother, Lee, in discussing her son's success stated, "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."

While this larger idea of "That's just who I am" demonstrates students' 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. Damon said that being successful prepares you

for "the ultimate goal–to have better than what you always have." 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 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. It shows how Malcolm has connected his "image" of success to future prospects.

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.

Like Sonia, most mothers commended their child(ren)'s 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, "[Damon] doesn't need a lot of motivation from me, which is a blessing."

"She Pushes Me" (SM)

"She pushes me," a declaration shared by most students was an acknowledgement to how deeply invested their mothers are in their academic success. 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. 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.

Mothers' discussion of their school-related efforts ranged. Whether their investment was demonstrated by "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. Though 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.

Overall, students and mothers expressed the diversity of ways mothers were engaged in their child(ren)'s schooling. 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.

Being a Mother Comes First (M)

Mothers expressed how being a mother took precedence over other aspects of their lives and for some, even work. Maya, Malcolm's mother, 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… 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.

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 asked, "How do you explain that to work?" in a matter-of-fact way she replied, "I don't." She further said:

I don't miss no more than about 2 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.

Generational Mobility (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 be more successful than you are. So yes, I kind of like that concept, you know. So, yes, I push them, you know.

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:

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.

"They Know Me" (SM)

The third major category of this study highlights the importance of social-relational supports 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." She went on to say, "Most of them went out of their way for me which is amazing".

Octavia's remark of how amazing it was that teachers went "out of their way" demonstrates 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. 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."

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.

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.

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." 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 also pointed to the closeness of family as important elements contributing to their child(ren)'s success. Throughout our conversation, Maya often stated that she and her family "lean on each other." Likewise, in detailing the impact of her family, Sonia highlighted, "I had that support. We have a little village taking care of the girls, including my ex-husband's people, too."

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. Raegan expressed it this way:

> 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.

Community Organizations (S)

Another factor contributing to the success of student participants is there involvement in community programs. Community programs offered a number of opportunities to support student achievement including access to mentors and leadership development. 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. When asked to talk about the influence of the programs he's involved with, 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."

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore academic success as perceived and experienced by African American high school seniors and their single mothers. The narratives of students and mothers narratives help increase our knowledge and understanding of factors related to Black student success. Gaining perspective from mothers, in particular, adds another layer of perspective and context to student's success that is not often explored in research.

All study participants reported that students' positive sense of self, belief in their abilities, and inherent motivation for academic achievement were important characteristics driving success. The statement "That's just who I am" expressed by Toni and "I've always been like this" shared by Octavia referred to students' ever-present motivation to do well in school. These statements also challenge deficit views that suggest Black students do not care about their education. Mothers described the inherent nature of students' motivation when they noted how their children are self-driven, resourceful, and able to advocate for themselves. The current study's findings are congruent with the research conducted by Cokley (2003) which revealed African American students are intrinsically motivated, but not necessarily in the same way as European American students. Griffin (2006) also noticed that in addition to participants 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.

Students' deeply invested mothers distinguishes the role of Black single mothers in supporting their child(ren)'s academic achievement. 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. 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.

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). 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.

Participants also discussed how other 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 et al. (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 Marsh, Chaney, and Jones (2012) who found 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. 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."

Consistent with Williams, Greenleaf, Albert, and Barnes (2014), extracurricular activities, including participation in social organizations, also contributed to student success. 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. Without participating in these programs students might not have had access or exposure to these opportunities.

Black students are, in fact, high achieving, have a high achieving self-concept, strong support systems, and possess the capacity to excel in school despite social and systemic factors that compromise their achievement, health, and overall wellbeing. Additional research is needed to uplift and promote such narratives of Black student success that can inform curriculum development and pedagogical approaches that center Black student and family experiences. Additional considerations for related research also include Black student success in postsecondary settings where they are one of the most underrepresented student groups.

Limitations

Findings from this study adds to the existing knowledge base on Black student success and should be interpreted in light of several limitations. First, sampling was 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 transferability or the ability to apply the study's findings in other contexts. Transferability of the findings was also restricted because all the participants are from one Southeastern state. Second, being unable to schedule follow-up interviews with two families also posed a limitation, resulting in less data from them than from other families and an inability to gain more clarity related to certain aspects of their stories. Overall, given the complexity and range of participants' experiences, conducting more interviews, with more participants might have produced more rich and complex data.

Implication for Social Workers

Social work practitioners are well positioned to recognize the unique factors supporting and sustaining the academic success of African American students raised in single-mother homes. The findings of this study can help social workers in schools or other practice domains view these

families through a more informed lens. Supporting student achievement requires social workers to develop skills that engage Black students and their families. This engagement requires that social workers actively and with great intention seek out their perspectives to help inform practice–asking students and families where they believe their voices would have impact. Fundamentally, engaging with students and families often starts with creating a safe space for them where there perspectives and knowledges are affirmed and validated. The study's findings have a community building function because the insights from participants can help social workers learn to identify the resources, strengths, and support systems that are often overlooked.

Given the significance of social-relational supports as noted in this study, social workers are best equipped to support Black students by connecting them with school based and community resources in support of academic achievement. Often serving as liaisons between the school, home, and community, school social workers in particular, can provide direct support to Black students and their families within the full context of their identities with the home, school, and community environments (Bowen, 1999; Brake & Livingston, 2016). Directly tasked with assessing student progress within the socio-cultural environment, school social workers have the opportunity to disrupt pervasive narratives about Black students from mother-centered homes.

Recognizing the ability and potential of Blacks students requires that social workers acknowledge and appreciate the family regardless of its family structure or composition (Sudarkasa, 2007). Social workers must contest ideas that purport Black single mothers are impediments to their child(ren)'s academic success. This includes identifying deficit thinking and avoiding stereotypical labeling of Black mother-centered homes and students from this familial type as "at risk," "disadvantaged," and "underprivileged." The issue is not who "leads" or "rules" the family, but rather the functionality of those present in the student's life.

As demonstrated by the first author's positionality statement, social workers must locate themselves within the social relations of domination and oppression. Through critical reflection, social workers become more deeply aware of their particular social locations and examine how their attitudes and behaviors can perpetuate and reinforce the oppressive systems that negatively impact Black student achievement. Auerbach (1995) cautioned that even "strength-based" (central to social work practice) thinking and practice approaches may continue to function within a deficit framework. The corrective-narratives in this study reveal authentic and affirming aspects of Black students and their families that are helpful for social workers in challenging deficit orientations.

It is also imperative for social workers to not only adopt approaches that focus on the capabilities of African American students and their families, but to also assume a critical posture that challenge the larger, socio-political contexts creating oppressive conditions. As Jansson (2013) 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.

One such policy-related practice is for social workers to participate in what Louque and Latunde (2014) described as "collective advocacy" (p. 8). This form of advocacy can entail using the voices of families to inform and shape school and district policy. For example, social workers can share corrective-narratives from students and families, such as those expressed by participants in this study, to inform decisions made by teachers and administrators. Social workers can also can tell students and families about decision-making bodies such as school board meetings and encourage families to share their stories at these meetings.

Lastly, the theoretical frameworks guiding this study, Phenomenological Variant of Ecological Systems Theory (PVEST) and Black Feminist Thought (BFT), are valuable tools to equip social workers 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.

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