

Beating the Odds: How Single Black Mothers Influence
the Educational Success of their Sons Enrolled in Failing Schools

Abstract

The academy has given little attention to academically successful Black males and the factors that may lead to their successes. This multiple case study design, however, examined the ways in which single-Black mothers influence the educational success of their sons by focusing on the mothers of academically successful 11th grade Black males. Data for this study came from in-person tape-recorded interviews conducted with each mother followed by a focus group. Results support the existence of common characteristics of these successful single-Black mothers and the strategies they use to help their sons beat the odds. Recommendations for school leaders are also given.

Discussions in the popular media regarding the academic troubles of Black males have captured the interest of politicians and educational leaders (Brown & Davis, 2000). The resistant low overall academic performance of Black males has enticed our social and intellectual imagination. Yet, little is understood about steps that could be taken to redirect these students' educational paths (Davis, 2003). Legislation, such as the *No Child Left Behind Act* of 2001, requires states receiving Title I funds to test all children annually in reading and mathematics in grades three through eight and report student performance disaggregated by poverty, race and ethnicity, disability and English proficiency (U.S Department of Education, 2002). This type of testing has focused national attention on how subgroups of students are performing on accountability measures. Consequently, being Black and male in American schools still leaves one statistically at high risk for school failure (Ferguson, 2000; Polite & Davis, 1999).

Why, despite the best efforts of policy makers and educators do most members of this group replay the same sad statistics of low performance year after year? Conversely, what can we learn about success from those who do succeed in spite of the statistical predictions? Can those who thrive in education, in spite of the low performance of their peers, teach us about how to help more Black males succeed? These are the questions that drive this research project.

One critical variable in examining the academic performance of Black males rests with the family. A majority of Black males are now being raised by single mothers. Most mothers, married or single, play a significant role in raising their sons. According to Jackson, Brooks-Gunn, Huang & Glassman (2000) Black single mothers are more likely to experience stress events, making them more at risk for psychological distress, which increases the likelihood inadequate parenting. This, of course, can directly affect the educational outcomes of their sons. Understanding this dynamic could have important implications for gaining insight into how to

better address educational performance for all Black males. *The purpose of this study was to gain a deeper understanding of the perspectives that single Black mothers hold which help promote their son's academic success.*

Theoretical Framework

Urie Bronfenbrenner's social-ecological theory of social development (1979; 1986; 1989; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998) is the primary theoretical framework for this study.

Bronfenbrenner's theory consists of five interconnected "environmental" systems that range from the individual within close interpersonal interactions, to the broad influences of institutions and cultures. There are three important explicit assumptions within the ecological model. First, it assumes that the individual, and the individual's environment, are continually interacting and exerting mutual influence. As a result, things are constantly changing in small ways that may seem unimportant but may influence other factors in an individual's life. Second, it is assumed that the individual is an active participant in the change process. The individual is acted upon by the environment but also has the potential to exert influence and power within the environment. Third, Bronfenbrenner's model is bidirectional. That is, changes in the ecological system may influence changes that have varying effects on the individual. At any given time, any part of the system may act as a support for educational goals, or may act as a barrier.

Single Mothers of African-American Sons

According to U.S. Census data, in 1970, 65% of Black families had two parents. By 1990, the numbers had fallen, leaving only 39% of Black families headed by two parents. Recent Census Bureau figures reveal that the percentage had fallen even further by the mid-1990s (Hrabowski III, Maton & Greif, 1998). As a result, the care of Black sons has been laid at the feet of their mothers. According to Stevenson, Chen and Uttal (1990) most Black mothers value

their children's education, and they encourage them to do well in school. However, too often they bear a disproportionate level of criticism when things go wrong (Brown & Davis, 2000).

No-Nonsense Parenting

Black Mothers seem to demonstrate a more authoritarian style of parenting. Some evidence suggests that this is influenced by religion. Brody and Flor (1998) tested a family process model that linked maternal education, maternal religiosity, and the adequacy of family financial resources and psychosocial competence in the mothers' children. The sample included 156 6-to-9-year-old African American children living in single-mother-headed households in a rural area. It was concluded that greater maternal religiosity was related to more use of "no nonsense" parenting practice, higher mother-child relationship quality, and more maternal involvement in the child's schooling. This finding supports the belief that African Americans' religious involvement can promote supportive and responsive family relationships, which in turn help the family cope with economic and social stressors that accompany life.

Some Black mothers believe that schools do not reflect their concerns regarding education. Over the years these mothers worked hard to elevate the quality of education for their sons in spite of numerous obstacles (Moles, 1987). Nevertheless, it has been argued that single Black mothers are less effective in influencing their son's academic success than White mothers (Coley, 1998). According to Duncan, (2002) single Black mothers have much to offer educators; however, they have fewer opportunities to get involved at school because of their lack of understanding about how the educational system works (Hunter et al., 2006).

Mothers' Perceptions

Collins (2000) argues that Black women develop a "unique" vision of the school world based on their perceived low social position within a matrix of social domination that puts them

at the center of intersecting oppressions of race, class and gender. She argues that the oppression is expressed by society structurally (as in mostly white schools built on mostly white educational values), disciplinarily (where tests are used that point to the individual with low scores as the “failure”), hegemonically (believing that society and its schools have the right to do this), and interpersonally (through interactions that suggest that one does not have to treat people “at the bottom” with respect while oppressing them).

Moles (1987) explained that single mothers have the same interest and willingness as married parents to help their children with their educational needs, and they can spend a great deal of time helping them at home. Research has shown that the mother’s responsive behavior towards her child’s education is a relatively strong intermediary between the mother’s expectations and her child’s academic performance (Jackson & Remillard, 2005; Seginer, 1986).

African-American male students face challenges unique to them as students in U.S. schools at all levels of schooling, by virtue of their social and cultural identity as African-Americans and because of the ways that identity can be a driving force of devaluation in contemporary American society (Perry et al, 2003). The evidence is mixed as to whether general societal racism, inadequate or inappropriate public education policy or school settings, lack of understanding or skills in teachers, poor parenting skills, or lower individual skills of students who are African-American males, is the primary “reason” for general poor performance. However, that all bits of evidence exist to some degree suggests what might be a generally unsupportive life environment for Black students.

Purpose of the Current Study

The purpose of this study was to gain a deeper understanding of the relationship Black mothers share with their sons and how these relationships influence the educational success of

their sons. Specifically, we wanted a better understanding of the ways Black mothers put the needs of their sons first and what influencing factors drove these mothers to want academic and social excellence for their sons. Our aim was also to study how these mothers, with limited knowledge and skills at navigating their way through the educational system, learned what they needed to learn so they could serve as “agents” on their sons’ behalf.

Since most prior research on this topic has argued that single Black mothers have a negative influence on their sons, our goal in designing and conducting this study was to explore how some Black males succeed despite the odds. By better understanding how success occur, we might be able to more objectively address how societal and institutionalized racist expectations for Black males can be reduced so more young men can succeed academically.

Using Bronfenbrenner’s theoretical framework, the following research questions are derived from our review of the literature:

- 1) In what ways do single Black mothers attempt to influence the educational success of their academically successful sons?
- 2) What procedures and practices do single Black mothers use to navigate the educational success of their academically successful sons?

Methods

Participants

This multiple case study design sought to identify specific patterns of successful mothers’ behavior and to uncover new themes by viewing Black mothers as sources of support for their sons. This study was conducted in a large urban California school district that serves a mostly impoverished, Black population and was limited to schools with a history of poor academic performance. All participants were recruited from schools in the district on the “needs

improvement” list. Our aim was to demonstrate that even in schools where Black males have the lowest rates of academic success, there are mothers who influence their sons to persevere despite the odds.

This study followed a two-tiered sampling plan. First Black males were selected, then their mothers. Both had to meet specified criteria. Males selected in the study met the following criteria: (a) 16 to 17 years of age with grade point averages of 3.0 or better, (b) enrolled in courses that met the University of California high school A-F requirements, (c) identified by recommendations from the school counselors, and (d) confirmed by examining school records. The rationale behind these selection criteria was linked to the literature on black youths. In order for those eligible to have their mothers selected, their mothers must have been: (a) divorced, separated or single and the primary caregiver for their son, (b) their son’s biological mother, and (c) whose highest educational level attained were lower than a Bachelor’s degree. This particular selection criterion was important because a number of previously-published studies had documented the relationship between mother’s education level and student academic success. A goal of this study was to examine previously-untapped sources of influence.

Design and Measure

A qualitative case study design was chosen because this type of design allows for deep exploration of a topic that would not be possible with a quantitative approach. Data for this study came from two primary sources: interviews and focus groups. 50 interview questions, informed by the literature surrounding Black males, were initially constructed which were then refined and reduced to 12 key questions for the interviews with the mothers. Three Black mothers assisted the first author in revising the chosen 12 questions to their final format. The final selection of the

questions was based on the ability of the individual question to bring out issues most relevant to the study. All interviews were tape recorded and transcribed prior to analysis.

In addition to the interviews, the first author conducted a 1 to 2-hour focus group jointly with the five mothers. During the focus group, summaries of the interview findings were shared and participants were asked to clarify any areas they believed had been misinterpreted and to affirm that their responses were portrayed accurately. Second, focus groups provided an opportunity to ask follow-up questions and pursue lines of questioning that interpretation of the interviews results suggested might be meaningful. Prior approval of the topics to be covered in the focus group discussion was given, but the actual focus group questions were written after the interviews, as interview responses determined the depth and order of the questions.

Analysis of the collected data for this study occurred through a process of open coding and axial coding, whereby the data were first deconstructed and labeled and then selectively categorized (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) by two independent coders. Data and coding patterns were then compared. Coding was repeated until there was good inter-rater reliability.

Procedure

Participants were recruited in a series of steps. First, a list of students who met all selection criteria was made. Of the five students selected, two were from one “improvement school” and the other three were from a second “improvement school” in the same urban district. Then, the first author contacted the mothers by phone to set up an in-person meeting during which the study was explained. At the end of the meeting the mothers were given a consent form to sign. Each of the five mothers signed and returned the forms, agreeing to participate in the study.

After the signed consent forms were in our possession, the first author scheduled appointments for face-to-face tape-recorded interviews with each individual. Each interview took approximately one hour. Two weeks after the interviews, the first author conducted a one-hour focus group with the five mothers. The focus groups provided more detailed information and allowed for follow-up questions after the first author examine responses from the individual interviews conducted with the mothers and the sons (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994).

Although the participants were forthcoming and appeared to respond favorably to the interview process, opportunities to establish rapport and probe further into their responses may have improved the findings. It is possible that some of the participants withheld ideas, beliefs and experiences. One of the mothers was not able to attend the mothers' focus group meeting; having all five of the mothers present at the focus group meeting might have yielded a more meaningful discussion and richer data.

In addition, given the fact that the first-author personally identified with this situation and is passionate for improving educational conditions for more Black males, personal biases may have clouded the objectivity of our findings. Nevertheless, we took steps to control for this potential bias by using an independent coder to code the data transcripts and cross checked our results with trends in the literature.

Results

Demographics

Compared with other schools in the district, School 1 has the largest population of students (over one third) who are homeless, in foster care, or living with grandparents / guardians. Thirty seven percent of the parent/guardians have not completed high school themselves. At any given time, approximately 80% of the students are on probation from the court system. There is a significant transition of faculty, an average of thirty to forty teachers leave each a year. Moreover, in the past year alone the school has had five principals (three of whom served as interim principals). The demographics of School 1 are 55% Black and a 45% Latino population.

School 2 is also an urban school challenged with high levels of violence and poverty. Campus safety remains a primary concern that takes up a significant amount of administrative time. The student population is approximately 60% Hispanic, 39% Black and 1% other, with about 99% of the population receiving free or reduced-price lunches. Since 2001, student attendance failed to meet the state's requirements during testing days; however, in 2005, attendance on test days allowed the school to meet the annual attendance objectives as defined by the state. Nevertheless, the school failed to meet the proficiency objectives. Both schools have been designated in need of "program improvement" by the district.

Of the five mothers, all but one indicated that they worked full-time jobs. Two mothers were divorced, two mothers indicated that they had never married, and one mother was widowed when her son was an infant. One mother had only completed a high school education, had at least some education at the junior college level. None of the mothers had met before, yet, in the

focus group there appeared to be an immediate bond and sense of respect towards one another for their sons' achievements and for the hard work they had contributed as mothers.

How Single-Black Mothers Help their Sons Succeed

When interviewed, the mothers expressed active attitudes and behaviors in which they influenced their son's academic success. These mothers were pro-active in building their own skills on behalf of their sons' best interests, interacting with other key people in their sons' daily environment, and teaching their sons positive lessons about how to be successful. The mothers tactfully encouraged and motivated their sons by building on their interest and desires, being available and attentive to help, and by pushing forward as needed. They supported all aspects of their son's life financially, emotionally, and psychologically. Four out of the five mothers had full time jobs and were able to provide financial support. In addition, their work ethic is a model for their sons to follow. Several mothers constantly told their sons to not repeat their mistakes and take advantage of what opportunity in education that they have. Whether the mother was trying to motivate, encourage or redirect the efforts of her son, the sons' best interest was always at the forefront of the mothers' decision making. Common characteristics in the interview results with these mothers are outlined in Table 1.

Table 1.

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

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

These characteristics were apparent in the numerous strategies used by the mothers, see Table 2. The mothers talked regularly with their sons. They emphasized the importance of education whenever they could and used their own experiences to help provide their sons with cases to learn from. They held up role models (teachers, ministers, coaches, etc.) and told their sons to talk to them. They told their sons that only the son could actually do, or not do, what was needed to succeed. These mothers talked about how to use other people to help advance their sons' success. They identified people in official roles who caused problems to occur (a

counselor, an administrator, a teacher); they talked about how they intervened to solve the problem, and how they got people to help their sons. They also talked about redirecting their sons if that was what was needed. Another category of available help for their sons was identified outside the school in the broader community. Three of the mothers identified God and church.

*Table 2.**Strategies used by Single-Black Mothers to Influence the Academic Success of their Sons in Low Performing Schools*

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

In the mothers' focus group discussion, four of the mothers added more specific information on several of the themes first named in the interview resources. While no new themes emerged in the focus group discussion, the mothers' comments helped frame the categories of data which eventually emerged from the data coding.

“Motivation” was discussed again in the focus group. Motivation could include life lessons from the past, and it could include “teachable moments” in the present.

I think a parent should positively motivate their children, and always remind them to continue to do well, ask them how they are doing every day. You know, when you pick them up from school, ask them ‘What’s going on today? How was school? What could I do to help you do better? Do you need any help?’ Just know, ask them, communicate, and understand, listen - a lot of times - just be there, an open ear. Just support them, and spend all the time you can with them.

Each of the mothers “encouraged” their sons to stay focused and they did all they could to help this along. Encouragement happened on many levels, on a regular basis, and through behaviors as well as through talk.

I would like my son to be an honest, successful young man. And I help him out along the way by being an honest person myself, and trying to do the best I can in whatever career I am in. And be consistent, and try to set a goal and follow through with the goal, and just stick with it.

Each of the mothers had an understanding of the importance of “supporting “their son’s efforts to do well in school, and they talked about support in the focus group. These mothers did everything they could to make sure they were there to help their sons along.

Well, I guess I can say that I want him to be a strong individual. I mean, as far as from seeing him grow up from a boy to a young man, I can say that he has been choosing his friends and his surroundings wisely. Again, I wanted to stress that I did get him involved in sports...Like I said, the parent in the background,

standing strong and firm with the child, that makes the child into a strong and firm individual.

Another mother stated,

I talk with my son during dinner-time, and on the weekends, and discuss what's going on in the school day and discuss his homework.

The mothers also "focused" on their sons and pushed them to be productive. This could be through determining their son's likes and dislikes, finding ways to get them involved in extra-curricular activities, or steering clear of negative peer pressure.

The challenge we all have being single parents is making sure our boys are staying out of gangs, and have enough food to eat, and clothes to wear. I raised my son to not be like the world. I tell him Momma, can't afford this, so don't come home, talking about so and so has this, can I have it. No, you can't. That's why you're going to school, so when you graduate you can go to college, get yourself a job, you can buy all these things you want right now.

In summary, the mothers put the success of their sons as their highest, constant priority. They marshaled their own resources to be the best mothers they could be; they observed and communicated with their sons on a regular basis so they knew their sons in –depth. They interacted with their sons on such a regular basis that they knew the patterns of their sons' days, and when those patterns were disrupted. They focused on school and church and focused on more casual, informal interactions so that they believed they always had a fairly good sense of how the son was doing at any particular moment. Three of the mothers drew upon their religious beliefs and their church community to support and direct their sons. They also learned, on their own, how to interact within the school community on their sons' behalf.

Discussion

This is one of the few published articles that examine the positive effect that single, Black mothers can have on their son's educational success, even as they attend some of the most segregated, low performing urban schools. Research has conclusively demonstrated the general failure of Blacks in school and the dominant discourse often endorses a "blame the victim" lens of analysis in the media, but our evidence suggests that some Black mothers are able to help their sons achieve academically, despite insurmountable odds.

Throughout the interviews and the focus group discussion, it was clear that the mothers in this study were concerned with putting the needs of their sons first. These mothers wanted their sons to be successful educationally and socially. They learned what they needed to learn in order to be better mothers to their sons. They focused on their sons, and learned everything they could about the son's personality and the environment of the son, so that they could support positive actions and block negative influences. These mothers also learned how to negotiate the educational system in order to advance the educational development of their sons. This finding is in contrast to Lareau's (2000) study that concluded that Black parents are least likely to be able to negotiate schools and institutions on the behalf of their children in the sense that the mothers learned and exercised behaviors more typically found among middle class parents. These mothers were willing and capable of negotiating on behalf of their sons. Their behavior and skills looked more like those demonstrated by middle class White parents in previous studies.

In Fordham's (1996) study, he reported that the low educational performance of Black males was a result of parents not providing them with strategies needed to negotiate a hostile academic environment. This was not the case for the mothers in my study. For example, one mother said; "Whenever he needs my help, I'm there to help and push him and guide him and

lead him.” Not only were the mothers in my study focused on their sons’ education, they were prepared to act on behalf of their sons as well. This supports the findings of Brown and Davis (2000) that suggested that many Black mothers value their children’s education and encourage them to do well.

These mothers committed themselves to the well-being of their sons. For example, one mother said, “When you bring children into this world there are a lot of things you can’t do [for yourself] so that your child can have.” Another mother said, “It has been like team work for us with both of us together, it’s been exceptional. My son asks me ‘am I supposed to do this or that?’ and then he’ll come home and say ‘mom how is this suppose to go?’” In Davis’s book *Black Sons to Mothers*, he explained that Black mothers can have a profound influence on the family and therefore on the social and educational development of Black males. The obvious commitment that the mothers in this study have towards the well-being of their sons supports Davis’s argument and conclusion.

The mothers did not complain because of the sacrifices they made for their sons. In fact, they said it was their responsibility to do what they could in order to secure the educational success of their sons. One mother stated “I am the only adult figure in his life” while another mother said “he needs me to tell him don’t give up; go on and go to school, you’re going to be ok.” The mothers in my study were committed to their sons, and they believed they were the only ones who cared whether or not their sons made it through the educational system.

In a 1994 study conducted by Harry and Anderson, it was concluded that Black parents were mostly operating from a deficit perspective that was intensified when their children were subsequently designated academically incompetent. The mothers in my study did not operate

from a “deficit perspective.” In fact it could be concluded that they were operating from a logical viewpoint of potential success grounded in high expectations.

These mothers were concerned with building character and creating strong individuals who could make their way through the educational system and do the “right thing” and become productive students, regardless of how they are viewed by teachers. In his (2003) study, Ferguson reported that most teachers underestimated Black students and their potential to be effective students. To combat this, the mothers in my study constantly talked with their sons and gave them advice that would help them become better students.

The ultimate goals of these mothers were to turn their boys into successful men who could care for themselves. Responding to the educational needs of their sons and pushing them to do well in school was the start of this process, which appeared to be natural for these mothers. This supports the (2003) study by McKay, Atkins, Hawkins, Brown and Lynn that found Black parents willing to be involved in their child’s education. Unfortunately, some mothers lack the knowledge on how to get involved.

Implications

The data gathered from conversations with these mothers clearly support each of the three assumptions of Bronfenbrenner’s social-ecological theory. They built a strong self, taught their son how to act, and directly controlled the microsystems of their sons’ lives. By constructing a defined set of operating principles, these mothers were able to guide not only their own behavior, but that of their sons at home, at school, and in the community. These mothers interacted on their son’s behalf in all of the institutions and groups with which the son had contact. If the son was interacting with a teacher, or a minister, or a coach, the son could trust that the mother was right there as well, monitoring everything that was happening and

intervening as necessary to make sure that the son's needs and best interests were being served. The mothers also acted to push their son's away from negative microsystems (gangs, drugs), while actively constructing positive systems in their place.

In various ways, the mothers acted as the mesosystem itself. In the absence of their son's positive links between home, community, school, and church, the mothers forged the linkages and maintained them for their sons. Although none of these mothers told stories about going to the district or state level for their sons, inferring from the stories reported here, it is likely that they would do whatever is required for their sons to succeed.

Recommendations for Further Research

Because of the overwhelming amount of research written on the negative aspects of Black males and their mothers, the author encourages further research studies on Black males that add to the understanding on what some of these individuals are doing "right." Our research demonstrates that Black mothers can help their sons perform well in spite of negative press that defines them as "culturally incompetent;" however, there is little to no research that focuses on the successes of these individuals. More research that shines a light on the successes of Black males and the overwhelming support they receive from their mothers could begin the process of averting racial prejudice. By redefining the negative definitions that so harmfully label these students and their mothers, the current educational outcomes for millions of children of color will likely change.

Conclusion

The mothers described in this study give us hope. They do not match the racial stereotype of single Black mothers. They taught themselves and their sons how to be successful despite the trends. If the contribution of Black mothers, as those described here, is sought and nurtured by

more educators and administrators, schools might better teach more Black males to achieve to their full potential. By identifying and supporting Black mothers, more urban schools can become institutions that inspire and educate other parents to help their sons beat the odds.

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