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A Pathway to Scholarship: A Qualitative Study of the Single African American Mother's Role in the Academic Development of their Sons for Kindergarten

Onda Johnson
University of San Francisco, ojohnsonusf14@gmail.com

The University of San Francisco

A PATHWAY TO SCHOLARSHIP: A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF THE SINGLE AFRICAN AMERICAN MOTHER'S ROLE IN THE ACADEMIC DEVELOPMENT OF THEIR SONS FOR KINDERGARTEN

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Dissertation Abstract

A Pathway to Scholarship: A Qualitative Study of the Single African American Mother's Role in the Academic Development of Their Sons for Kindergarten

The voices of single African American mothers are critical to research on kindergarten readiness. This study examined maternal influence on the kindergarten readiness of African American male children of single African American mothers. Research on the topic of maternal academic support for sons indicated a deficit view of mother's expectations for her son's performance and cognitive ability in the year prior to entering kindergarten.

Studies on the educational outcomes of African American male students suggested this subgroup significantly underperformed on standardized tests in mathematics and reading compared to their peers. The education community references the achievement gap as this difference in performance, which is prevalent as early as kindergarten for African American male students.

Antithetical academic deficiency theory describes maternal behaviors to circumvent and combat the nonacademic stereotypes of their African American sons. The theory informs nontraditional parental-involvement practices and positive messages regarding the academic expectations and support mothers have committed to their sons.

Findings from the study of single African American mothers' perceptions of the cognitive ability of their sons suggested that mothers' positive influence in the areas of continuous support, academic preparation, and parental involvement impacted their sons' academic growth. This study demonstrated the aptitude of single African American

mothers in countering the degenerative attitudes that dissuade the academic development of African American male students beginning in kindergarten.

This dissertation, written under the direction of the candidate's dissertation committee and approved by members of the committee, has been presented to and accepted by the Faculty of the School of Education in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education. The content and research methodologies presented in this work represent the work of the candidate alone.

Onda Johnson Candidate	April 23, 2018
Patricia A. Mitchell, Ph.D. Chairperson	April 23, 2018
Walter Gmelch, Ph.D.	April 23, 2018
Richard Greggory Johnson III, Ph.D.	April 23, 2018

DEDICATION

In dedication and memoriam to my Grandparents, James Henry and Lillie Mae Exum, for their steadfast, bountiful, and unconditional love and support throughout my life. Thank you for sharing your faith in God, your commitment to each other, and your dedication to improving the lives of our family. Your belief in me and encouragement to reach my life goals gave me the confidence to keep pursuing my education. Your lives are an example of faith, persistence and perseverance, strength and character that serves as the foundation in all that I do in my life.

In dedication and memoriam to my father, William L. Thompson, who insisted that I be the best in whatever I chose to do, and who believed I could and would. For teaching me not to withhold and be silent, but to speak, and raise my voice, because you knew I had something to say and you enlisted me to have the courage to do so. I will always love you for telling me and showing me that I was strong.

To my Grandson, Gabriel, I hope that one day you will understand that this was more than something your Grandmother accomplished; it is an open door to your future. I expect great things from you, and this work reflects that all things are possible. You are the first, I pray, of many more grandchildren and future generations of our family. You have the awesome responsibility of sharing your story about what you saw and experienced with the others when they arrive. Always be the example or one better than the example that was set for you. Lead with positivity and possibility, and first and foremost, let God be the head of your life; all other things will be added to it.

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I am humbled and deeply appreciative of the extraordinary women that participated in this study who unveiled their lives for the benefit of others. In examining your lived experience, I was immersed in your narrative and I felt present in the stories you told. Your words encircled me as an invisible companion in your history. In each of you, including the participants in the pilot for this study, I sensed the depth and bottomlessness of your story, and the victory in your journey.

Individually, your efforts to erase the labels African American male students carry in academia are commendable. Your mission to open the pathway to scholarship for your sons and to adjust the lens on the perceptions of African American single mothers is prodigious. I hope this body of work will honor the spirit, innovation, and tenacity in your efforts to see your sons to a successful end. I cannot express gratitude enough for your fortitude and sacrifice.

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To my son, Quynton, as I contemplated whether or not to conduct a study of the educational experiences of African American male students, your educational journey resonated in me. Your story became a catalyst for this work and, as I reflected on the experiences and challenges in navigating the educational system for your benefit, I became more resolute about the importance of a study of this nature. The educational experiences of African American male students in the United States is a history that is bound in stereotypes that limit their possibilities and future, your success in overcoming these barriers is proof that it is possible. Although our story is not reflected in the social position of the mother-son dyad represented in the current study, as an African American mother of a son, I understand the importance of the mother's role in a son's academic experience. You inspired me to tell our story and I have done so through this work. I

want you to know how appreciative I am of you for being the man that you are, for our relationship, and for supporting me in accomplishing this educational capstone.

I would like to thank all my family for their patience as I was on this journey. To my husband, James, thank you for your love and support. You are the reason I was able to seamlessly move through this process. To my daughters, Victoria and Alexia, you are both incredible women and I am in awe of all that you have accomplished. Your determination, integrity, fortitude, and perseverance are a testament to other women, to God be the Glory for all that you are and will be.

To my mother, brothers, sister, and sisters-in-law, nieces and nephews, father- and mother in-law, and to all of my extended family members, friends, and prayer warriors, you know how important you are to me. I hope I have shown you what is possible when you are steadfast in your self-commitments to complete what you start. I am grateful for your support, prayers, and acknowledgment in pursuit of reaching this goal.

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CHAPTER I

THE RESEARCH PROBLEM

Statement of the Problem

The best available evidence indicates that children of different racial and socioeconomic backgrounds come into the world equally equipped to excel. … However, by age three, between-group skill differences are clearly in evidence. Later, gaps in school readiness are firmly established by the first day of kindergarten.

— Ronald Ferguson, *Toward Excellence with Equity,* 2007,

Kindergarten readiness is socially constructed, meaning it is a concept of learning derived from socially accepted ideologies of what students should know prior to entering kindergarten. Conceptually, kindergarten readiness has been shaped by educational policies that have defined the rigor in kindergarten classrooms since the early 1990s. In the late 1990s, shifting educational priorities and reform amplified the expectations of what children should know as they enter formal education (Bassok, Latham, & Rorem, 2016; Russell, 2011; Stipek, 2006; Stipek, Feiler, Daniels, & Millburn, 1995).

Academics have not agreed on a single definition of kindergarten readiness; for the most part, educators define readiness by measures that assess performance in reading, mathematics, and other skills generally acquired between the ages of 3 and 5. A few researchers also noted noncognitive skills that include behavioral aptitudes, such as paying attention, following rules, and motivation for learning in academic environments as integral to school readiness.

Despite the differences in defining kindergarten readiness, children are expected to enter kindergarten with a set of skills that undergird their ability to function in an

academic setting. Researchers indicated that African American male children are more likely than their Caucasian peers and other minorities to enter kindergarten without the prerequisites for learning in today's kindergarten classroom.

The differences between African American male children and their peers in preparation for formal educational environments may be attributed to a number of variables, including maternal gender biases on the perceptions of educational attainment that viewed the competency of African American females in academic environments over African American boys (Wood, Kurtz-Costes, Okeke-Adeyanju, & Rowley, 2009). Parental expectations that conform to a nonacademic social stereotyped labeling of African American male children undermine the confidence of the members of this subgroup, leading to a predictable negative educational outcome (Wood et al., 2009). These beliefs also serve to quell the motivation of African American male students toward academic performance; motivation toward learning is a behavioral aptitude identified as a prerequisite of kindergarten readiness. Wood et al. (2009) "considered mothers' endorsement of stereotypes about gender differences in academic abilities … [contributed to] the societal and institutional factors that undermine the educational outcomes of African American males" (p. 12). The Wood et al. study extended the research on the general patterns of African American parental beliefs on gender differences in educational attainment compared to their own youth.

A literature review conducted by Mandara, Murray, Telesford, Varner, and Richman (2012) uncovered limited empirical research on the effects of the gender-based parenting styles of African American mothers. According to Mandara et al., "only a few studies have directly examined the degree to which African American mothers have

different relationships with their sons and daughters" (p. 130). Results indicated that "the gender differences in mother–child relationships are especially large among African Americans" (p. 138). Mandara et al. uncovered limited empirical research on the effects of the gender-based parenting styles of African American mothers showing mothers' expectations for daughters "economic self-reliance and assertiveness" and "higher educational expectations" differed from those for their sons (p. 130), with sons exhibiting behavioral deficits, and daughters exhibiting stability.

The researchers measured seven maternal parenting variables: maternal warmth, encouragement, instructiveness, empathy, controlling, negativity, and acceptance (Mandara et al., 2012). The researchers' hypothesis suggested that the maternal gender-related behavior patterns indicated more assistive behaviors such as aiding sons to complete a task (controlling) and anticipating independence in completing a task by daughters (encouragement). Maternal behavioral patterns in this study increased the likelihood of a negative effect on the behavior of African American males over females. Gender-based parenting resulted in "less optimal parent–child relationships experienced by African American boys" and "facilitate[ed] the disparities in behavior problems and achievement between them and African American girls" (Mandara et al., 2012, p. 138–139). Findings from Mandara et al., relating to self-efficacy, were notable in sons' rejection of the mothers' assistance and insistence on completing the task without mothers' interference.

Similar to the Wood et al. (2009) study, Mandara et al. (2012) intimated that maternal gender bias "may force many African American mothers to subconsciously focus more of their energy on the child with the greater perceived potential to succeed in

society" (p. 139). Although the Mandara et al. study examined the relationship between mothers and sons and mothers and daughters, it did not imply a lack of concern or love and care in these relationships.

The Allen and White-Smith (2018) study of parental involvement practices offered a contrasting perspective of the mother–son relationship and maternal gender-based parenting styles. Allen and White-Smith noted "in a school system that privileges White middle-class norms, aesthetics, and parenting styles, the parental involvement practices of Black parents are often pathologized" (2018, p. 410), meaning their actions and parental engagement were nonconforming and abnormal. African American parents are marginalized and "met with rejection and exclusion similarly to what their children experience in school environments" often labeled "confrontational and uniformed, [school systems] tend to dismiss the critiques of Black parents" (2018, p. 412).

The African American mothers in the Allen and White-Smith (2018) study evoked cultural wealth, characterized as "the skills, knowledge, connections, and abilities used by communities of color to fight discrimination and oppression" (p. 414). African American mothers view cultural wealth as parental involvement in their sons' education, used as a tool to push back against the structural and institutional mechanisms that "socially construct the Black family as deficient" (Allen & White-Smith, 2018, p. 414).

A precept to the attitudes that shape the beliefs of African American mothers regarding their sons' cognitive ability are African American maternal parenting styles. Situated in a cultural framework, African American maternal parenting may be contextualized in the sociocultural norms that result from environmental strains and perceived threats. The adage "we raise our daughters and love our sons" is an example of

the ideologies of protection reflected in the messages and lessons of racial socialization taught to African American children on "cop[ing] with racism and racial exclusion while not allowing it to become a rationale for failure or despair (S. A. Hill, 2001, p. 498).

Research on the mother–son dyad supported the concept that sons are validated more than daughters as a means to "protect them from the threats of discrimination in the real world," providing a perspective on racial socialization and an "explanation for why the African American mother 'loves her son' at least to the extent that such 'love' is centered around 'protection' (Telesford, n.d., p. 55). This form of racial socialization is rooted in the narratives of slaves where it was used as a mechanism to protect the children in slavery from the harsh reality of their condition. This emphasis on sheltering their children from harm is as prevalent today as it was more than 400 years ago, during the period of slavery that began in the 13 colonies.

Parental involvement on the academic achievement of African American youth has an intervening dimension, an aspect to closing the achievement gap (Jeynes, 2005). Measuring parental involvement on four aspects of involvement—attendance at school events, communicating with their children about school, maintaining high expectations for their children's success, and checking children's homework—revealed a high impact on the academic outcomes for families that participated in the Jeynes (2005) study. A small but statistically significant difference (.0001 level of probability) in parental support favored support of daughters over sons. The positive effect of parental involvement of African American parents has wider implications:

> The fact that parents are more likely to be involved in the education of their daughters more so than their sons is rather disconcerting, particularly because

> African American females are more likely to go to college than African American males. … The fact that parents are more involved in the education of girls than boys could be a small contributing factor to this [gender] gap. (Jeynes, 2005, p. 271)

Other contributing factors included socioeconomic and marital status in examining parental engagement (Jeynes, 2005). African American parental involvement was more likely in two-parent middle-class households, with married parents. Single-parent households faced challenges in allocating time for parental involvement. To offer a broader perspective and to mitigate against constraints such as time, parental involvement in the African American community could not be viewed from a single dimension. Some parents marked their attainment or desire for higher socioeconomic status (SES) as a means of parental support. An improved SES may open the opportunity for children from single female-headed households to live in communities with better schools, and to better afford supplementary educational supports such as tutors and other educational resources. A focus on other parental-involvement attributes was particularly emphasized for single parents as a measure of the academic support for their student (Jeynes, 2005).

Single mothers head 57% of African American households, indicating a high probability that children born in African American families will be raised by a single mother (Snyder, de Brey, & Dillow, 2016). The incidence of African American single-parent households includes those who were never married, separated, divorced, and widowed. These households represent all SES classes and are not limited to lower income households.

Socioculturally defined roles of African American women and men blur historical Eurocentric gender roles. The mother–child household prominent during slavery became a normatively acceptable household archetype for African Americans in poverty (S. A. Hill, 2001, p. 496). The childrearing practices in African American single female-headed households necessitated a "gender-neutral" environment. This process included male and female role expectations: that is, male children were expected to care for younger siblings, do housework, and other traditional female roles and female children were expected to take on work outside the home in these environments. The division of labor and support relates more to ability than gender in Black families (S. A. Hill, 2001).

Racial socialization, "messages parents transmit to their children about the significance of group identity, racial stratification, and intergroup and intragroup relations" (Dunbar, Leerkes, Coard, Supple, & Calkins, 2017) may negatively impact the expectations of African American male children in single female-headed households. Researchers noted that in these environments, addressing the effects of racism plays a key role in the parenting differences of males and females concerning the external social influences resulting from discrimination. Expectations are predominately due to a "Black mother's fear for the safety of her son" and the messaging around gender-based expectations are borne out of this fear (S. A. Hill, 2001, p. 503). Cautionary messaging is not relegated only to single African American women in poverty in "understanding that their sons face many obstacles and even dangers in expressing masculinity. [Black] parents may develop higher expectations for daughters than for sons and be more tolerant and self-indulgent with sons" (S. A. Hill, 2001, p. 503). Challenges in raising African American males transcends SES in the Black community (Green, 2012). Middle-class

single African American mothers struggled to address the negative educational outcomes of their sons (Green, 2012, p. 13).

African American mothers' parenting style is "authoritarian or helicopter parenting," as a means to control and protect their sons from racism, victimization, and incarceration (Henderson, 2016, Abstract). Protective parenting styles are implied in hovering over the lives of their sons to shield them from social stigma and influences on the self-identity of their sons (Henderson, 2016). Parents' beliefs about their children's academic ability shaped their children's self-efficacy and academic outcomes (Wood et al., 2009). Racial and ethnic identity are indicators of parental and community influences that can profoundly affect the behaviors and academic outcomes for children and youth.

> Research supports the idea that culture conditions individual perception and cognition by providing sets of values, life expectations, and needs which affect people's basic sensory perceptions. Culture serves as a source of lay theories about the world and shapes how people attend, think, and react, crafting their life views and philosophies. (Kastanakis & Voyer, 2014, p. 6)

Davis (2003), in examining the intersection of race, gender, and schooling for African American males, considered the "mechanisms" that influence "disengagement" in the early grades. This phenomenon can be examined through a social-constructivist lens with data suggesting that parenting styles in the African American community contributed to a racial and ethnic identity for African American males that had historical precedence. Davis used the masculine imaging of African American males as a "social and academic construct for their personal lives" (p. 520). The masculine identity, a stereotypical image of African American men in society, "portrays the Black male as

violent, disrespectful, unintelligent, hyper-sexualized, and threatening" (Davis, 2003, p. 520).

This racial and gender identity had implications for the cognitive and social limitations placed on African American males in school settings. This negative stereotyping occurs early in the educational experiences of African American males and is oftentimes reinforced in the media, community, and other socially influenced venues that contribute to "a traditional masculine hegemony of behaviors and attitudes" (Davis, 2003, p. 532). In some ways, a masculine identity undermines an academic identity that is seen as feminine and undesirable (Davis, 2003; Jackson & Moore, 2008). The media reinforces this cultural identity by promoting images of "African American males as individuals deeply embedded in a subculture valuing standards of coolness and hyper-masculinity signified by identity with the hip-hop culture" (Jackson & Moore, 2008, p. 849).

The nature of the masculine stereotype identified in Davis (2003) and Jackson and Moore (2008) was invoked by a review of literature on the topic that suggested "Black males are often disadvantaged by this perplexing and misunderstood intersection of race" (Davis, 2003, p. 517). Davis suggested "little is known about the processes and experiences of early schooling, particularly issues of masculinity and how it influence[s] schooling" (p. 518). Jackson and Moore (2008) averred that gaining acceptance in a subculture, such as the hip-hop culture, "encourages behaviors that devalue academic achievement and depress educational aspirations while condoning activities and relationships that rebuff traditional standards of academic success" (p. 849).

The advent of the term *intersectionality* (Crenshaw, 1989, as cited in Carbado, Crenshaw, Mays, & Tomlinson, 2013), responded to the implications of race and gender that were transposed and in juxtaposition for Black women. Crenshaw's 1989 essay lay the framework for the term intersectionality to later be exposed through multiple factions of intersecting identities (Carbado et al., 2013). Decades after the development of the theory, intersectionality was first introduced to define Black feminism, expanded beyond a singular precept to other areas where the multidimensional model can be applied. The original intent of the theory to expose the distance that bifurcated the social experiences between African American men and women informed Crenshaw's definition of intersectionality.

The cross-sections between race and gender related to bias created an additional dimension of experiences for African American women that were not implicated similarly for African American men or White women, with the latter two reflecting the bilateral indices of discrimination at that time. Intersectionality as a theory that supported Black feminism explicated the relationship between being Black and a woman and "addressed the marginalization of Black women within not only antidiscrimination law but also in feminist and antiracist theory and politics" (Carbado et al., 2013, p. 303).

R. G. Johnson and Rivera (2015), expanded the application of the term intersectionality and reframed it as an approach to confront the disparaging ideologies of bias associated with the term. Relating the skill derived from a dual-identity, the researchers suggested that "oppressed minorities become adept at *bicognition*, or the ability to navigate both their own and alien sociocultural milieus" (R. G. Johnson & Rivera, 2015, p. 512). Redirection of the term opened the discourse to include additional

identities suggested in the research as: intercategorical, or "discrete traits" in a category; intracategorical, referencing a self-identification that expands on the racial category or sexual-orientation, and countercategorical, or opposing the category; transcategorization, means identification by association. These identities open the possibilities for self-examination by individuals who may not have considered the social diversity of their existence "and therefore to the possibility of greater mutual appreciation … and cross-identification" (Johnson & Rivera, 2015, pp. 511–512).

In the current study, intersectionality is examined through the lived experiences of participants in preparing their sons for an academic environment. The theory underscores the interchangeable positional challenges of preparing their sons for an academic environment and supporting their son's self-identity. The duality reflects the challenges of the maternal position to support sons' academic development while navigating social institutions that denigrate their parental position and involvement.

The challenges of African American male students in academic settings are well documented. Research findings supported the pronounced negative effects of low academic expectations for African American male students by schools and communities. African American males face greater challenges in academic settings than their female counterparts: 81% of African American women between the ages of 18 and 24 obtained a high school credential compared to 72% of African American men in 2006 (Wood et al., 2009). The disparity in achievement widens in the upper educational levels where African American women are more prominent (Wood et al., 2009). African American women earned 40,000 postbaccalaureate degrees in 2005 compared to 16,000 awarded to African American men in the same year (Wood et al., 2009, p. 1).

Although a myriad of studies examined the academic deficiencies of African American male students, much of the research has focused on environmental conditions, such as poverty, as contributors to poor school performance. Although the impact of poverty cannot be discounted or underrepresented in a study of this kind, it does not go far enough to address the underlying nature of the persistent gap in academic achievement for African American male students, which researchers have suggested should be considered from multiple perspectives. This diversity of thought is particularly important when considering that the African American community encompasses a range of SES. Academic concern for African American male students included school environments with a large percentage of middle-class African American students.

Davis (2003) suggested that a framework of qualitative and quantitative research in this area should include "using a developmental perspective to study changes in African American males' achievement and performance from kindergarten to 3rd grade" (p. 523). Consideration for early learning, including school readiness, should include the parental impact on school preparedness. Parental influence is paramount in developing ideas and acceptance of an academic identity. Cultural orientation, reinforced in the community, is reflected in Fordham's (1996, as cited in Davis, 2003) work that "implies that negative school attitudes can be found among Black students because it is learned behavior that is community enforced (p. 524). Studying parental influence, particularly from the maternal perspective, would address a gap in empirical research on the early learning experiences of African American male students.

Important contextual issues such as maternal perceptions of the academic competency of male children may be significant to factors contributing to the academic

development of African American males. Parental perceptions of academic competence shaped the beliefs of African American male students, including their levels of academic motivation (Wood et al., 2009). The subgroup displays stereotypical behavior, derived from understanding the expectation of family members, the community, and society at large, through attitudes of self-fulfilling prophecy. Self-fulfilling prophecy means negative attitudes and behaviors that are externally driven by expectations from influential people or through social engagement that creates a dynamic for the predicted behavior to occur. "Little evidence is available on the antecedents of underachievement for young males—the exception being the negative effects of some family and schooling background variables" (Davis, 2003, p. 515). Studying maternal perceptions of the cognitive development of their sons prior to the entering formal educational environments may provide another perspective to the causes that underlie this phenomenon.

Patterns of racial socialization focus attention on the need to insulate African American children from racism and the racial exclusionary practices they are expected to experience in society and in social institutions. Research on the topic of racial socialization has been inconclusive and contradictory in empirical studies that applied measures to indicate the impact racial socialization had on academic preparation, academic outcomes, or the academic self-esteem of African American students (Brown, 2009; Dunbar et al., 2017; Neblett, Chavous, Nguyen, & Sellers, 2009). Researchers acknowledge that the various measurements used to examined this phenomenon have fallen short in correlating racial socialization to academic outcomes for African American students. Brown (2009) described the literature on the topic and discovered the findings

to be inconclusive and disparate on whether racial socialization contributes to positive academic outcomes, suggesting that "many researchers have failed to fully explicate the mechanism by which racial socialization results in better achievement outcomes" (p. 2). Accordingly, researchers measure racial socialization practices in a variety of ways and generally address the mechanisms parents impose in the preparation for the impact of social environments African Americans must navigate within, particularly for African American male children (Neblett et al., 2009). In contrast, researchers suggested that racial-socialization messaging, particularly messages of racial pride, perform several functions, including encouraging academic performance in school settings resulting in an indirect or distal link between these messages and the academic achievement of African American students (Brown, 2009; Henderson Hubbard, Lewis, & Johnson, 2014). Educators measure academic achievement at the onset of a student's school experience; therefore, a positive impact in this area could provide agency against the influence of racial dominance and prejudice on the academic outcomes of African American male students (Brown, 2008; McWayne, Mattis, & Hyun, 2018; Neblett, Philip, Cogburn & Sellers, 2006; Varner, Hou, Hodzic, Hurd, & Butler-Barnes, 2018).

Maternal perceptions of single African American mothers on the cognitive development of their sons prior to entering kindergarten may impact children's school readiness. In the current study, single African American mothers' influence on their sons' academic development is the phenomenon under examination. The examination focuses on maternal contributions and attributes that specifically support the concept of kindergarten readiness and the general cognitive development of their sons. The intent of

the investigation was to understand mothers' process in preparing sons for an academic environment and their motivation for doing so.

Background and Need for the Study

The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) identified seven behavioral attributes that may impact a student's academic outcomes as they enter kindergarten. These attributes, reported by teachers in the longitudinal study, ECLS-K:2011 included paying attention, persisting in completing tasks, showing eagerness to learn new things, working independently, adapting easily to changes in routine, keeping belongings organized, and following classrooms rules. From a cognitive perspective, subject-matter development in reading and mathematics included such skills as letter recognition, rhyming words, and vocabulary, recognition of numbers, shapes, patterns, and basic addition and subtraction (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). The National Association for the Education of Young Children defined school readiness through a focus on the school environment, social institutions, and familial supports needed to ensure students succeed in school. The National Association for the Education of Young Children (2009) adopted the following definition of readiness from Maxwell and Clifford (2004):

> School readiness involves more than just children. School readiness, in the broadest sense, is about children, families, early environments, schools, and communities. Children are not innately "ready" or "not ready" for school. Their skills and development are strongly influenced by their families and through their interactions with other people and environments before coming to school. (p. 1)

In California, *California Preschool Learning Foundations* (2008) identifies the skillsets for learning. The three-volume set outlines the knowledge children should have prior to the kindergarten year: social-emotional development, language and literacy, English-language development, and mathematics; visual and performing arts, physical development, health; history-social science, and science. These domains are a measure of the knowledge children should acquire in the first 4 years, according to the California State Board of Education (SBE; California State Department of Education [CDE], 2018).

Researchers have identified several issues concerning equity in the access to quality early learning environments. Inequality in educational opportunities between Whites and racial minorities results from the historical precedence of racial segregation in public schools. Since the 1970s, researchers have studied differences in the academic development between Whites and other minority students based on the results of standardized tests in mathematics and reading. The academic achievement gap, as this phenomenon has been referenced, has widened and narrowed in response to educational policy and remains a prominent concern in the educational development of African American students.

Educators have no debate about whether the achievement gap exists: strong research has examined the phenomenon from the lens of racial inequality (Jeynes, 2005). The achievement gap is less about the nature of equity and how to improve school environments but is more about school improvement, which deemphasizes the need for equity in the educational system (Berliner, 2009). Referencing the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, Berliner (2009) admonished the law to address the educational deficits of individuals and subsequently, the academic achievement gap.

The sociopolitical influence in education has sought to level the playing field beginning in preschool with such programs as the federal Head Start and, more recently, Early Head Start programs, and through the enactment of policies intended to address the disparities in the educational opportunities for African American children and other minorities. Since 1965, the federal government has invested in preschool programs that serve low-income households. Access to sufficient slots for placement and the quality of these programs, compared to the fee-based programs that children from affluent families can afford, have raised the question of equity. Recent federal investments in platforms such as the *Ready-To-Learn* grant have expanded the approach to equality in an effort to reach more households with an investment in public broadcasting.

Programs such as *Sesame Street* and *SuperWhy*, public service announcements and commercials such as the *Sing, Talk, Read* initiative, funded through First 5 of California, an agency created to support child health issues and parental support, are examples of the expansion. Efforts to inform and to "narrow the achievement gap through trans media" and to broadened access to information on the importance of a preschool education and family engagement (P. Johnson, Steven, Lovitts, Lowenstein, & Rodriguez, 2016, p. 267), are sufficient to heighten the awareness of preparing students academically and socially for school environments. However, this effort does not resolve the concern for insufficient access to quality preschool spaces for children from low-income communities.

Equitable access to quality preschool programs or enriching home environments for African American students form the basis of the achievement gap (Friend, Hunter, & Fletcher, 2011). Access to learning environments that are richly resourced in either

formal preschool settings or informal family or kinship settings is a key indicator of children's preparedness for schooling (Gable & Cole, 2000). Students who enter kindergarten deficient in academic and social-emotional preparation are more likely to face challenges early in their academic careers (Friend et al., 2011; Reardon & Portilla, 2016). The academic and social challenges some African American children face early in their education persist over time and oftentimes lead to academic incompetence, increased retention rates, and suspensions and expulsions at higher rates than Caucasian students (Friend et al., 2011, p. 41; NCES, 2016).

In 2011–2012 data collected from a national population of public schools, schools retained over 140,000 kindergarten students (4% of the population); males represented 61% of those retained and 5% were Black/African American (U.S. Department of Education, 2014).

An examination of the achievement gap from a historical perspective supports framing the issue from its roots. The binary of the Black and White achievement gap is "one of the most pressing challenges for urban education in the United States today" (Norman, Ault, Bentz, & Meskimen, 2001, p. 1102). A more egalitarian approach to the achievement gap may occur through an outline of the educational experiences of immigrants. For generations, Blacks were unable to access education, as they were denied an education as a means of control over the masses of individuals shackled to slavery; the enlightened slave owner understood that an educated workforce would pose a threat to the master plan of submission. The southern states of South Carolina and Virginia passed laws to ensure slaves would not learn to read and write; in contrast, in

some northern states, freed slaves were allowed access to literacy through educational institutions built for former slaves.

Fredric (1863), an escaped slave, wrote “It is a saying among the masters, the bigger fool the better nigger. Hence all knowledge, except what pertains to work, is systematically kept from the field-slaves” (p. 18). Although regard in this manner was kept from all slaves, in some cases, house slaves benefitted from their position and the proximity to books, heretically fulfilling a need for literate slaves to support the master. Northern Blacks, freedpeople, were not prohibited from becoming literate, and schools formed for these former slaves to become literate (Small, 1979; Williams, 2002).

Two educational systems arose in a free public education system—one for White children, further bifurcated by White affluent children—the other for Black children and other minorities. In 1954, *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* set the stage for desegregation; the Civil Rights Movement of 1964 moved the needle by only 2.3% for African American children in the deep South according to The Civil Rights Conference, a nonprofit civil rights legislative advocacy organization founded in 1950. The 1954 Supreme Court decision, *Brown v. Board of Education* did not protect African American students from the racism and prejudice in mostly White schools. More than a decade later, an attempt to desegregate and diversify public schools provided a decrease in the dropout rate for African American students enrolled in integrated schools in the 1970s, by 25% (Long, 2014); improvements in the health, earnings, and life outcomes of students in integrated schools were also attributed to these students.

The Kerner Commission report of 1967 set an historical precedent, commissioned by President Lyndon B. Johnson, 3 years after signing the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and

in the wake of seminal federal policies flowing from Johnson's congressional agenda for a "great society." The platform for the creation of these policies would be a plea to urge the nation "to build a great society, a place where the meaning of man's life matches the marvels of man's labor." (The White House, n.d.). Aid to education was one of Johnson's many congressional recommendations a year after signing the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

Among the various federal policies and programs established under Johnson's presidency, an emphasis on a "War on Poverty" resulted in legislation to fulfill the promises of the vision of a great society. Among those policies was the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA), which provided funding to public schools; the federal preschool program, Head Start, was also established in 1965. This statute signaled "a landmark commitment to equal access to [a] quality education" (Jeffrey, 1978, as cited in Paul, 2016).

The original intent of the ESEA was to address the equality of education in the public school system through the provision of substantial funding to primary and secondary schools with an emphasis on high standards and accountability, to support professional development, instructional materials, resources for educational programs, and to promote parental involvement" (Paul, 2016, p. 1); this work was to be carried out by school districts through various title funding. ESEA has been revised extensively since its initiation as successive administrations have replaced the origins of this law with new educational reform ideals that have ousted Johnson's vision of a "great society." Education reform has responded to shifting priorities as new administrations respond to ever-expanding needs of students and educational institutions to provide educational support (Coburn, 2003).

The intent of ESEA, to focus on those in poverty to equalize access to a quality education, has been expanded to include other areas of discrimination such as gender, disability, and English-language acquisition that equally impact students of color and students in poverty (Blankstein & Noguera, 2016). The historical milestones in civil rights that eschewed slavery and discriminatory practices targeted to Blacks have also holistically benefitted society as well as others who have experienced "structural barriers related to race, gender, poverty, and learning differences" (Blankstein & Noguera, 2016, p. 6). Blankstein and Noguera (2016) espoused that "measures to expand civil rights for some have incrementally enlarged rights for all people and increased our ability to provide quality education to all children" (p. 6). The emphasis on *all children* in an equity framework calls into question where to place the emphasis on educational equity for African American students who to still fall behind academically as early as kindergarten.

The underlying language of equity espoused in books, periodicals, journals, conferences, and other scholarly gatherings address the academic-achievement gap. More succinctly, it is the opportunity gap, defined by a number of variables that implicate the intersections of race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status, addressing educational inequity, specifically, "the unequal or inequitable distribution of resources and opportunities (*The Glossary of Education Reform*, 2014).

The Schott Foundation for Public Education, an organization with a mission to address "systemic change in the disparities poor children and children of color face in our nation's schools" (n.d.a., para 4) further defined the opportunity gap as "the disparity in access to quality schools and the resources needed for all children to be academically

successful" (Schott Foundation, n.d.b., para 2). The opportunity gap is persistent in the educational experience of African American students. The opportunity gap is underwritten in the curriculum and pedagogies, the school environment and neighborhoods, and the impact of the educational experiences of the students in these environments.

The U.S. Congress commissioned Coleman in 1966 to study the response to Title IV of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Act that mandated the desegregation of public schools. Coleman's report, *Equality of Educational Opportunity* addressed the condition of educational equity in U.S. public schools. The Coleman report tested the fidelity of President Johnson's plan to improve the lives of the low-income Americans through improved educational opportunities. The findings underscored the disparity in educational opportunities and were evidence of an opportunity gap between minority and White students.

In the decade preceding the Civil Rights Act of 1964, *Brown v. Board of Education* mandated the dismantling of the segregated public education system, the Civil Rights Act of 1964, following 10 years later, attended to legislative gaps that permitted discriminatory educational practices to dominate the educational landscape since "separate but equal" was indoctrinated in public educational institutions. Title IV of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, embodied the promise of educational reform and represented the precipice of equality in education.

Two years after the landmark educational reform legislation, the Coleman report tested the "availability of equal educational opportunities for individuals by reason of race, color, religion, or national origin in public educational institutions at all levels in the

United States, its territories and possessions, and the District of Columbia" (*Civil Rights Act*, 1964, Sec. 402).

During this period, segregation was prominent for minorities and Whites in public schools with Whites being the most segregated from minorities, representing "80 percent at grade 1 and 99 percent at grade 12" (Coleman, 1966, p. 3). The report indicated no significant improvement in desegregation furthering the "inherently unequal" educational opportunities between Black and White students following the Supreme Court decision on segregation in 1954 (Coleman, 1966, p. 3). Coleman's report signified the nation's continued unwillingness to provide equal educational opportunities for African Americans in spite of federal policies that aspersed unequal educational practices.

Following the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, educational reform efforts have attempted to create a balanced educational system. For nearly 2 decades, the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB), an act that amended the ESEA, sought to ensure all students received access to a quality education. Critics of NCLB postulated that the emphasis on assessments did not have a significant impact on improving the educational outcomes of the targeted populations, namely the students of color for whom that legislation was intended.

Socioeconomic and racial segregation have been prominent indicators of poor academic performance by students of color. In a report for the National Center for Children in Poverty, Johnson and Theberge (2007), examined the disparities among low-income and minority children in early childhood, emphasizing the lifelong scarring effects that a lack of access to institutional supports such as health care, housing, and other negative exposures links to later health impairments including cognitive

development (p. 1). A possible implication of income and racial disparities for minority children is a “lower level of school readiness” that “can largely be attributed to income status” (Johnson & Theberge, 2007, p. 2).

NCES, the national system for educational data collection, analysis, and reporting on the status of education in the United States, reported an increase of 37% (representing 12% of the U.S. population) in the Black population between 1990 and 2016, noting the majority of the Black population is U.S. born, according to these data (p. ii). More recently, data retrieved by NCES from August 2, 2016 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2016) census data indicated a decline in the school-age population for Blacks (15 to 14%). A similar decline was reported for White school-age children, a decrease from 62 to 52% for children aged 5 to 17; Hispanics, Asians, and children of two or more races all increased during the period 2000–2016 (Johnson & Theberge, 2007, p. 13).

School-age population data are similarly reflected in California. According to the Kids Count Data Center, a longitudinal data collection of child well-being across states indicated a slight downward trend in the Black school-aged population from 6 to 5% between 2010 and 2016 for children aged 5 to 11. The significance of these population changes to the academic achievement gap represents the volume of students this issue impacts. As the numbers of African American students of school age rise and dip, the numbers of students identified in the achievement gap should correspond.

During certain periods from 1998 to 2010, the gap narrowed (Reardon & Portilla, 2016). During an earlier period, a widening of the income achievement gap occurred (Reardon, 2012). The income achievement gap indicates differences between Whites and Blacks when assessing achievement measures (test scores and grades) against the

socioeconomic background of students. Regardless of the population of students identified in the gap, differences in achievement for African American students persists compared to Caucasian students and other minorities.

The academic-achievement gap links to kindergarten readiness. The kindergarten-readiness gap has varying definitions but generally relates to the academic and social skills introduced in preschool settings. Children's proximal social environments predict kindergarten outcomes (Mollborn, 2016, p. 1878). The most powerful of these are race/ethnicity, socioeconomic background, and teen parenthood. Although articulated in a broader developmental ecology, these mediating pathways were significant in the academic and social-emotional development of children for kindergarten (Mollborn, 2016).

Academic gender stereotyping, the sociocultural mechanisms applied in families and communities in developing the culturally acceptable identities and behaviors of gender, suggested that African American mothers have differing academic expectations for their sons and daughters (Wood et al., 2009). In the discourse on human nature, a variety of studies linked student academic achievement to parental influence (Jeynes, 2005). Theorizing from a social-constructive perspective, cultural beliefs and perceptions may influence the maternal attitudes of single African American mothers in the academic preparation of their sons (Jeynes, 2005).

Mollborn (2016) situated the positioning of parental influence in the "structural and demographic factors with interactional, psychological, and genetic factors—described as developmental ecology" (p. 1853). The connections between children's developmental ecology are the "interrelated features of a child's proximal social

environment that are distinct from but influence children's social interactions and individual characteristics" (Mollborn, 2016, p. 1853).

Factors that contribute to the child's academic development, socialization, and overall health align with school readiness (Mollborn, 2016). Vygotsky (1930, as cited in Palincsar, 1998) first introduced sociocultural theory, the dynamics of interrelationships that support knowledge and later learning and mental processes as discourse to the basis of the acquisition of "learning." Vygotsky's perspectives contrasted with those of Piaget's sociocognitive-conflict theory of development, focused on the internalized acquisition of knowledge through experiential learning with peers (as cited in Palincsar, 1998, p. 350). Vygotsky focused on the more knowing others in the proximal placement, enveloping the child as highly influential in the child's growth and development.

The zone of proximal development (ZPD) is an integral construct in Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory on what a child can perform independently (based on previous learning) and dependently: learning supported by someone with a higher capacity in the subject. The duality of learning by activating previous knowledge and acquiring new learning with support are functions that Vygotsky contributed to the cultural process of learning.

Vygotsky (1978) considered cognition and learning to have historical pretexts bound in cultural language, artifacts, and other shared cultural experiences. According to Vygotsky, learning involves a process that requires engagement with others for optimal development; this interaction is necessary with people in the environment and coincides with the child's active process of learning. Vygotsky's followers have used the developed tools to sharpen developmental theory.

The pronounced effects of low academic expectations for African American male students by schools, communities, and occasionally parents, are evident in the gender disparities in educational attainment in the upper educational levels, where African American female students are more prominent (Hoffman, Llagas, & Snyder, 2003). Differences in the experiences of African American male and female students in educational institutions may be attributed to maternal gender biases on educational attainment that favor African American females. Researchers supported the idea of gender-stereotype findings as having a significant impact on motivation, maternal attribution to stereotype beliefs, and the decreased enrollment numbers of African American men in institutes of higher education (Copping, Rowley, & Kurtz-Costes, 2010; Jacobs, Chhin, & Shaver, 2003; Jeynes, 2005; Noguera, 2003).

Compared to their female counterparts, African American men have fallen behind in academic attainment. For example, 81% of African American women between the ages of 18 and 24 obtained a high school credential, compared to 72% of African American men in 2006 (Wood et al., 2009). The gender gap further widens when comparing postsecondary-degree holders, and graduate-level degrees wherein African American women earned 40,000 postbaccalaureate degrees in 2005 compared to 16,000 awarded to African American men in the same year (Wood et al., 2009).

Studies on the educational experiences of African American men have focused on issues such as low-SES that factors into poor housing, healthcare, and nutrition as contributors to poor academic performance for students in these conditions. In addition to the social and environmental issues that plague low-income communities, the quality of the school environment in low socioeconomic areas links to low academic performance

for students from socioeconomically deprived environments. Other related intrinsic factors such as motivation, academic ability, and behavioral concerns have reportedly impacted African American men in obtaining desirable educational outcomes. Various factors contributed to the elevated numbers of African American adolescents who dropped out of high school compared to those of other races. From 1972 to 2009, the number of African American male adolescents dropping out of high school was 8.7% compared to 5.4% of White male adolescents (Chapman, Laird, Ifill, & KewalRamani, 2011, KewalRamani, 2010, as cited in Chapman et al., 2011).

Important contextual issues such as maternal perceptions of the academic competency of male children may have contributed to the academic development of African American male students. Stereotypical behaviors, derived from the subgroups' understanding of the expectations of family members, the community, and society at large, are displayed through attitudes of self-fulfilling prophecy. Self-fulfilling prophecy means negative attitudes and behaviors that are externally driven by expectations from influential people or through social engagement that create a dynamic for the "predicted" behavior to occur (Franklin & Boyd-Franklin, 2000; Weinstein, Gregory, & Strambler, 2004). The stereotyping of this social group as nonacademic has perpetuated through self-efficacy-type behaviors (Wood et al., 2009). A variety of studies have linked student academic achievement to parental influence. In spite of the expansive body of research on parental involvement overall, less is known about the influence of parental involvement on African American youth than about the impact of this variable on the overall student population (McBride & Lin, 1996).

A dearth of research describes the educational experiences of African American males in the early years of schooling, particularly in the year preceding kindergarten, providing a place for this research among empirical research on the academic or opportunity gap associated with African American males and their Caucasian peers. Davis (2003) suggested,

> One research area that has been neglected deals with issues of Black boys' early child- hood schooling and home experiences, such as school readiness. This area of investigation would provide potentially useful information on Black males' trajectory of achievement and differences in school engagement over time. (p. 522)

A theory on the perceptions of single African American mothers in their assessment of their sons' academic development in early learning resulted from this study. Advocates of early learning and primary-education administrators, teachers, legislators, stakeholders, and researchers may use the findings from this study to assist African American parents, particularly in single female-headed households to understand the significance of their influence on the educational outcomes of their male children.

Outcome-based research would advance interventions that would support positive academic experiences and outcomes for African American male students (Davis, 2003). An increase in the number of African American males enrolling in and obtaining college degrees, including graduate-level education, improvement in the SES of this social group, the potential for a reduction in the percentage of high school dropouts for this social group, and improved family relations would all be desirable outcomes for this research. This study adds to the body of knowledge on the factors that may contribute to the

educational outcomes for African American male students. This study informs educators, policymakers, researchers, parents, practitioners, and the general public about the attributes that may contribute to the academic success or challenges of the subgroup of African American male students stemming from maternal perceptions and their influence on the academic development of their sons.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the perceptions of single African American mothers on the educational expectations of their sons prior to entering kindergarten and whether the mothers' views contributed to the early educational experiences of their African American sons. Research on gender differences in academic expectations suggested that motivation for learning—an identified trait for kindergarten readiness—could be impacted by maternal gender expectations of academic acumen as well as the influence of cultural indicators of gender-stereotype behaviors. For this study, maternal perceptions were examined for their understanding of what it meant to be kindergarten ready and to what extent mothers' ideas of culturally responsive gender-based academic preparedness impacted the cognitive development of their sons.

Theoretical Framework

The concepts of ontology (ways of learning or understanding) and epistemology (ways of knowing) have been reported in a range of theoretical perspectives. From a sociocultural constructivist perspective, Vygotsky deemed the "activities that take place in cultural contexts … mediated by language and other symbol systems, are best understood when investigated in their historical development" (1930, as cited in Palincsar, 1998, p. 371).

In aligning the tenets of sociocultural theory to the educational environment, Palincsar (1998) suggested that one of the failures of schools to serve all children includes the pathology that occurs in educational settings when educators use stereotypes to inform expected behaviors and academic outcomes. This marginalization is particularly emphasized in social institutions such as school environments. Palincsar promoted Vygotsky's assertion of the function of social processes that are interdependent in learning and development. Palincsar restated the major premises of Vygotsky's "genetic law of development" that purports:

> Every function in the cultural development of the child comes on the stage twice, in two respects: first in the social, later in the psychological, first in relations between people as an interpsychological category, afterwards within the child as an intrapsychological category. … All higher psychological functions are internalized relationships of the social kind, and constitute the social structure of personality. (1998, p. 351)

The precept of duality in a child's development was first simplified by scholars of the time as knowledge transfer (Palincsar, 1998). In response, Vygotsky clarified the concept to distinguish it from knowledge transfer. The distinction in this theory, ZPD, is the concept of "actual knowledge, what a child can perform on their own and potential levels of development, what children can do with assistance" (Palincsar, 1998, p. 353).

ZPD reflects the true nature of cognition, according to Vygotskian theorists, "that is a dynamic and relative indicator of cognition" (Palincsar, 1998, p. 353). Acquired knowledge, the second phase, is explicit when applied in the construction of new tasks and problem solving. Ontological shaping and development of individuals in a cultural

community underpins the sociocultural influence in learning. The various environments with which individuals come in contact, beginning with the home environment, which is most prominent in the effect, reflects the concept of community. From a social-constructivist perspective, the importance of the maternal perception of a son's cognition is instrumental in this cultural context and as a derivative of the social constructs of gender-based academic expectations. In the context of this study, ZPD implies significance to the influential role of single mothers in the cognitive development of their sons.

In the current study, in examining the perceptions of single African American mothers of sons, it was appropriate to consider the position of this subgroup in the larger society. Reflecting on the lived experiences of African American women, intersectionality has its historical roots in Black feminism, used to elucidate the intersections of race, gender, "and a host of other social categories" of the members of this population (Nash, 2011, p. 448). The coalescing of Black feminism and intersectionality have made the terms synonymous: "Intersectionality is not the exclusive terrain of Black feminism, though Black feminists have long been invested in examining how structures of domination collide to produce experiences of oppression and identity" (Nash, 2011, p. 451).

Waters (2016), in her book *We Can Speak for Ourselves*, examined the lived experiences of Black women supporting their children's education and assessed the role of the mother using their narratives as data. Waters cited Hill-Collins's (2004) definition of the Black nuclear family in the division of two organizing principles: a public one and

a private one; the two "spheres" reflect the dominant views of the married two-parent household and the gender-based responsibilities assigned to each partner.

Notable between the two theorized organizing principles is the private sphere, where the mother, as nurturer, has the assignment to ensure the development of the child. This picture of family health has not framed the lives of many Black mothers, who, in the application of their role as nurturer, must struggle with issues such as racism that conflict with this role. African American mothers confront a myriad of discourses, written or spoken, authoritative communication or discussions, "that have been instrumental in the construction of knowledge regarding Black women's bodies, psyches, and everyday lives" (Waters, 2016, p. 13). These discourses are included in the scientific, government, education, and mothering constructs identified through Waters's (2016) study.

The current study examined Crenshaw's (1989, as cited in Carbado et al., 2013) intersectionality theory as it pertains to the maternal experiences of being Black and the issues concerning single parenting and raising sons. Specifically, the inclusion of intersectionality theory underscored the sociocultural ideologies that influence the parenting styles of African American single mothers and potentially their perceptions of their sons' cognitive development. Intersectionality theory was employed to analyze mothers' self-efficacy in navigating the intersections of race, gender, and class identity that African American women, and particularly single African American women, must confront in their role as the person primarily influencing their sons' academic development.

In the current study, intersectionality theory was adapted to explain the multiple identities articulated in the maternal expressions of the sons' experiences in academic

environments. The theory was stratified to include sons' identities in educational institutions that define their experiences. These identities, African American, male, student, son of a single mother, classmate, and peer, among others, relate to the term *bicognition* in describing the ways marginalized individuals navigate parallel social dimensions (R. G. Johnson & Rivera, 2015).

ZPD and intersectionality affix "others" in the integral space of the children's social, cultural, and academic development; the other represented in the current study is the single mother. The single African American mother's role represents the single idea or phenomenon examined in this study. The mother's role is critical as an informant in the development of a son's academic acumen. The single mothers' competency is offered in constructing knowledge in the position as the more knowing other, Vygotsky's defining role in the cultural space, and in preparation of their sons for social institutions and environments that have historically perceived them as academically deficient. ZPD and intersectionality are strong theoretical determinants of this integrated and dynamic process.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this study:

- In what ways do single African American mothers' perceptions of their sons' cognitive ability influence the academic support, meaning parental involvement, interest, or engagement, provided in preparing their sons for kindergarten?
- How do culturally gendered parenting styles in the African American community impact how single African American mothers approach the academic development of African American male students?

- In what ways do single African American mothers support their sons' early academic development in preparation for kindergarten?
- In what ways do single African American mothers define academic goals for their sons?

Limitations and Delimitations

The proposed study was limited to a convenience sample of single African American mothers of sons who responded to an invitation to participate in the study. This limitation does not allow a generalization of the findings to the larger population of this subgroup. Additionally, the study examined kindergarten readiness as a prerequisite to formal learning and therefore was limited to the activities the researcher identified as relating to this purpose. The findings captured a snapshot of the conditions related to the study, which is also a limitation of this research.

As a member of the community being examined in this research, the researcher has extensive knowledge and personal experiences that may bias understanding and interpretation of the study. The limitation to participants who are single African American mothers of sons, will temper the researcher's bias in a limited way because this aspect of the phenomenon does not apply to the researcher's parenting experience. The researcher captured the personal accounts, narrowing the participants to those who responded to the invitation and controlling for specific characteristics, as well as triangulation, or the use of multiple data sources to support the "reliability and validity of the data and results" (Fusch, Fusch, & Ness, 2018, p. 21). The data collected support the research questions, the purpose statement, and semistructured open-ended interviews, which were delimitations of the study.

Educational Significance

The study of single African American mothers' perceptions of their sons' cognitive development prior to entering kindergarten adds to the body of knowledge on the influence of this subgroup on the educational attainment of African American male students. This study informs educators, policymakers, researchers, parents, practitioners, and the general public about the attributes that may contribute to the academic success or challenges of the subgroup, African American male students, resulting from maternal perceptions and their influence on the academic development of their sons.

A dearth in the research on the educational experiences of African American males in the early years of schooling, particularly in the year preceding kindergarten, provides a place for this research among empirical research on the academic or opportunity gap associated with African American male students and their Caucasian peers. Davis (2003) suggested,

> One research area that has been neglected deals with issues Black males' early childhood schooling and home experiences, such as school readiness. This area of investigation would provide potentially useful information on Black males' trajectory of achievement differences in school engagement over time. (p. 522)

Antithetical academic deficiency theory describes the perceptions of single African American mothers in their assessment of their sons' academic development in early learning that resulted from this qualitative study. Advocates of early learning and primary-education administrators, teachers, legislators, stakeholders, and researchers may use the findings from this study for policy development, pedagogical practices to address the kindergarten-readiness gap for African American males, and to engage single African

American mothers as active partners in the academic environment to complement classroom instruction in support of the educational outcomes of their male children.

Outcome-based research would advance the interventions in support of positive academic experiences and outcomes for African American males (Davis, 2003). An increase in the number of African American men enrolling in colleges and obtaining college degrees, including advanced degrees, a potential reduction in the percentage of high school dropouts for this social group, and improved family relations would all be desirable outcomes for this research.

Definition of Terms

The following terms are defined for clarification as used in this research.

African American female: A person who identifies as a female person, of African descent, who was born and raised in the United States. This term describes the gendered opposite of African American male.

***African American male*:** A person who identifies as male child, of African descent, who was born and raised in the United States and is between the ages of 3 and 11. This definition applies to the African American sons of participants in the current study. This term describes the gendered opposite of African American female.

African American single mother: A female person of African descent who is the head of her household and raising a son with no other adult living in the household. The father does not live in the home due to separation, divorce, or death (Davis, 2003).

Educational equity: "equity is measured along two axes/dimensions: a) the extent to which the education provided is sufficient and adequate; b) the extent to which, in addition to participation, the educational systems guarantee success for

all, including minority groups" (Castelli et al., 2012, p. 2248).

Intersectionality: A term relating to the interconnectedness of an individual's identity that includes race, class, gender, sexuality, and nationality. The composition represents the basis of oppression for individuals who embody these positions (Crenshaw, 1989, as cited in Carbado et al., 2013; Hill-Collins, 2000, as cited in Waters, 2016).

Kindergarten/School readiness: Physical well-being and motor development, social and emotional development, approaches to learning, language development, and cognition and general knowledge are the five components of school readiness (Mollborn, 2016).

Opportunity gap: Opportunity gap is the disparity in access to quality schools and the resources needed for all children to be academically successful (Schott Foundation for Public Education, n.d.a).

Racial socialization: The transmittal of values, attitudes, and behaviors that help prepare future generations for possible negative race-related experiences (S. A. Hill, 2001).

Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD): Vygotsky's theory of cognitive development that incorporates a sociocultural approach with an emphasis on the social factors that influence and guide learning. Adults represent the more knowledgeable other who is an integral part in the adoption of language and knowledge and the beliefs, values, and tools of intellectual adaptation of the culture in which a person develops (Vygotsky, 1930, as cited in Palincsar, 1978).

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Restatement of the Problem

Education-reform efforts intended to resolve the long-term effects of racial segregation, racial bias, and poor schooling, among other concerns in public education, have been ineffective in equalizing the educational experiences, expectations, and outcomes for all public school students. As research on the topic of kindergarten or school readiness has identified, African American males enter kindergarten with academic deficits that belie the educational competence required in today's kindergarten classroom. The gap in achievement between African American males and their peers has prompted research in this domain, with a mixture of findings and results and minimal gains or improvements in the academic experiences of this subgroup.

For more than half a century, since the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the educational experiences of African American students have been notable in the research on educational equity. Examinations of the earliest signs of the disparity in the educational outcomes for African Americans compared to Caucasians have reported findings related to the academic-achievement gap and kindergarten readiness; these findings reflect income disparities and SES, health and well-being, and access to quality preschool programs and other enriching environments. In reviewing the literature on kindergarten readiness, an area attributed to the achievement gap, cultural and environmental factors contribute to the gap in performance between the groups (Norman, Ault, Bentz, & Meskimen, 2001). Using a socioeconomic indicator, in a between group examination of Whites, Blacks, Asians, and individuals with a Hispanic origin, Garcia

(2015) suggested that the achievement measured against Blacks with other ethnicities indicated that Blacks were lagging behind these groups in some subject areas.

This study extends the research on kindergarten readiness through an exploration of maternal perceptions of the cognitive skills of African American males at the onset of their formal education. The research indicated an education gap that exists for African American male students prior to kindergarten entrance that persists in some form throughout their formal education (Garcia, 2015; Jencks & Phillips, 1998). The literature review on the phenomenon resulted in four constructs on this topic: educational equity; racial socialization, culture, and race; gender bias; and kindergarten readiness.

For this study, the single mother's maternal influence on academic development is the phenomenon under examination. Figure 1 displays the relationship of maternal influence to the outcome: the need for all children to be ready for kindergarten and the two constructs: academically ready, as described in the preschool prerequisites as the foundation of being academically ready, and socially behaviorally ready, related to the behavioral attributes such as paying attention, following rules, and motivation for learning in academic environments that indicate how children should be prepared to meet this goal.

Figure 1 depicts the intervening effects related to maternal influence, meaning areas in the literature review identified as ways mothers' involvement in their sons' education are integrated into the educational environment. These are depicted as historic bias in access to quality education, educational equity, intersectionality, beliefs, perceptions, socioconstructivism, and ZPD. These indicators of maternal influence are divided between the areas the mother has to traverse (historic bias and educational

equity) and those that are more directly impacted by the mother's sense of herself and how this reflects in her parenting (intersectionality, beliefs, perceptions, socioconstructivism, and ZPD) and the academic preparation of her son.

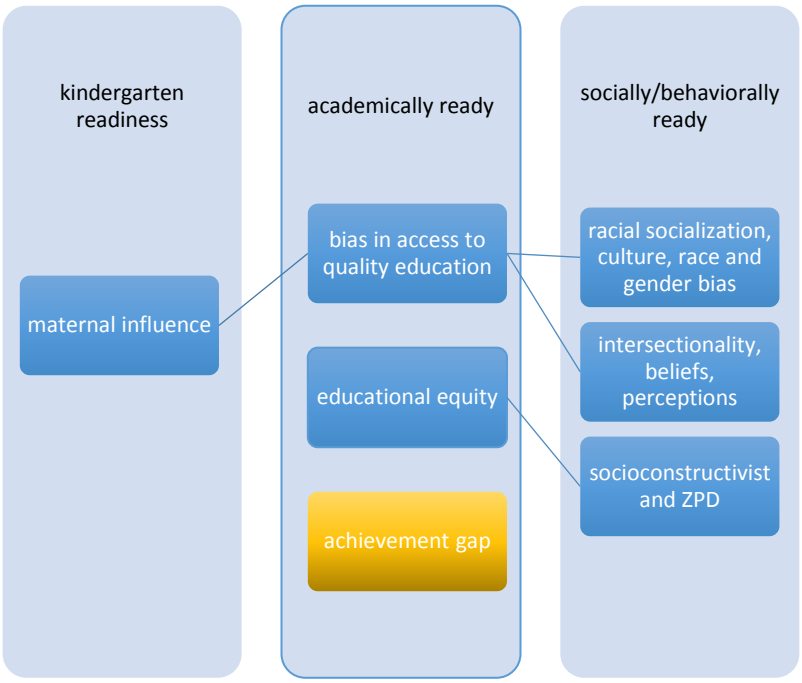

Figure 1. External indicators influencing mothers' perceptions.
Note. Factors influencing maternal perceptions of kindergarten readiness are external to a mother's ideas of her son's cognitive ability.

As a socially dynamic theoretical framework, socioconstructivism and Vygotsky's ZPD imply mothers are central figures in the sphere of influence to a child's development. Following the premise of this idea, the mother's own school-related experiences will shape her position and understanding of her role to prepare her son for an academic environment. The mother as the more knowing other, as Vygotsky labels those who are engaged in the child's development, requires understanding of her role to prepare her son for an academic environment; from the theory-related impact of intersectionality, these ideas may include indicators of experience with racial bias, poor schooling, the impact of inadequate housing, access to quality health, and modest

employment opportunities. It is also plausible that the mother's experience in education may have been positive and impact her son from an affirming position.

Children with backgrounds that include environmental impacts such as inadequate housing, poor schools, and modest employment opportunities were found to have lower reading and mathematics skills compared to White or Asian children (Maxwell & Clifford, 2004). A small number of children, 1 in 20 from high-risk families and those with multiple risk factors, are ahead of the "typical kindergartner in reading … and a similar portion [of the identified subgroup] is one level ahead of the typical pupil in mathematics (able to identify the ordinal position of an object in a series)" (Zill & West, 2001, p. 27). Maternal influence may also be impacted by the cultural environment in which they are situated, which would include internalized community and familial persuasion that may reflect ideologies related to racial socialization, gender bias, and stereotypical behaviors of African American males.

The achievement gap reflects a cyclical and reciprocal effect related to the construct, academically ready, involving educational equity and historic bias in access to quality education. The influence of these two mediating factors in the education of African American males is well-documented and is an integral aspect of the study on maternal influence (Davis, 2003; Gardner, Rizzi, & Council, 2014). The literature map, Figure 1, depicts the relationships of these themes to kindergarten readiness with maternal influence as the foundation.

Educational Equity

Equity means "a commitment to ensure that every student receives what he or she needs to succeed" (Blankstein & Noguera, 2016, p. 3). Equity, from this perspective,

speaks of “every” student but does not polarize or divide students into categories that fit their SES or their ethnicity. Following this definition of equity, the researchers suggested a commitment be made to delineate and provide individual support to every student as a means to affirm equitable educational environments (Blankstein & Noguera, 2016).

Through a collegial approach to this commitment, Blankstein and Noguera (2016) suggested that “the pursuit of excellence through equity invariably involves forging *collaborative relationships among adult stakeholders”* (original emphasis). Their case suggested that a simple nod and handshake is sufficient to “support the success of every student” and improve students’ academic outcomes (p. 20). The use of terms such as “mutual accountability” and “knowing our children” foreshadow the paradigm shift or the “new paradigm of excellence through equity” that Blankstein and Noguera promoted as equity. The pair acknowledged the edicts of the past several decades that have led to education reform and policies that have failed to move the needle on equity. “The persistence of disparities in learning opportunities and academic outcomes have contributed to America’s decline in educational performance in comparison to other nations. … Inequality is a central factor contributing to America’s educational decline” (Blankstein & Noguera, 2016, p. 4).

Noting the historical markers on educational reform and the key players and stakeholders behind these efforts, Blankstein and Noguera (2016), suggested that, similar to the social changes in the late 1960s that produced an expansion of opportunities for Blacks in this country, these “measures to expand civil rights for some have incrementally enlarged rights for all people … equity-based reforms have strengthened our democracy by reducing some, though by no means all, of the blatant injustices”

(p. 6). The idea that civil rights laws and educational reform swept away the racist ideologies that necessitated these laws is to accept that a man can be his own judge and jury and will modify his actions accordingly. Even as the Blankstein and Noguera book was written, African American male students were being negatively impacted by the educational system in much the same way as their parents or grandparents, who in their experience may have been subjected to segregation and marginalization throughout their education.

The "three pillars of the new paradigm"—child development, neuroscience, and recognition of environmental influences—offers an approach to equity that would result in a positive outcome for students. The pillars are not a panacea, but simply "a different way of thinking about how schools can serve the learning needs of students" (Blankstein & Noguera, 2016, p. 19). The authors also suggested that overcoming the stigma that "equity" implies will yield winners and losers, alluding to the displacement of resources and "fear of loss" (stature, position, and the threat of fair competition) by the affluent for their children. The strategy works for everyone, including the socially oppressed and the affluent, and suggested that "the best possible road to excellence is one that is paved with equity" (Blankstein & Noguera, 2016, p. 22).

Blankstein and Noguera's (2016) new paradigm and definition of equity outbound the issues of performance, accountability, and active measures to improve academic outcomes for students. The new paradigm is a way of thinking about thinking about education (intentional phrasing), omitting conscious ideas related to fairness, access, and opportunity that equity in education should espouse. These ideas have left behind the

commitment to systemic improvement that is more than an act of agreement; it requires delving into the silence of commission to the ideology of restriction.

The definition of equity differs from equal, as in separate but equal, in that it does not assert that all students should be served equally, which is a uniform assumption, but that every student should experience success. Blankstein and Noguera's (2016) ideology appears more ethereal than grounded in research and evidence. It is representative of a mixture of scientific research that, on its own merit has its usefulness; however, as a compilation of sorted theoretical, experimental, and sociopolitical concepts, loosely appendages this strategy to closing the achievement gap.

Professor, researcher, author, and noted Founder of Multicultural Education Banks penned the forward to Gorski's (2013) book. Banks highlighted the significance of Gorski's work to reverse deficit-model thinking and beliefs of educators and to implore them to "examine their attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors toward low-income students" (2013, p. ix.). Taking aim at the "stereotypes and misconceptions of poor people that are institutionalized," Banks highlighted Gorski's use and example of his own Appalachian grandmother's "telling and powerful personal example to underscore how deeply embedded stereotypes, misconceptions, and negative attitudes towards poor people are within American society" (Gorski, 2013, p. ix).

Banks relayed Gorski's principle belief that "teachers can become a transformative educator" through acknowledgement of the "[educational] differences that exist among population groups that are victimized by poverty" (2013, p. x). Banks identified a key difference in Gorski's book supporting other authors who have written on the varied educational experiences between the rich and poor in U.S. society. Banks

wrote, Gorski's book "describes the cultural factors that perpetuate inequality in U.S. society … [and] what teachers and other educators can do now to create more equitable learning environments" (2013, p. x).

The importance of Gorski's (2013) work is punctuated by the calculated increase in students of color and the "influence of an increasingly ethnically diverse population [of students]" will have on educational institutions from primary to post-secondary education" (2013, p. xi). According to Banks, a stigmatized educational system is not equipped to provide educators with the proper tools to meet the needs of such an increasingly diverse student population. Banks pointed out that Gorski's book is useful to address the attitudes, beliefs, and pedagogies that are driven by "detrimental stereotypes and misconceptions" and replace them with sound evidence-based information and evidence of effective educational practices. Banks applauded this book as the "treatise for the right of all children, including our nation's most neglected and marginalized group of students, to be educated, respected, valued, and affirmed" (Gorski, 2013, p. xiii).

Gorski (2013) introduced the mindset of deficiency in educators relating to poor students. Steeped in decades of research, Gorski pointed to the meritocratic imprint that implies "education is the great equalizer" as the biggest misconception of equity that has been perpetuated and ingrained in educational institutions. It is the misconception of educational equality that subjects students from poor families to the "savage inequalities of schooling" (Gorski, 2013, p. 1).

Social conditions relative to access to services and support impact the educational outcomes of students in poverty. These conditions alienate people in low-income communities from the basic constructs of healthy well-being: "These conditions do not

reflect or result from low-income families 'cultures' or attitudes towards education" (Gorski, 2013, p. 2) but instead are a result of the institutions intended to serve limited-income individuals. In an analysis of existing research that examined some aspect of educational equality, Gorski determined that insufficient research provided solutions to address the perception of poverty held by many educators. Gorski worked to address the "power" [of educators] to "mitigate … inequalities" and not to continue to conform to "inequitable conditions" in their classrooms (2013, p. 3).

Gorski (2013) referenced colleague Swalwell's (2011) work in equity literacy. Gorski and Swalwell both recognized a gap in the literacy surrounding educational equity and the framework for talking about diversity and equity in schools, including cultural competence (pp. 18–20). In defining equity literacy, Gorski honed in on the misperceptions addressed earlier about students from low-income environments. The definition implies and informs educators about implicit biases they possess that restrict equitable learning environments; in doing so, Gorski reversed the role and responsibility of the student and the educator in the meritocratic ideology of hard work by focusing on the "skills and dispositions … educators need … to create equitable learning environments for youth" (2013, p. 19). "Equity Literacy is comprised of the skills and dispositions that enable us to recognize, respond to and redress conditions that deny some students access to the educational opportunities enjoyed by their peers" (Gorski, 2013, p. 19). Many related theories engulf the framework for equity literacy. One that stands out is cultural proficiency, which suggested people examine their "own biases and how they are tied to privilege and even social inequalities" (Gorski, 2013, p. 20). In understanding one's own preconceived ideas and biases, educators begin to build

capacity and enjoin themselves to a more effective and positive approach to supporting students in poverty.

Gorski (2013) redefined equity literacy including distinctions and definitions in racial categories: SES, poverty, working class, middle class, managerial class, owning class, income, and wealth. Addressing the dimension of poverty, Gorski acknowledged conversations about "class and poverty are taboo. … Discussions about them are exceedingly rare" in the academy of educators (2013, p. 14). Further,

> conversations we have in the education world about poverty can be so imprecise and simplistic. … It is why conversations about poverty among educators often seem to focus, not on poverty … but rather on simple pragmatic strategies that are based more on stereotype than on evidence-informed practice. (Gorski, 2013, p. 14)

Gorski (2013) suggested that the myth or meritocracy that one's effort (hard work) equates to outcome (success) is sufficient only from the perspectives of historical figures that dreamed equality in a world fraught with civil dissolution, and that these ideas of fairness are "common misperceptions" of real-life experiences of poor students in the United States (pp. 15–16). A common misconception of the issue of achievement in poor students is that "it's all *their fault* (original emphasis), from these perspectives students are held accountable for what … are the symptoms of the inequities they likely have faced since birth" (Gorski, 2013, p. 17). Gorski asserted that assigning individuals a label of poverty predisposes them to stereotypes embedded in the economics of poverty. The shared or common experiences of individuals and communities of people in the "condition of poverty," is, as Gorski explained, a social condition; not a culture. Further,

these social conditions are "barriers and inequities…which people in poverty must attempt, against considerable odds, to thrive" (Gorski, 2013, p. 52).

Important to the current study is Gorski's (2013) assertion that ideologies that promoted a "mindset of poverty" or "culture of poverty" have given legitimacy to individual biases, particularly of educators, that engulfed these ideologies into their visual frame of reference in identifying people in this category. The relevant history around the ideologies of a poverty mindset are fitting to the framework on intersectionality that supports the study on maternal influence, highlighting the social influence and acceptance of these ideas and marking them as false, providing an additional perspective to enhance the research on the subject of maternal perceptions and influence on the education of African American male students.

Trailing the Progressive Era of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Lewis's (1959, as cited in Gorski, 2013) work stretched over the African American community where it was applied "more or less verbatim" by his "contemporaries," specifically, Moynihan's *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action,* which implicated a "ghetto culture" was "characterized by single-mother families" as the reason for the condition of poverty in the African American community (Gorski, 2013, pp. 52–53).

Counter to the beliefs promoted by the ideas stemming from the Moynihan report, a culture of poverty does not exist. According to Gorski (2013), studies consistently have disproved Lewis's (1959) ideas and have failed to replicate Lewis's findings in the last 50 years. Clear differences emerged in approaches to equity. The selection of the two dichotomous positions on the topic emphasized polarized approaches to equity. Neither selection directly discussed or addressed the academic-achievement gap as it relates to

equity. Other examples, some of which were cited to provide guidance in this area, described equity in education as broader than the achievement gap, which can be labeled as an outcome of unequal educational opportunities, not a cause.

It is for this reason that a focus on equity included the historical foundations that Gorski (2013) addresses in his writing and added a framework for equity literacy. Juxtaposed to Gorski, Blankstein and Noguera (2016), were less critical of the educational system, its history, and present; their suppositions for improvement are less about individuals and more about community, in the sense of a mutual benefit for everyone to collaborate to improve student outcomes. For the current study, Gorski's ideas served as a model for instruction and pedagogy and an indicator exposing maternal gender bias, focused on the aspects of community building promoted by Blankstein and Noguera.

Racial Socialization, Culture, Race, and Gender Bias

Racial exclusionary practices and ideas, as well as racism, have led to "retention and reinforcement of African-centered values, created seemingly intransigent socioeconomic inequality between White and Blacks, and shaped the flexible and adaptive gender roles found in Black culture" (S. A. Hill, 2001, p. 495). S. A. Hill (2001) pointed to historical precedence for the familial structure in the Black family that dates back to slavery. The role of Black women in dominant roles in the family resulted from a lack of employment opportunities for African American men, according to S. A. Hill, "broaden[ing] the roles of Black women may have diminished and undermined the roles of Black men" (2001, p. 502). Gender-neutral parenting styles in African American families derive from the African culture adopted by African American families. S. A. Hill

related, "the Black child, to be sure, distinguishes between males and females, but unlike the White child he is not inculcated with standards which polarize behavioral expectations according to sex" (2001, p. 502).

One may attribute the mothering of sons as a protective factor in response to racism to the mother's gender-based expectations for sons and daughters. S. A. Hill (2001) noted "African American parents may have higher expectations for daughters because they view them as having a greater opportunity to survive and succeed in mainstream society" (p. 504). S. A. Hill accurately reflected the community and the Afrocentric foundation extended in African American cultural norms.

Researchers have examined attitudes that may lead some to raising daughters and loving sons displayed negatively in some studies. Navigating the traditions and moving away from deficit-model ideologies may provide an additional perspective on the phenomenon of maternal influence. S. A. Hill's (2001) work accepted the protective factors infused in African American parenting approaches as accurate reflections of caring and loving parenting styles. In the current study, a counter narrative admonishes the dominant narrative regarding single African American mothers and could provide a balanced perspective to the phenomenon.

Maternal Influence

Mollborn (2016) examined poverty and family structure measured on three domains: household resources, health risks, and ecological changes. These three factor into how "demographic characteristics factor into school readiness" (p. 1853). Mollborn supported a "broad ecological approach" that includes "interactional, psychological, and genetic factors" (2016, p. 1853). Stressing the "proximal social environment that are

distinct from but influence children's social interactions and individual characteristics," Mollborn's developmental ecology examines the interrelated environmental factors at the macro level such as "a family's current socioeconomic resources … [and] health risks (diet, sleep habits, and secondhand smoke, violence exposure, and safety precautions)" (2016, pp. 1855–1856).

Maternal influences include maternal nativity, teen parenthood, and socioeconomic background as strongly related to children's development ecology and school readiness (Mollborn, 2016). Jung (2016) considered environmental influences in examining "parents' [kindergarten] readiness beliefs and family activities … related to children's reading skills. Home-based literacy practices and parental involvement were believed to be signals to parental beliefs about "children's school readiness…growth and learning" (p. 63). Jung suggested that shared family activities such as playing and reading contribute to the affirmation by parents that their children have the skills necessary to be successful in kindergarten (2016, p. 63).

Kindergarten Readiness

Reardon (2012) examined school readiness from a socioeconomic perspective over the last 50 years, identifying a number of contributing factors, including trends "in family structure and composition [that] have led to an increasingly polarized distribution of family contexts for children" (p. 24). Comparable family structures indicate that the gap is punctuated between "mothers with low levels of education … [who may be] single or divorced; and mothers with high levels of education" (Reardon, 2012, p. 24). Reardon's examination of the income achievement gap relates to opportunities families with higher income levels employ for their children: quality preschool programs,

enrichment and extracurricular activities, access to health care, and patterns of income segregation, as higher income families move to more affluent neighborhoods. Reardon studied the income gap as it relates to the achievement gap and the differences in the academic outcomes of White and Black students in a number of research projects. Reardon suggested the gap was widening as much as 1 standard deviation, which he calculated as "roughly 3 to 6 years of learning in middle or high school" (2012, p. 20).

Reardon and Portilla (2016) considered a different set of variables related to the income disparities reflected in low- and higher income-earning families, acknowledging a slight narrowing of the readiness gap between 1998 and 2010 between subgroups of students. The Reardon and Portilla (2016) reexamination included test scores in reading and mathematics and parent- and teacher-reported behaviors, as well as longitudinal and income data. The authors signified the challenges in defining the academic-achievement gap and in quantitatively assessing the impact of reform efforts to alleviate the effects. Reardon and Portilla's quantitative approach demonstrated an alternative design and measures to address this phenomenon that are easily identified but difficult to measure longitudinally. The difficulty could result from educational policy changes, or, as Reardon (2012) suggested, societal changes that prompt interest in education and influence policies and social practices. The Reardon and Reardon and Portilla studies in the area of kindergarten readiness suggested that a qualitative examination of the phenomenon would provide a different perspective that is limited in a quantitative research approach.

Summary

Educational equality has had a polarizing effect on the educational opportunities of African American students and other minorities. A number of perspectives on the achievement gap suggested a myriad of variables that potentially cause this divide, One of particular interest was historical racial and prejudicial practices that underlie school disparities (Howard, 2010).

Waters (2016) admonished the historical and government discourses that targeted the Black mother as the bane of the Black community. Waters referenced Giddings's (1984) response to the Moynihan report. According to Waters, Giddings (1984) postulated that the idiosyncratic nature of the report suggested Black women suppress opportunities for Black male students through their assertiveness, thereby dismantling the Black family and disrupting opportunities for improvement for Black male students.

The deficit-model emphasized in the Moynihan report of the Black matriarch purports a dichotomous reality for African American women to define themselves as mother, in the European model, against the dominant female-headed household that is prominent in the Black community (Waters, 2016, p. 20). The backdrop of these conflicting views is the role of African American mothers to provide supportive environments for their children, where the need for maternal support is critical, particularly given the percentage of single female-headed households in the Black community. Waters (2016) posited,

> We seek to understand that the issues of race and subordination of Black mothers is not simply the problem of Black mothers, but it is endemic in how we function and prepare our children to function within the whole of society" (p. 33).

Reporting on the mother–son dyad as it relates to metacommunication, the messaging between mother and son that shape their self-efficacy and personal development, Henderson (2016) reported key findings from Elliott (2013),

> that single mothers raising sons struggled more than mothers of other racial groups; were more inclined to be marginalized, unemployed, and to lack financial resources; and were more likely to be poor and live in impoverished conditions; furthering the need for supportive community-based programs. (p. 4)

Henderson related these findings to sociocultural parenting styles intended to "protect their sons from a hostile and racial society (p. 4). A review of the literature uncovered key concepts as points of consideration as well as justification of the need for the current study.

Similar to Kindergarten readiness, the achievement gap does not have a single definition. Researchers examined several variables under the premise of the achievement gap from a number of perspectives—a Black/White binary, income disparities, literacy and vocabulary deficiencies, sociobehavioral, opportunity, experience, and racial—as each relates to why African American male students are underperforming in U.S. schools.

Germane to the research is an understanding of why the gap exists and a measure of assurance on the viable efforts to ameliorate or mediate its effect on students. Missing from the research is an account on how the inputs of instruction, curricula, parenting effects, sociocultural effects, and society-at-large contribute to the academic outcomes and enlarge or narrow the gaps. To state it differently, researchers said little about the capacity for students to learn, reversing the outcome impact (test scores, grades, and other measures of outcomes) when a student enters kindergarten unprepared.

According to the skill sets and behavioral patterns identified as a measurement of kindergarten readiness, is it possible for children to engage with the curricula, teachers, and peers and learn what they need to know to be successful? The aforementioned variables of identification and definition suggest that the achievement gap measures impact, not capacity, and, thus, is more artificial in assigning deficit. In the digital age it is expected that students would have more contact with material knowledge due to access. The digital divide is a symptom of the achievement gap, and does not necessarily mean all children are accessing quality materials through this medium.

The idea that a simple improvement in the SES of individuals in poverty would profoundly improve the achievement gap is concerning. In this researcher's personal experience in moving from poor working-class neighborhoods to a middle-class neighborhood, no improvement in academic performance or ability resulted from a change in residency to a better zip code. In contrast, this researcher remained a statistic in the achievement gap, despite family efforts to improve social standing. To understand the impact socially acceptable ideals such as kindergarten readiness and the academic achievement gap have at the family level through the narratives of those who are governing their lives in ways that address these issues by telling their stories, study participants brought another perspective.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Restatement of the Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the perceptions of single African American mothers of sons about educational expectations of their sons prior to entering kindergarten and whether mothers' views contribute to early educational experiences. Research on gender differences in academic expectations suggested that motivation for learning an identified traits for kindergarten readiness could be impacted by maternal gender expectations of academic acumen as well as the influence of cultural indications of gender-stereotype behaviors. For the purposes of this study, maternal perceptions were examined based on mothers' understandings of what it means to be kindergarten ready and to what extent mothers' ideas of culturally responsive gender-based academic preparedness impacted the cognitive development of their sons.

An important aspect of the study is the relationship between the researcher and study participants. As a member of the community represented in this study and as the central instrument used to examine the phenomenon, establishing a rapport of trust and respect was essential to the engagement between study participants and the researcher. The current study unveiled varying discourses of subjective truths about the lived experiences of participants, their viewpoints, and perceived knowledge on the subject.

An investigation of this nature requires confidence in the methods and approach as well as perceptions by participants that the researcher is unguarded and receptive to their information. As a member of the community under examination, the collective experiences of the researcher and participants may have enhanced the reliability of the

participants toward the researcher and improved the richness of the data participants brought forth in their narratives.

The study centers in phenomenology, a philosophical concept first published by Edmund Husserl (1859-1938), considered to be the founder of phenomenology. Phenomenology is considered a method to investigate and describe phenomena experienced in human consciousness. This consciousness derives from first-person observation, described through narrative that assigns meaning to events. These meanings are the "essence of consciousness" (Behnke, n.d., p. 8).

According to Ungvarsky (2017):

> phenomenology looks at an event through a lens of how that event is viewed by a person, not how the event actually took place. In other words, the person's perception and interpretation of the event is given priority in understanding how the event unfolded. (p. 1)

The researcher conducted a qualitative-method study using a grounded-theory approach, in a constructivist design. The constructivist design for this study followed Vygotsky's (1978) theories of social constructivism, generally concerned with the coconstruction of knowledge as it aligns with the theoretical framework. From this framework, learning is constructed in the cultural environment.

Research Design

Terrell (2012) suggested that the researcher's paradigm, referenced as the qualitative paradigm, is the ascribed axiology, epistemology, and oncology that shape the selection of research methods employed in a qualitative design. In the present study, a

broad theory was developed, grounded in the data on the perceptions of single African American mothers on the cognitive development of their sons prior to beginning kindergarten (Creswell, 2015, p. 425).

Qualitative researchers perform a grounded-theory approach, as a "systemic process" for data gathering and coding, in a manner that acknowledges the rigor that results from the close association between the researcher and the data through "a general method of constant comparative analysis" (Creswell, 2015, p. 426; Strauss & Corbin, 1994). Grounded theory emerged since the 1960s when Glaser and Strauss (1967, as cited in Creswell, 2015) developed the theory for medical research, discovering the benefit of an inductive process that evolves from the "perspective of the participants in a study" (Creswell, 2015, p. 427). The generative-theory nature as well as the built in "explicit mandate to strive toward *verification* [original emphasis] of its hypotheses (statements of relationships between concepts) are enhancements within this methodology that are not shared in others" (Strauss & Corbin, 1994, p. 274).

Qualitative research provides many possibilities for ethnographic research including grounded theory. The current study was conducted in three phases: the first phase comprises in-depth interviews that addressed the characteristics of maternal support for their sons' academic development. The second phase included document analysis of artifacts shared by the participants as demonstrative evidence of their influence on their sons' academic development. Finally, the researcher's reflections on the process, thoughts, and questions, were captured in field notes or memoranda that represented another source of data to investigate the phenomenon under study.

Cases in the current study were a sample of single African American mothers of sons, the single unit of analysis. The participants' narratives represent a source of generative data that described participants' lived experiences. Additionally, the use of artifacts that defined the mother–son relationship or that represented the mothers' process in the academic preparation of their sons, and the researcher's memoranda assessed mothers' perceptions of their sons' school readiness and expanded the body of knowledge on the overarching idea of kindergarten readiness.

Use of a constructivist design recognizes that reality is a product of human intelligence interacting with experience in the real world (Elkind, 2005). The design aligns with the theoretical framework for the study using Vygotsky's (1978) ZPD, Crenshaw's intersectionality, and the snowball sampling method (Carbado et al., 2013). Four research questions guided the elements of the study.

The Research Setting

The greater Sacramento region was the geographical location for the study. The Sacramento region encompasses several counties in northern California and western Nevada: Sacramento, Yolo, El Dorado, Placer, Sutter, Yuba, and Nevada. According to the 2016 American Community Survey, an estimated 1,479,300 people resided in Sacramento County (U.S. Census Bureau, 2016).

Data collected in the same year for Sacramento City reflected 484,530 residents. The region has experienced growth since the 2010 census that estimated 1,418,788 residents (less than 10% were African American), attributed to the suburban areas north and south of Sacramento in cities such as Elk Grove in the south and Rocklin in the north. The greater Sacramento area was chosen from a practical concern for accessibility to the

researcher. Competence in the general location of the study allowed for distinction in areas where recruitment of participants for the study was most prominent.

Sacramento has two major educational institutions: California State University, Sacramento, and University of California, Davis. Additionally, it has a community college district, Los Rios, which encompasses five community colleges. Also, the area sports several private nonprofit and for-profit colleges.

American River College is one of the largest community colleges in California according to the Los Rios Community College District webpage. The school had an estimated 30,000 students enrolled in the spring 2017 semester, more than 50% of whom attended courses during the day and the rest attending evening classes at this site. According to first census data collected in the fall of 2016, 22,469 day and evening students are enrolled in Sacramento City College. Cosumnes River College, located in south Sacramento, a section of Sacramento with a large African American population, had an estimated 14,408 students in the fall of 2016, according to the first census collected in the fall semester of 2016 (Los Rios Community College, 2016).

To provide sufficient outreach to potential participants, a communication plan included posting flyers at the California State University or community college campuses. Notifications of the study were e-mailed to the various community colleges, and California State University or organizations designated personnel for outreach to share with students or parent groups affiliated with the campus or organization. Use of a broad networking approach of this nature was intended to expand outreach to the designated study population and increase the potential pool of study participants.

Population and Sample

Population

The study population represents the subgroup: single African American mothers of sons in the Sacramento area. The study's primary aim was to examine the single African American mother's perceptions of their son's cognitive ability prior to entering kindergarten. The eight participants in the study comprised an array of sociocultural backgrounds in the African American community, meaning participants represent a sampling of divergent qualities; what Waters (2016) referenced as "the complexities of race and class," referring to the individuals in the Black community reflected in diaspora of individuals with African roots. Waters (2016) and the current study reflected on the composition of participants' individual and life experiences visible in the intersections of being single, African American, and mothers (p. 13).

The phenomenon under examination required access to a distinct population in the subgroup of African American women. Participants in the study met the following criteria: (a) African American female, (b) single, widowed, or divorced, (c) 18 years or older, (d) with at least one son between the ages of 3 and 5.

A purposeful sampling method resulted in eight prospective candidates who met the study criteria. These individuals accepted the invitation to participate in the study. An adjustment was made in the initial design of the study, a change in the target range for the participants' sons' ages from 3 to 5 was increased to 3 to 11 to correspond to participants' sons' ages. As the single unit of measure in the current study, mothers' adherence to the criteria was most critical and sons' ages were inconsequential, meaning they would not affect the findings because the focus was on mothers' perceptions. Sons were the object

of this perception and ancillary to the study. During the interview process, participants responded to the questions and provided artifacts based on their perceptions, expectations, and experiences of their sons' educational experiences prior to entering kindergarten. This sampling method resulted in eight participants with sons ages 3 to 11, representing the grade spans pre-K through sixth grade.

Sample

A snowball-sampling method was employed to identify prospective participants for the study. A purposeful-sampling technique, snowball sampling is effective when study participants are difficult to find. In the current study, participant criteria included a specific subgroup of African American women: single mothers of sons. According to Kidsdata.org (n.d.). In 2014, 18.6% of California households were female headed; 20.7% of households in the Sacramento region were female headed; between 2010 and 2014, 48.5% of African American households in Sacramento County were headed by women.

Using snowball sampling, initial invitations were sent to potential participants. Candidates were requested to invite others to participate who met the study criteria. After the research was underway, the researcher requested study participants recommend others that fit the study criteria. At the end of each interview, participants were asked to share the researcher's contact information as well as their experiences in participating in the study. This purposive-sampling strategy supported the researcher in gaining access to the population suggested in Creswell (2015). Respondents to the invitation to participate in the study contacted the researcher by e-mail or phone and agreed to an in-person or virtual meeting using a videoconferencing platform: ZOOM or FaceTime.

According to Starks and Brown Trinidad (2007),

> the sample size in a qualitative design depends on five things: the scope of the study, the nature of the topic, the quality of the data, the study design, and the use of shadow data (when participants' speak of others experience as well as their own). (p. 1374)

As a general guideline, Creswell (2015) suggested collecting 20 to 30 interviews during the data collection; this number could be augmented by the use of multiple sources of data.

Qualitative studies that examined a similar demographic to the current study have included 5 to 10 participants. Other qualitative studies conducted with a similar population of participants or that examined parental engagement had a sample size of 5 to 20 participants (Henderson 2016; Pacheco Schweitzer, 2016; Waters, 2016). Fusch and Ness (2015) considered the nature of the data collection, to be "rich, as quality, and thick, as quantity" (p. 1409).

In the current study, the number of participants was limited to those who responded to the initial invitation to participate and the subsequent snowball-sampling method employed that met the criteria for the study resulting in eight participants. Waters (2016) suggested that "qualitative research typically centers on relatively small samples selected purposefully to permit inquiry into and understanding of phenomena from the perspective of those involved" (p. 33). The Waters study is an example of a small sample size. The study of parental participation of African American mothers at a school site in Chicago was completed with five participants. The eight participants in the current study did not ascribe to a particular SES or residential status, among other demographic identities that were at the researcher's discretion.

Instrumentation

Guided by the research questions and the theoretical framework, an initial set of semistructured open-ended questions were designed as a guide for interviewing participants on the central phenomenon of the mother's role in the preparation of her son for kindergarten. The interview guide was the primary data-collection tool (see Appendix A). Appendix B, the Kindergarten Skill and Readiness Questionnaire (KSRQ) is a nonscientific, nonweighted scale to gather data on a participant's impressions of her son's capacity for kindergarten, or kindergarten readiness. The 7-item scale was originally designed for use by Jordanian kindergarten teachers as an assessment of their students' readiness. With permission from the publisher, the researcher made minor adjustments, such as replacing words that were less familiar to English speakers with more common language. Four measurements were less than expected, as expected, more than expected, and consistently more. Responses were not weighted. The data were useful as attitudinal data and not scientific measurement. The questionnaire appears in Appendix B, Figure 1 indicates the attitudinal outcomes of participants.

The open-ended question bank focused on participants' interviews with the research questions and the following constructs: (a) early academic support, (b) academic goal setting, (c) perceptions of cognitive development, and (d) culturally situated gendered parenting styles in the academic development of their sons. The constructs support the theoretical framework and were intended to structure the researcher's process in collecting data. The question bank was divided into three sections: demographics, mother–son dyad, and education. Participants were prompted using an open-ended question such as, "Tell me about living in Sacramento." If necessary, the researcher

requested follow-up or clarifying questions, such as, “Help me understand what you meant by…” or “Tell me more about…” to gain a deeper understanding of the information provided by the participant.

Creswell (2015) referenced grounded theory as “theory in process,” an inductive approach centralized on participants, rather than forcing identities into structured categories. This process enlightens rather than informs the researcher “on the meanings [of the phenomenon] ascribed by the participants in the study” (Creswell, 2015, p. 432). As the researcher using a grounded-theory approach, the researcher was active in the process and an integral part of the instrumentation, making decisions that reflected experiences with the participants. For example, the researcher expanded on a common response represented by the participants through further probing and clarifications to elicit rich data for a fuller exploration of participants’ responses. This perspective aligns with Creswell’s (2015) suggested use of the emerging design process in which “the researcher … brings values, experiences, and priorities [to the process of unfolding the data]” (pp. 432–433). Charmaz (2008) posited, “grounded theorists adopt a few strategies to focus their data gathering and analyzing, but what they do, how they do it, and why they do it emerge through interacting in the research setting, with their data, colleagues, and themselves” (p. 398). The study proceeded using a grounded-theory approach as referenced by Charmaz (2008) and Creswell (2015).

Validity

A pilot study was conducted with a population with similar characteristics to participants in the general study. Independent interviews were conducted using the interview question bank and recorded using audio and video recording equipment. A

survey was administered to participants for input and feedback on recommended adjustments to the instrument. Participants in the pilot made no recommended changes; the instrument was not altered.

The interviews were professionally transcribed or transcribed by the researcher. Participants were provided copies of their transcripts for member checking. According to Creswell and Miller (2000), researchers use member checking to inform accuracy and to add "credibility to the qualitative study" (p. 127). Creswell (2015) suggested "member checking is a process in which the researcher asks one or more of the participants in the study to check the accuracy of the account" (p. 259). In the current study, individual transcripts were e-mailed to participants with a request to respond with any edits, corrections, or revisions; participants requested no changes.

Open coding was initiated beginning with the first participant interview. Each successive interview was coded to the existing codes; codes were added as new categories emerged from the data. Creswell (2015) suggested that in grounded-theory research, validation is completed through "the constant comparative procedure of open coding" (p. 445). Memoranda and artifacts were included to triangulate the data. Fusch and Ness (2015) suggested the use of multiple data sources to saturate the data. This strategy was useful for this grounded-theory research with a small number of participants.

Pilot Study

A pilot was conducted in advance of the data collection of the study. Participants in the pilot test were interviewed using the open-ended interview question bank. Participants were sent a survey to evaluate each of the questions in the interview instrument. Participants were instructed to provide their overall feedback on the interview

process including the length of time to complete the interview in addition to the number of questions in the instrument, the relevancy of each question to the purpose of the study, and whether the questions were properly worded. The written feedback was collected through an electronic survey. Participants made no recommendations for adjustments to the instrument; the instrument was unchanged as a result of the pilot.

Reliability

Fusch et al. (2018) suggested that the use of triangulation in qualitative research serves several purposes: mitigates researcher bias, supports reaching saturation of the data, and "adds to the depth of the data that are collected" (p. 19). Fusch et al. identified four types of triangulation first defined by Denzin, including methodological triangulation, the type of triangulation employed in the current study. A further defining feature of methodological triangulation, or the incorporation of "multiple sources of data … from multiple data collection methods," includes "interviews, focus groups, observations, etc. … in a qualitative case study or ethnography" (Fusch et al., 2018, p. 22). The type referenced here is "within-method triangulation," an option in methodological triangulation (Fusch et al., 2018, p. 22).

In the current study, the researcher employed within-method triangulation as an indicator of reliability. Open-ended interviews and artifacts were collected. Along with these two data sources, the phenomenon and theoretical frame served as a point of analysis that Creswell (2015) suggested can occupy one of the three points of triangulation. Creswell (2015) posited,

> Applied to the research, it meant that investigators could improve their inquiries by collecting and converging (or integrating) different kinds of data bearing on

the same phenomenon. The three points to the triangle are the two sources of the data and the phenomenon. (p. 538)

Data Collection

Examination of the phenomenon required application of the research questions from the perspective of the theoretical framework: ZPD and intersectionality. Theoretical sampling follows the process that begins with the research problem and moves through several phases including data collection. Interactions with people in the form of interviews is an acceptable means of capturing experiences on the subject under examination and the process addressed in the phenomenon (Creswell, 2015). During the research process, data emerged that brought relevancy to the research questions. During the research process, several constructs pertinent to the theoretical framework and research questions guided the data-collection process: (a) early academic support, (b) academic goal setting, (c) perceptions of cognitive development, and (d) culturally situated gendered parenting styles in the academic development of their sons.

Data collection included in-person and virtual interviews, researcher memoranda, and artifacts. The inclusion of additional forms of data collection mitigated researcher bias. Fusch et al. (2018) suggested "triangulation is the way in which one explores different levels and perspectives of the same phenomenon … [and] it is one method which the validity of the study results are ensured" (p. 26).

The first steps included broad distribution of the invitation to participate through e-mails sent to student–parent and child care centers at California State University, Sacramento City College, American River College, and Cosumnes River College; additionally, invitations were sent to nonprofit organizations and posted in public

locations that served individuals from the demographic selected for this research. In addition to the outreach to educational institutions and nonprofit organizations, the researcher employed a networking Web strategy, an exponential outreach strategy that used the strength of personal relationships.

To support a purposive sampling method, snowball sampling, individuals in the researcher's network were e-mailed a copy of the invitation to participate to serve two purposes: to accept the invitation to participate and to forward the invitation to individuals in their network that met the study criteria. The request was to repeat the process of identification of individuals or forward through other individual networks. After the onset of the study, the researcher requested participants to share the researcher's contact information and their experiences participating in the study to individuals in their network who met the study criteria.

The invitation to participate included specific information about the desired demographic for the study, as well as highlighted any benefits for participation. Study participants were selected from the population of single African American mothers of African American males across social class, age, and residential status who responded to the invitation to participate. Prospects who accepted the invitation to participate were sent an e-mail with information on the study, Institutional Review Board approval documents, and a consent form.

Participants had the option to be interviewed in person or through a video-conferencing platform. Participants who opted for a virtual interview were invited through ZOOM or FaceTime. In person and virtual interviews were audio and video recorded with participants' permission; the researcher protected and secured these

recordings. The transcripts of the interviews were produced by a professional transcriptionist or by the researcher and sent to individual participants for member checking.

The interviews were the primary source of data collected for this study. The purpose of the interviews was twofold: to investigate the experiences of participants to define their process of preparing their sons academically, and to collect attitudinal data on their perceptions of their son's cognitive development prior to entering kindergarten. The interviews varied in length and ranged between 1 and 2 hours. The researcher's semistructured interview protocol (see Appendix A) was designed to allow participants to speak freely regarding their preparation activities and other related topics. The interview protocol was refined after conducting a pilot of the instrument. The pilot was employed to validate the instrument. The questions were modified during the interview sessions using an iterative process based on participants' responses to the questions and probes. Probes were infused throughout the interview to clarify participants' responses and to collect thick data (Fusch & Ness, 2015). The semistructured interview protocol ensured consistency in the process of gathering data (Creswell, 2015). One-to-one in-depth interviews allowed for unrestricted responses from participants (Creswell, 2015, pp. 216, 451).

Participants were requested to submit artifacts, including photographs, videos, pictures, drawings, or other suitable media that reflected their beliefs and perceptions of their sons' academic capacity prior to the kindergarten year. The artifacts were intended to support the interview data as an attitudinal data set to assess maternal views. Three of the eight participants submitted these types of data. Last, the researcher's memoranda

served as reflective and inquiry-related data as a point-of-reference to the experiences shared by the participants.

Approval by the Institutional Review Board of the University of San Francisco was obtained prior to conducting field research or inviting individuals to participate in the data-collection phase of the study. Following the ethical guidelines outlined in Creswell (2015), permission to participate in a research study was requested from all participants as well. Participants were advised of the nature of the study and offered resources to assist with any unintended circumstances or problems that may have arisen as a result of their participation. Participants were advised of their right to forgo their engagement in the study at any time during the study, and were offered access to the findings at the end of the study (as in Creswell, 2015).

According to Creswell (2015), grounded-research studies generate or discover a theory or abstract schema of a phenomenon that relates to a particular situation grounded in the experiences and perceptions of the participants. The data-collection methods—open-ended interview questions, artifacts, and memoing—provided rich and thick data that supported a well-rounded discovery method for the emergence of a theory, guided by participants' responses. The data collected through this study informed a theory on the perceptions of the single African American mothers' understanding of the contextual factors that contributed to the educational outcomes of their sons.

Data Analysis

The researcher proceeded to analyze the data collected through the two phases of coding for grounded-theory research suggested by Charmaz (2008). The raw data, interview transcripts, artifacts, questionnaire responses, and personal memoranda were

collected. The researcher employed the process of constant-comparative data analysis, a method in grounded-theory research. Charmaz posited that making meaning or sense of what the data is telling the researcher is a perpetual process in analyzing the data, and should be attended to in a narrowing and visible entrance into the lives of the participants.

The first step included reading the individual transcripts to get a sense of the data. Next, segments of the transcripts were assigned codes using open coding applied to segments of the individual narratives and active codes as descriptors of what was happening. Constant comparison across the documents, comparing data to data, allowed the data to begin to unfold or construct. The researcher used the transcripts to compare interview statements.

Comparing the first interview to the others offered distinctions in similarities and differences in responses. The second stage involved focused coding, or a refining of the initial codes and placing them into categories. The researcher used Dedoose 8.0 35 software to create the initial open codes, or "small segments of information," as suggested by Creswell (2015, p. 437) across the transcripts of all participants and researcher memoranda. The codes were examined using the code presence/absent feature in Dedoose 8.0 35. Redundancies were reduced and grouped into themes. The themes were developed using the theoretical framework of ZPD and intersectionality to underscore the attitudes and beliefs of participants. Grouping the codes into themes provided a narrowing of the data and clustering of codes that supported the next phase: theoretical coding. In a constructivist design, this phase explored the substantive codes for a core category that informed the development of the theory, *antithetical academic deficiency theory*.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

The narratives of single African American mothers of sons on their perceptions of their cognitive development prior to entering kindergarten were collected in this study. Chapter 4 begins with a description and background of participants. A brief overview of the data-collection procedures is followed by the responses to the four research questions, arranged by themes and subthemes that represent the data that emerged from the data analysis.

The three major themes were parental involvement, protective factors, and activism and advocacy. Subthemes further defined the major themes. Protective factors and activism and advocacy included social diversity, racial socialization and stereotype threat, intraracial, and self-identity. Finally, a summary of the major findings of the study is presented.

Participant Descriptions and Profiles

Participants were eight single African American mothers of sons. Participants were all from northern California and centrally situated in the Sacramento metropolitan region. The participants elected to remain anonymous and pseudonyms were assigned to the mother and son. At the time of the study, sons' ages ranged from 3 to 11, and represented grade levels pre-K to sixth grade. Participants' ages ranged from 26 to 49. Table 1 provides demographic information on participants including an overview of participants' educational attainment: 62% earned a bachelor's degree or, in some cases, advanced degrees. The table also presents comparable data of the participants' occupation and age.

Table 1

Participant Demographic, Occupation, and Age by Pseudonym

Participant pseudonym	Student pseudonym	Mother's occupation	Education	Student's age	Mother's age range
Penelope Rose	August	Correctional counselor	Master's in progress	7	25–34
Lakeisha	Lamar	Unemployed	Master's in progress	11	35–44
Liana	Cameron	Chiropractor	Doctor of Chiropractic	3	35–44
Aniyah	Aric	Financial specialist	Bachelor of Science	7	25–34
Makayla	William	Self-employed	High school diploma/College courses	3	35–44
Capria	Christian	Self-employed	Master's degree	10	35–44
Azra	James	Business specialist	High school diploma/College courses	11	45–54
Kimani	Gregory	Nurses assistant	High school diploma/College courses	7	35–44

The eight participants were selected for the study based on a purposeful sample of individuals who met the criteria: single African American mother of an African American male. Based on the respondents to the invitation to participate, the researcher used discretion to restrict the age of the participants' sons described in the study to 11 years old and the grade level to the sixth grade.

Participant 1: Penelope Rose

It's probably one of the better decisions of my life.

Penelope Rose spent her formative early education in a homogenous environment. She expressed her competence in this environment where she was rooted in the community, with her peers, and where she felt grounded in her education. A move to a suburban community and school landed her in unfamiliar territory and for the first time she understood that she was in a minority.

> So I came up my, umm, sophomore year in high school, from the bay, which was a big transition umm, because I had gone to school with the same people from kindergarten all the up to freshmen year and then my Dad got a job, got relocated in … we lived in what "he " said was an impoverished area in the Bay, so he brought us up to a more suburban area but then that put us at a school where we were umm, the minorities, I've never been a minority … in a school, there was total less than 10 Black people in my graduating class.

Upon graduating from high school, Penelope Rose left the state to attend college. She returned to California with her son after a complicated pregnancy and delivery at the end of the first semester in college. Penelope Rose expressed the challenge this life-altering event had on her educational goals. She understood the adjustment to this new paradox meant accepting responsibility for herself and her son. Penelope Rose concluded,

> there's a better reason, a greater reason than you that he's here, umm cuz, God was just like, here's this child, that we didn't even give you the option if you were going to bring into world, he had to be here, so I was like okay, he's here. … It's probably one of the better decisions of my life.

Participant 2: Lakeisha

I just wanted more.

Lakeisha made her way across country with her infant son, driving over 3,000 miles alone. After planning and contemplating the move for over a year, Lakeisha abruptly made the decision to leave her home in a southern state after an adverse issue with a close family member. Friends had convinced her that she could "make it in

California" and that there would be an opportunity for her to pursue her goal to attend college. Prior to making the decision to leave her home, Lakeisha started college, but was interrupted several times for various reasons.

Finally completing a GED motivated her to want to continue her education. She knew it would be impossible under the circumstances at home. Lakeisha was homeless when she arrived in California. She and her infant son stayed in shelters for a period of time. Lakeisha accessed services to get herself on track and registered in community college. She has since completed a bachelor's degree and will soon complete a master's degree. "I did what I had to, I just wanted more."

Participant 3: Liana

He will know who he is and who God is, and his self-worth.

Liana is a California native. She left the Bay area after graduating from high school to attend college in the southeastern part of the country. She expressed her deep connection to the prominence and affluence African Americans in this part of the country had elevated. Her experience in the south as an adult was a dichotomous experience to the one she experienced growing up in the Bay Area, where she felt disconnected from her African American peers in the school community where she spent a short time in her educational career. She discussed the chaotic environment she found herself in when she briefly attended a public school in a suburban neighborhood. The school population was diverse, but there was dissention in the student body that resulted in students regularly engaging in physical altercations. Liana expressed that she was uncomfortable around what she considered to be an unstructured environment.

Liana sought refuge in the structure she found in religious-based schools and her single mother of two afforded her this benefit.

> In the Catholic school as well as the Seventh Day Adventist school we had lots of structure and discipline and we actually got ruler at the Catholic school. If you got in trouble, you went to Principal Di's office and she had a ruler. There was a lot of structure there. We always had a religion class. You know, we went to chapel regularly. So going into a public school and not having that and then you add the profanity and the music, we didn't have any of that. So I was taking this in. I might have been a little sheltered, but I had great value and a spiritual relationship and religion, things that—you know, I think I had a great foundation, you know, built in me. And I loved it. I loved the structure of it.

As a parent, Liana preferred a religious-based preschool environment for her son that aligned with and would support her own beliefs. The location she selected encompassed his entire pre-K–12 educational career. Liana is confident that this school provides him with the educational foundation he will need to be successful. She explained that one of the major goals for her son is that "he will know who he is and who God is, and his self-worth."

Participant 4: Aniyah

Just really honing in on education is the way you get there.

Aniyah is the product of a suburban education. Her experience growing up in an educated middle class family defined her educational expectations.

> I believe that I received a tremendous amount of support from my family, maybe not directly but indirectly in terms of setting expectations of how far our family members are expected to go with their educational journey. So growing up in a household where both my parents had Masters degrees, and the majority of my aunts and uncles also had their degrees, and some also had Masters degrees it created an environment and expectation that for our family education is at the forefront of priorities.

Aniyah reflected on the experiences she had in school, including feelings of rejection and negativity from some of her teachers, feeling incompetent in the classroom environment, and invisible to her teachers. She expressed that she minimized her engagement in these unwelcoming and unsafe environments. As a result, she commented she missed out on the benefit her parents expected her to receive in gaining access to a high-quality educational environment.

Aniyah attended a Catholic high school, and it was in this environment that she flourished and connected. She explained,

> I think the first time I really started to umm, enjoy school, was when I was in high school just because the environment I was in, at the school there was so much you know, umm, team spirit, it was all about connectedness and that was something I hadn't really experienced.
>
> I look back from this point and previous, I really, I really felt like I did not have enough of a focus on school, I did not see how crucial, how important, really focusing, really understanding, and really digesting everything that I was learning.

As a parent, reflecting back on her school experiences, she focused on ensuring her son is engaged in his education at the beginning of his educational career. She explained that she communicates this message in a number of ways: by being active in his school environment, providing him an enriching home environment, and ensuring he has external educational supports.

> I try to talk to him a lot about you know … *that he is in control* (participant's emphasis) of what he can become, and I do that by just having playful conversations about what he wants to be when he grows up. … How are you going make that kind of money. … What I really want to instill in my son is, the things that he wants he's going to have to earn it. … Just really honing in on education is the way you get there.

Participant 5: Makayla

I'm teaching him how to be a good person … I'm teaching him how to be respectful.

Makayla's educational experience was divided between a homogenous environment and one that was predominantly White. She iterated racial tensions were prominent in both environments. Intraracial dissention presented itself on various social and economic levels.

Issues in the community, such as employment, that separated individuals WHO were employed from those WHO were unemployed was a source of contention between Makayla and her peers at school.

> My grandmother worked hard 'cause she is native or was native, and so she would drop me off in a Cadillac. And in them days I didn't see the difference. She

> had a long-assed Cadillac. But in other communities, in the Black community it was a big deal. I didn't know that, you know, or if people ask you, "Was that your grandma? Why does your grandma pick you up all the time?" "Because my mom works. Doesn't your mom work?" You know, and some people's parents didn't so they wanted to get in a fight about it. I'm like dude, I just want to go to school. Yeah. So it was interesting about the things we fought about.

Makayla also faced racial tension in the rural community to which her family moved: "Initially, I fought at the beginning 'cause I was the only Black kid in my class, and then after that I didn't have any problems." In the rural environment, she also found herself in physical altercations with the other African American students who moved into the area, which she said later settled down and they became friends, once the students acclimated to the environment.

Makayla is the mother of five children: four males and a female. In this study she shared her experiences as a singe mother of multiracial children growing up in a rural environment. The focus of the interview was on her youngest child and son. Makayla's narrative included the experiences of her older sons as they matriculated through the school system in a rural county and how those experiences shaped her perceptions, expectations, preparation, and concern for her youngest son.

Makayla shared that respect for others is an important part of her parenting, and respect for all living things is in line with her native cultural upbringing. In responding to what life lessons she is sharing with her son, her response was, "I guess I'm teaching him how to be a good person even though he's 3. I'm teaching him how to be respectful."

Participant 6: Capria

I think parenting is my best asset. I think if I could say the one thing I did right, it would be that.

Capria is a Caribbean-born native who came to the United States with her family when she was in third grade. Capria shared her parents' commitment to a better education for their children that brought them to the southeastern part of the United States. She related devastating community and school experiences during her formative schooling, noting that survival meant tapping into the tough centeredness she learned, growing up in her native country.

Capria related a similar approach to raising her children. She voiced that she finds the means to provide academic support and offer her children the opportunity to explore their interests in extracurricular activities, stating, "I don't care the cost." Situated in her own educational experiences that were difficult to navigate, despite these roadblocks, Capria came out on top of a very socially challenging school experience. As a result of her personal educational challenges, she expressed the commitment and sacrifices she has made and will continue to make to support her children's educational development. She is fulfilled in her role as a parent, exclaiming, "I think parenting is my best asset!"

Participant 7: Azra

It's like I don't have anything else to do. … This is my investment. … These kids are my investment. I have to do this.

Azra admittedly had a great school experience in her home town in southern California. Leaving the homogenous environment where she had family and strong community connections was difficult, but it meant moving to a middle-class

neighborhood, an improvement in the family's social status. The new neighborhood included a few other Black families, equating to a small number of Black students in the school population. Azra noted that her strongest connections during this time were with these families and her church community. She grew up in a faith-based home and school environment, where the majority of all of the family activities took place.

Azra enrolled in the regional occupational program in high school and found that it was a shelter from the unsettling racial incidents that were constant in the school. She was motivated to complete her formal education and to begin her career, which she accomplished. Azra is the mother of two children, a daughter and a son, with a 12-year age difference between them. She expressed that she adopted a different parenting style with her son. Her daughter described the adjustment as leniency. Azra explained that the parenting approach with her son derives from a different set of circumstances that was different than with her daughter, when she had familial support. She admitted that her approach is different; however, her commitment is the same. "It's like, I don't have anything else to do. … This is my investment. … These kids are my investment. I have to do this."

Participant 8: Kimani

He didn't leave home with those behaviors; he learned them at preschool.

Kimani left her West African home under dire political conditions, separated from her mother, stepfather, and six siblings when they moved to the United States. Kimani became the primary caregiver for herself and a younger brother. When she was finally able to reunite with the family in the United States, Kimani was placed in an age-

appropriate high school setting that was well beyond her third-grade education. She floundered in this environment and eventually dropped out of school.

Kimani's early educational struggles kept her from completing her high school education until later in her adulthood. She completed the required units to acquire a high school diploma and has since enrolled in community college. Kimani expressed that she was driven, after becoming a mother, to make improvements in her life. She wanted to ensure her children had a better educational outcome than her own.

Kimani expressed her determination to provide her two children the best possible life she can, which includes raising them in a Godly way, and teaching them to be respectful. Her parenting style reflects her religious beliefs and the cultural discipline she values for her children. She articulated her assurance that her children are well-behaved. She shared an experience she had when her son was enrolled in preschool where she observed him behaving adversely to her edict. She knew something was awry, noting, "he didn't leave home with those behaviors; he learned them in preschool." She removed him from this influence and placed him in a school setting that aligned with her religious beliefs and parenting style.

Research Questions and Findings

The data collection for the study included semistructured, open-ended interviews, research memoranda, analyzing artifacts, and an informal review of responses to a questionnaire on kindergarten readiness. The researcher coded 384 excerpts and 22 memoranda into 86 open codes and 860 code applications.

In a second analysis, the researcher used the code present/absent feature in the Dedoose 8.0 35 software and reduced redundant codes and any that were initiated but not

used. In a constant-comparison analysis process, the codes were filtered and combined into four categories: A *Different Kind of Smart, Disconnected, Familiar Traditions, and Single Parenting.*

These categories were compared for emerging themes, resulting in three major themes: Parental Involvement, Protective Factors, and Activism and Advocacy, and three subthemes under Protective Factors and Activism and Advocacy: Social Diversity, Racial Socialization and Stereotype Threat, and Intraracial and Self-Worth; Navigating Educational Institution; and Motivation Toward Learning. The data collected and sorted into these themes respond to the research questions.

1. In what ways do single African American mothers' perceptions of their sons' cognitive ability influence the academic support, meaning parental involvement, interest, or engagement, provided in preparing their sons for kindergarten?
2. How do culturally gendered parenting styles in the African American community impact how single African American mothers approach the academic development of African American male students?
3. In what ways do single African American mothers support their sons early academic development in preparation for kindergarten?
4. In what ways do single African American mothers define academic goals for their sons?

The following represent the application of participants' responses to the research questions:

Research Question 1

In what ways do single African American mothers' perceptions of their sons' cognitive ability influence the academic support, meaning parental involvement, interest, or engagement, provided in preparing their sons for kindergarten?

Parental Involvement

As an intervening factor in the academic-achievement gap identified in the research, parental involvement serves as a support for academic preparation, continuous engagement, and advocacy in a student's academic development. In the current study, the researcher used 11 codes to identify participants' interest in the academic development of their sons, identified as parental involvement.

Reflecting on Jeynes's (2005) four measures of parental involvement—attendance at school events, communicating with their children about school, maintaining high expectations for their children's success, and checking children's homework—participants in the current study reported parental involvement that met principles of effective parental involvement. An expansion of the methods identified in Jeynes (2005), were applied to nontraditional modes of parental engagement, such as coparenting, as indicators of a broader range of parental contributions to their son's academic development.

Participants reported that these nontraditional modes of parental support were necessary to ensure their sons' cognitive and behavioral development targeted the goals they established for their sons' academic success. Penelope Rose, shared an example of a targeted goal, describing a process she designed in preparing her son for classroom assignments to keep pace with his peers. Adapting a pedagogical process that responded

to her son August's preferred learning style, Penelope Rose's supplemental reteaching and adaptation of the curricula afforded her son the additional time he required with the curriculum to be successful in the classroom. The additional time and attention described in assessing, designing, and adapting the curriculum to her son's preferred learning style provided assurance of his content knowledge and, according to Penelope, was successful in assisting August to be on par with his classmates. She commented, "he's not going to be the perfectionist here; he's not. But it's [not] okay for him to struggle." She continued,

> So what I've done, I have a copy of both books that he does at school, umm, requested for the teacher to email me the story they're going to be doing that next week, so Sunday our bedtime story is going to be that story they're going to introduce on Monday, in hopes that it gives him not only the confidence to go in there in and read, but a little like, not everything is new to me, umm, because his [lack of] self-confidence will also hinder his academic success. (Penelope Rose)

Similarly, Aniyah recognized a need to supplement the classroom curriculum for her son Aric. Aric entered kindergarten with advanced reading skills and was placed in an accelerated reading program. Aric performed well in this program in kindergarten, yet despite his advancement in kindergarten, he was not identified for this program in the first grade. Aniyah reported she invested in weekly tutoring in reading and mathematics to supplement classroom instruction, to respond to the areas of deficiency Aric is experiencing. Aniyah expects her investment to fill in Aric's identified subject-matter gaps to accelerate his learning and understanding of the curriculum, and to secure his foundational subject-matter knowledge.

> *I'm trying to take additional steps now because I know how important that foundations is* (participant's emphasis), one to make to try to make school easier for him, umm, and also to make sure that he sees the bigger picture of this isn't like day care or play time, this is, it's serious, you have to take it seriously and you have to learn to enjoy the process of learning

Another nontraditional parental-involvement method identified in the current study included the school climate and meaning of the school culture. Finding the right school for their sons' beginnings in preschool was identified by participants as critical to their sons' proper academic growth and development.

> He went to preschool as well, but it wasn't a … a Christian school. He went to one of those free preschools. … And the teachers I felt that they really—it's not that they didn't care, but they were like okay—At first I thought preschool teachers don't get paid too much so they don't really care too much.

> And so I regret putting him in that preschool and I wish I would've put him in this Christian school that I put my daughter in, because she had a foundation. She had as far as the behavior and everything, she had a foundation at that school and my son did not have that foundation. And so that's my only regret as far as preschool goes.

> But it did help because he knew, by the time he went to kindergarten he was reading. You know, he was one of the kids that was reading, spelling good and he didn't have no problem. The only problem I felt that he had was that he was trying to make friends at school. He went to kindergarten and its primarily White

> kids. You know, there was like maybe two Blacks in the class, you know. So the kids would say, "Oh, say this," you know, and he, being 5, he was saying, then he gets in trouble, but the other kids they were talking and saying whatever they did, but he was always in the principal's office. (Kimani)

Finding the right fit in a school oftentimes meant placing their sons in schools where they were one of a few minorities enrolled in the school. Being a minority in a predominantly White school environment was a trade-off and risk they were willing to take in exchange for a perceived better educational opportunity for their sons. Through their own educational experiences, attending predominantly White schools in suburban areas, participants were aware of the possibility that their sons may face issues in self-identity and acceptance, that racism and prejudice could factor into their experience, and that these environments could lack culturally competent teachers and teaching pedagogy. Participants reported they suppressed these concerns due to the potential for a better education for their sons.

Participants noted that the right fit did not require a homogenous environment. Notable selection criterion included diversity in the student body, safe and supportive schools, a religious-based environment, and access to advanced curriculum. "I hate that I have to choose between him being around like his demographic of people versus a good education, what I believe to be a good education, a better one for him." (Penelope Rose)

Their experiences in predominantly White educational institutions supported their decisions to be actively involved in school-related activities, noting the differences in the level of support students received that they witnessed while in school when parents were active members of the school community. Participants spent time volunteering in their

sons' classrooms, collaborating with other parents in classroom activities, chaperoning on field trips, and taking other opportunities to be outwardly visible in the school environment.

A major step in preparing their sons for kindergarten included identifying a care provider or preschool program that would address the participant's general needs, such as location and accessibility, and would meet their specific concerns for an environment that included such requirements as religiously based, academically rich, and diverse. Capria discussed her experience:

> He underwent a very traumatic experience at that school in his preschool years, and I ended up pulling him out of the school. We left when he was 3 and moved to another school, where I felt that he was able to receive a lot more care in that setting."

> I was home with him the first year, I found a woman who provided in-home childcare right down the street from the college I attended … she's like my second mama here, she had him since he was 1to 2-years-old. (Lakeisha)

Aniyah also shared that her son was first cared for in a safe, loving, and caring environment up to the age of 2, which was critical for her. Lakeisha and Aniyah were both college students when their sons were preschool age, which necessitated placement that other participants named priorities, such as a faith-based environment that aligned with their Christian values as well as advanced academic curriculum. Participants reported this selection process to be a form of parental involvement.

Researchers identified behavioral attributes students are required to demonstrate in classrooms including following rules, sitting, and paying attention. Participants noted their support for these behavioral practices in their parenting style as a method of parental involvement. Identifying the nexus of what they reported as indicators of their choices for discipline and behavior modification in "raising their sons to be respectful," as Makayla articulated, participants reported adaptations of disciplinary methods initiated in their households of origin that they considered effective. Penelope Rose shared her process:

> [My parenting is] a combination of my parents and what I wanted for myself as a child from my parents…so I took all the positive things like my mom did, the level of support even it was completely opposite of something she supported.

Another approach included adopting the attributes of successful parents.

> I am fortunate to have a lot of outside influence and some excellent examples of what, you know, phenomenal mothers look like … I have been very blunt and asked people who I think, umm, you know, raised very successful children, what did you do and what worked for you and your family?

Aniyah further commented:

> I have umm, people that I'm close to whose children are straight "A" students, and I really take the time to observe and try to absorb, you know, how did they get there? How did they help their children get there, and umm, observe their parenting and just formally ask them, what worked for you? What did you do and,

> you know, what worked for you? What worked for you and the kids, and did you have to change it over time? Or kinda get their firsthand insight.

Other techniques included adjusting their parenting techniques to the evolving needs of their sons:

> [I consider] what would have been beneficial for me as a learning experience? Umm, and then I think of that and then think about the way he processes things, so for me a lot of my parenting, it's almost a very scientific approach to it. (Penelope Rose)

> He keeps me on my toes, to say the least, during certain … I would say developmental and cognitive, like milestones, my parenting has to change with it so what he understood at 3-years-old can now either get elaborated or just removed when he's 5 or 6.

Liana commented, "I had to change discipline practices and establish 'mommy's the boss;'" adding "I want to be that person. … I always want to be connected with him, and to know what he needs."

Participants reported coparenting as a form of parental support: "our goal, his father and I … We're right now in agreeance and I pray we stay there, going to that school and just staying and graduating. So that is our goal, to just keep him there" (Liana). Capria offered her position:

> Doesn't bring any good, to make a child hate the other spouse or whatever it is. That makes no sense. I still require that he honors his dad because that's his dad,

> period. You know, you'll get to the point where you all can sit down and have that conversation, but in my house you're going to honor your parents. You don't have to like what they do but you have to respect them for who they are.

Lakeisha commented,

> So it's just, it's basically trial and error, it didn't work this way, try it a different way, but I'm not going to let them blatantly get away with anything I know to be inappropriate, so my thing is to set up as many positive pathways that as I can, but I know they still have the power to choose, so I just try to stay on my method, just keep settin em' up, whatever path they decide, if they try to go between those paths, then I know as much as I can.

Participants reported relying on familial or kinship relationships, seeking positive African American male role models, and religious-based support as other mechanisms of parental engagement in support of their sons. Providing enriching home environments, activities, diversity, addressing the home environment to ensure emotional security, self-confidence, familial support, accountability, and respect that contributed to their son's social and emotional well-being all were reported by participants as parental support for their sons' academic development.

Summary

The act or actions involved in parental involvement begins with a basic understanding of the parent's and school's perceptions and positions on what parental involvement entails, also referenced as parental engagement.

Calabrese Barton, Drake, Gustavo Perez, St. Louis, and George (2004) studied parental involvement in a high-poverty urban elementary school. Considering parental involvement as a practice, the researchers identified a source of parental activity and created a model referred to as the ecologies of parental participation. From a grounded-theory approach, the researchers analyzed the data from their study. Results included the ecologies of parental participation model and a definition of parental activities related to the education of their children as engagement rather than involvement.

According to Calabrese Barton et al. (2004), "we use the word engagement to expand our understanding of involvement to include parents' orientations to the world and how those orientations frame the things they do" (p. 4). This perspective is oppositional to the deficit model of parental engagement that focuses solely on what parents are not doing, according to this study. In a meta-analysis of research on parental involvement or parental engagement, Jeynes (2018) emphasized that "research indicates: (1) the home environment is the most important aspect of parental-involvement and –engagement probably by a wide margin; and (2) the combined effects of the other five components likely do not equal the influence of the home" (p. 150).

Capital, meaning "the human, social, and material resources one has to and can activate for their own desired purposes" (Calabrese Barton et al., 2004, p. 5), is a fuller description of the resourcefulness participants in Calabrese Barton et al. (2004) study and in the current study enforced to produce their engagement. From a sociocultural perspective, those "things" in the current study have evolved into a type of ecology described by Calabrese Barton et al. in that participants demonstrated and articulated their involvement or engagement outside of traditional means. This focus on their capital

afforded them a level of control over what they did, in response to their sons' educational support, which traditional means did not.

Participants in the current study communicated culturally relevant practices and messaging intended to buffer against stereotypes and prejudices their sons were expected to encounter in social environments. The messaging is germane to racial socialization, meaning the messages and actions from the mother toward her son represent counternarratives to the disparaging attitudes and stereotypical behavioral expectations. Evident in the current study, this messaging reflects a form of parental engagement that is culturally relevant and significant in the attributes identified as parental academic support.

Last, participants in the current study were resolute in their demeanor to positively contribute to their son's educational experiences. These women are challenging the controversial findings that implicate single African American mothers in the academic deficiency of African American male students. The practices employed by the participants underscored the kindergarten readiness practices of single African American mothers. Jeynes (2018) posited,

> Sagacious educational leaders understand that teachers alone cannot maximise student success. Both parents and school people need to work together to reach these same goals. By mobilising both educators and family members via taking action to increase parental educational enthusiasm, the two primary groups of people that affect youth achievement will be working together toward the same goals. Perhaps no single set of actions could produce so much potential scholastic

> benefit than the cooperation of these two groups via the activation of the most important components of parental-involvement and -engagement. (p. 161)

Research Question 2

How do culturally gendered parenting styles in the African American community impact how single African American mothers approach the academic development of African American male students?

Protective Factors

Protective factors, also referenced in the research as racial socialization, are the messaging and actions from the mother toward her son that represent counternarratives to microaggressions, disparaging attitudes, and stereotypical behavior expectations, that mothers anticipate their sons will encounter in society and in educational institutions.

Social Diversity

The African American community encompasses a range of identities that subdivide individuals in this subculture. Social diversity means the varied identities that are in-group differences stratified in a cultural community, prominent in communities where social status and cultural identity separate individuals from their homogenous community.

Participants shared a variety of experiences relative to social diversity: racial socialization, intraracial issues and concerns, gender-based parenting, and stereotype threat. In making educational decisions for their sons, participants noted the difficult choice in electing to place their sons in nonhomogenous environments. Penelope Rose described this challenge:

> But then I think like socially, would he'd done better at a predominantly Black school cause there's one down the street off MLK, but then I'm like academics, and with him having Autism this school like is just so much better with handling it, that's because they get the support from the city, where the other school just gets written off, and I hate that I have to choose between him being around like his demographic of people versus a good education, what I believe to be a good education, a better one for him.

Racial Socialization and Stereotype Threat

Steele's (1997) stereotype-threat theory, defined as "the threat that others' judgments or their own actions will negatively stereotype them in the domain" (p. 44), was prominent in the examples related to their sons' school experiences. In this study, stereotype-threat theory was examined from the perspective of mothers' various forms of intervention to thwart stereotyped judgments from interfering in their sons' academic experiences. Racial socialization was reflected in the messaging and practices of the mothers that upheld their expectations and goals for their sons.

> For him at 7 years old, to be told, he told me, he's more than that, he's more than an athlete, he loves science but, they don't, umm, foster science kids, for little Black kids, they only want us to play sports, he's like, they're always telling me to join the track team, I don't want to join the track team. (Penelope Rose)

> This year I finally had to teach him, or I'm trying to get him to realize that there's, what we like to believe, is like this justice system that's fair, firm and consistent … we don't fit into that, and I can see it's frustrating for him to process, umm, he

> somewhat understands it, cuz he'll come home and be like, "the Becky's tried to mess with me today, but not today, mom, not today!" (Penelope Rose)
>
> He has to not only be three times more well-behaved than anyone in the class, and I can see that it's already starting forming a resentment towards the other kids in class … like why do I have to be the one who's quiet every second of the day? Like, why can't I talk in line with my friends? Umm, and even with his, like, he's already stated, "I feel they pick on me at school" like, umm, and I'm not sure that I disagree with him. (Penelope Rose)

Penelope Rose shared thoughts and feelings regarding a conversation between her son August and an officer who visited his classroom:

> You protect everyone except me, like you're afraid of me, like what threat do I have to you? Umm, so teaching him how to navigate that, while also being conscious, like you're alone though, like I'm not with you at school.
>
> I had to stop trying to understand why people conducted themselves in such a manner that was harmful to other people when it had nothing to do with them, umm, why people just went out of their way to cause harm to other people, and that's where he's at, even in school, and I almost feel bad, cuz I feel like that in itself even thinking about those things umm, takes away from his childhood, and takes away from his having to know that he can't do certain things because he's Black, but his friends can, or he can't get away with certain, like he has to be three times more well-behaved than anyone in the class.

> It's upsetting the injustices, and for him to be aware of that at such a young age, but still continue to give his best, no matter what, just be happy and wanna make friends, and still wanna do all that, I guess I'm not doing too bad.

Capria offered her position in addressing racial socialization and stereotyped threat with her son:

> I was very cautious so I sought out private institutions 'cause I have an education background and as a teacher, I know what the classroom can look like and I know how he can easily be lost just because of the system.
>
> They had quite a few students in the room, you know, that 28, 30, and most of those students were not academically ready for kindergarten. They were still far behind and it made it very difficult for my son to flourish in that environment because he was reading upon entering kindergarten. So he was not one of those students that fell by the wayside, because the kind of mother that I am.
>
> And being an educator, I wasn't going to allow that. So that left him for many hours of the day bored, which leads to behavioral issues. So I'm getting calls about a child that I've never really had issues with. And I'm like okay, what's going on? And they just wanted him to just sit in a spot. And I was like, "Okay, this is not going to work." So I ended up after a week, 'cause by the end of the week the principal's like, "Your son has ADHD" and he just started throwing out all these labels, "And he needs to be evaluated." And I said, "Absolutely not."

> the first thing people see is ooh, he's a Black boy. The second they see is ooh, she's a single mother. There's no dad. And then they make all these assumptions from that point. I must automatically be struggling financially. I must already have all these lacks. And then when he opens his mouth it's like, "Why is he smart?" So then I had to deal with that angle of things.

Intraracial and Self-Identity

Mothers in the current study expressed concern for the dichotomous engineering of an individual and culturally acceptable identity for their sons. Their own experiences in homogenous and predominantly White environments fueled concerns for their sons' self-identities. Participants registered their school experiences and the imprint intraracial issues, racism, and nonacademic labeling had on their educational development.

> My mom put us in a public school … [in] a predominantly White area in the Bay Area. And so I went to junior high there. I did not like it. I think I cried like almost every other day. It was too overwhelming for me. I was used to a smaller community and I was used to wearing uniforms every day and here I am having to pick clothes out. And the kids were fighting all the time. I just did not like it. (Liana)

In comparing her experiences in a private homogenous school to a public school she attended, Liana commented,

> There was a lot of structure there. We always had a religion class. You know, we went to chapel regularly. So going into a public school and not having that and then you add the profanity and the music, we didn't have any of that. (Liana)

> I was taking this in. I might have been a little sheltered, but I had great value and a spiritual relationship and religion, things that – you know, I think I had a great foundation, you know, built in me. And I loved it. I loved the structure of it! (Liana)

Azra shared a similar experience in transferring from a homogenous environment to one where she was one in a minority group of Black students:

> But I came from a private school and so yeah, wasn't very many people of color, you know, lived near Sacramento for all those years when I was growing up and it wasn't very—we had our core little group of friends. My main thing was my core group of friends. It was a few Black people, maybe about five Black families, our core group of people, between my sisters' friends and our friends and my parents' friends and then the church. The church was a big deal.

Makayla experienced intraracial conflict in a homogenous environment. She discussed having to defend herself:

> —Kindergarten to second grade I was in Sacramento. I fought a lot, got in trouble for fighting.
>
> —What kinds of things would you fight about in Sacramento?
>
> —Because my hair was tight or if my grandmother braided my hair tight that morning or if my grandmother dropped me off versus my mother 'cause she worked. I didn't really see that as a problem or—my grandmother worked hard 'cause she is native or was native, and so she would drop me off in a Cadillac.

> And in them days I didn't see the difference. She had a long-assed Cadillac. But in other communities, in the Black community it was a big deal. I didn't know that, you know, or if people ask you, "Was that your grandma? Why does your grandma pick you up all the time?" "Because my mom works. Doesn't your mom work?" You know, and some people's parents didn't so they wanted to get in a fight about it. I'm like dude, I just want to go to school. Yeah. So it was interesting about the things we fought about.

Comparing her educational experiences in two regions of Sacramento, Makayla explained,

> From third grade up I was in a rural area of Sacramento. I fought at the beginning 'cause I was the only Black kid in my class, and then after that didn't have any problems. But the school didn't tolerate it, versus the schools in Sacramento, they tolerated it. They knew we were fighting so okay, you know. But in the rural county they didn't allow the racism to fester, 'cause there was a handful of us. And then high school I did—elementary school, junior high, I was fine, didn't have too many problems. The problems I did have was like the new coming Blacks because they were like "oh, we can be superior!" "No, we're all in school together here." And then we end up fighting and we'd get in trouble, then we end up being best friends.

Aniyah iterated her experience in a suburban school district:

> I would say I was just another student, I don't think that anyone, any particular teacher stood out, and you know made any additional effort or steps to help me along my way.
>
> I felt there were definitely times that I needed it, and I didn't get it, but I also felt that I didn't know how to ask for it at the same time, I didn't know what my options were, and if, if you know, there's a social piece to it as well, you don't want to always be raising your hand in class asking questions.
>
> But you know being in the classroom I didn't think feel that was a safe environment, I felt it was a very judgmental environment and I didn't feel that I could speak up and ask my questions, partly because I didn't know what my questions were, 'cuz I didn't understand what was going on.

Penelope Rose commented on the differences in the school and community in a suburban neighborhood:

> My dad got a job, got relocated in umm, we lived in what "he" said was an impoverished area in the bay, so he brought us up to a more suburban area but then that put us at a school where we were umm, the minorities, I've never been a minority … in a school, there was total less than 10 Black people in my graduating class, umm, so that was a culture, it was a culture shock
>
> When I was in the Bay … I was … so when I was in school I was top of my class, umm, I was always the smart Black girl, the intelligent one, umm, it was a lot close knit things that I went to, I had the same group of friends from kindergarten

> all the way up until high school, umm, it was a lot more family oriented even with other people's families so like I would always have different traditions with other people's families we went to school together and umm we grew up together, I knew their brothers, their grandmas.
>
> Like when I was in high school yeah we had our sports rivalries but it wasn't so focused on umm academics like I never heard people talkin about they needed this score to get into this school or they needed this or that or my parents said I gotta get this sat score and but when I came up here to sac that seems like that's all they focused on they have umm, avid which I was never exposed to in the bay area umm, the student body government … was completely different like they actually did it, so it was different in that way like they were very, they thought further into the future than what I had been exposed to.

Kimani arrived in the United States with a third-grade education at 15 years old. She shared her experience in predominantly White school environment:

> —They had put me in a class where English is your second language. … I felt overwhelmed because I feel like sixth grade—I mean, ninth grade and being in the third grade, and I was just—I felt lost, you know. And at that time, in order to get support, in my opinion, you know, a parent or guardian or an adult has to be first position that and make the school understand you know. Yeah. So being that, you know, I didn't have that support, you know, nothing was really done. So I made it nine, 10, 11, and 12 grade I dropped.
>
> —So you made it all the way to your senior year?

—Yes.

—And then you—so did you not—did you have enough units to finish?

—I had maybe three classes and I could've finished, but I didn't know that until when I decided to go back.

—And complete it.

—Yeah, complete it. I found that out.

Similar to Kimani, Capria was born outside of the United States, she shared community and school experiences in a southwestern state in the United States compared to her home country in the Caribbean:

> It was bittersweet. We went through a lot. You know, the South can have its—it does have its racism so I encountered that. My family came here from the Bahamas so we were not Americans. My accent was stronger. I've learned to enunciate and sound like my surroundings so I'm not picked out. … But I had to learn quickly.
>
> My first encounter with the school system was with a racist teacher in the third grade, and it left me with two black eyes and a busted lip. So I learned about America and its concept of who I was quickly coming into this country. And you could only imagine what that paved for me. We normally lived in majority, you know, White neighborhoods because we didn't really fit in with Black America, just 'cause Black America can close you out if you don't understand ham hocks

> and corn bread and we didn't know what that was. The door was shut in our faces quickly there too.
>
> So my experience of school was lonely and it was very isolated, but because of the values for academics in my culture, that's called "suck it up and you'd better achieve, because that's what we came to this"—you know, we came for the better. So I quickly excelled in school, despite the racism that I endured, and I was put into a lot of programs that were for students that were more, you know, academically inclined and I was able to get away from some issues in that way. I did well through middle school. I did go through my issues with peers and even, you know, students threatening to burn my house down … and parents in the Ku Klux Klan. I did receive, you know, the spitballs and pins in my seat when I get on the bus to sit down. I went through a lot as a child, you know, kids threatening to beat me up for whatever the reasons were. But I had learned—I learned how to maneuver in that and still succeed.

Summary

Several related subthemes under the finding Protective Factors are discussed in this section. The cross-section of social diversity and stereotype threat evident in the current study conflate the issue of racial identity, particularly in homogenous environments where individuals are expected to perform and conform to culturally acceptable behavioral norms.

In-group differences are represented in a self-identity that are at odds with one's cultural social group, creating a quandary between self-efficacy and uniformity to the cultural peer group. In the current study, Capria expressed her experience with in-group

differences most pointedly. She noted her own experiences stemming from her Caribbean-born roots and the conflict she experienced in a homogenous environment where the majority of the students were African American. She expressed being ostracized as not being Black due to her Caribbean accent, and for her intellect. She explained the characteristic differences in her native country in defining how she conducted herself in school and in the community and related how children were raised to be respectful, ardent, and steadfast in their educational pursuits. Being smart in her new environment led to physical altercations and disengagement from her peers.

On the other side of this spectrum, participants expressed experiences such as racial profiling and low academic expectations in predominantly White educational environments. The participants' experiences in social environments were at the forefront of the educational decisions for their sons. To address the identity-related concern, participants encouraged their sons to strive for individualism as an environmental adaptation and to moderate against stereotype threat.

The participants noted the struggle to support a cultural identity in either environment that would align with the academic goals for their sons. Penelope Rose encapsulated this critical idea in this statement:

> I am a Black woman, [trying] to teach him how to navigate his life as like a little Black boy … and I also, put so much on him, like I need to remember like, he's my child, umm, he's not, not this like grand study of 18 years. (p. 105)

According to participants in the current study, the challenges to prepare their sons for an academic environment are encircled in a myriad of social dynamics and effects that factor significantly in their sons' academic success.

Research Questions 3 and 4

In what ways do single African American mothers support their sons early academic development in preparation for kindergarten? In what ways do single African American mothers define academic goals for their sons?

Activism and Advocacy

The subthemes supporting the overarching finding of activism and advocacy magnify the actions of participants to identify and remove barriers that may curb their sons' academic growth and support their ideologies and perceptions of their sons' academic potential. The subthemes navigating educational institutions, and motivation toward learning represent the academic goals and strategies participants used to support their sons' academic development.

Navigating Educational Institutions

Participants articulated their personal educational experiences in homogenous and nonhomogenous environments as the basis for their expectations of their sons' encounters in these institutions. As an advocate for their sons' academic development, the participants confronted acts of unfairness and inequities their sons experienced in the educational environment. Preparing their sons academically also meant preparing themselves to be active in the educational setting, to promote their sons' well-being, to address their developmental needs, and to monitoring their academic development toward the goals they set for their sons.

Participants shared the following comments as examples of striving to ensure educational settings provide for their sons:

> I'm a Black woman, [trying] to teach him how to navigate his life as like a little Black boy…and I also, put so much onto him, like I need to remember like, he's my child, umm, he's not, not this, like this grand study of 18 years, but then I almost feel like that's what everyone does … like it's always this trial and error, this process, what's working, what doesn't work and then I think will work for him may not work for someone else, and also his, the understanding of different parts of the situation.
>
> I try my best to not put that pressure on him, umm, and understanding that he's a child and I don't need to go on milestones of other kids so I can allow him to be him, I have to remind myself this every couple of weeks, but, and also remind him that's he's not me, and our hardships are going to be completely different, umm, also learning through him like trial and error. (Penelope Rose)

Penelope Rose expressed concern over the approach her son's teacher was taking in accessing curriculum: "I feel like I've almost had to teach her how to teach [him]." She further commented,

> I can do that at home, but his teachers aren't like so, willing, or, okay well, if he doesn't understand it, he just doesn't understand it … Well how many different words did you use, did you phrase it differently? If he didn't understand it the first time why are you going to ask him, in the same exact way and just repeat yourself?
>
> That's just not the way his brain processes it, so it's like stuff like, I see may hold him back, umm, academically, and then like how am I going to get around it?

Azra commented:

> They had a writing teacher, Ms. Nessie. She's like an older lady and she didn't take anybody's mess. And so she really—she would email me and talk—You know, she had a higher expectation for him and even now he still has her to help. It's like a creative writing teacher and she makes him do a lot of writing and reading and stuff.
>
> But his fifth-grade teacher is when he started taking a dip, and then she was like, "Well he ain't passing." So I'm like okay. Well he ain't passing? Well he's in class with you all day, you know? What do you want me to do to reinforce that at home and just trying to push him to get things done? I think I kind of—when I don't get my schedule the way I want it or we're running home, getting late or whatever, it's like back then I would feel guilty about it and try to sit there with him and do it all with him. So I was like holding his hand at home and then when he gets to school—He can't do it himself. Can't even—'Cause I'd break it down, you know. I'm like, "What do you all…?"
>
> He's a very intelligent child, but putting it down on paper, he's like behind, to me. I feel like the way—his writing skills. He can do the work. I make him write it, so he knows he can't get away with it with—You know, 'cause I have a certain format.
>
> But a lot of his classes supposedly now, it's like, "Well I do everything at school." I haven't seen no writing, nothing, everything is done with the computer. And he doesn't bring papers home. He just—like, "James, let me see some of your

> homework or something." So now, with his older sister being here and we're making sure that the homework is the main thing for me right now with him.

Capria shared how the site administrator made a difference for her son:

> Their school is very diverse and their staff was very open and they had a very open culture to all. So there wasn't so much of that where he's being isolated or left out, and he grew like in knowledge and in confidence. He grew tremendously.
>
> We start seeing spurts of behavior, behavioral things again. Now, to my advantage—and it was just a wonderful blessing—the principal that year, he specialized in two areas: Special Ed and gifted students. And he was able to identify that this child is not a behavioral issue; he's smart and [we're] not feeding his brain. And he made something with the teachers, that if any teachers are having a problem with my son, he needs to come directly to the principal's office. And it became a joy for my son, because when he got there the principal would stimulate his mind, and give him things to build, which would always bring him down because now he's engaged in something that's positive.
>
> He got him involved in STEM, which is science, technology, engineering, and math, he would put him in all these little things in kindergarten. They had to build, out of paper they had to build a boat and they have a pool at the school and they have to race their boat. … In kindergarten he beat all the other grades and that's just how he thinks. And the principal was like, "Yeah, I thought so."

> My son went from people saying, “You need to get him evaluated” to Student of the Month, you know, on a roll. Well he’s always been on a roll but to the point where he can appreciate him being in the Honor Roll and not me fighting for it.
>
> He’s now in the fifth grade. He is one of their star students. They started a blended program. He’s in their blended program, so he’s taking some courses at fifth-grade level but his math courses are at the eighth-grade level.

Through observing in her son’s classroom, Azra learned that her son’s reported behavioral concerns were typical of other students in his class. Similarly, Kimani reported that her son’s behavior while in preschool was atypical of her experience in the home environment, as well as her expectations.

Participants’ involvement in their sons’ classrooms provided insight into teachers’ pedagogy, academic expectations, and behavioral norms. These classroom observations provided knowledge that was beneficial to their sons. Participants were prepared to develop well-informed responses to the accusations from teachers on their sons’ reported maladaptive behavior in the classroom. Capria provided an example of an incident between her son and his teacher:

> So he saw this eraser on the ground and then he’s like, “That’s my eraser.” And the teacher said, “No, it’s not yours.” And he was like, “Well can I go pick up my eraser? It’s mine.”
>
> And he got in a lot of trouble that day over that eraser. He was furious, he was livid. And I was like okay, Christian, what’s the problem?” He goes, “You know, mom, she automatically thought I was lying. Why would she think that? I would

> not lie." He realized that she automatically summed him up, so in defiance to her he went, he picked up the eraser and then he went in his backpack and he picked up the other half of it and he put it together. He said, "Look, it was broken in half. "C-h-r-i-s-t" is in my hand. That part says "i-a-n". Put them together, Christian. It's mine. I don't have to lie for an eraser." And I took that to the principal.

Participants also noted that behavioral expectations in the classroom oftentimes did not align with their parenting styles and expectations. Mainstream normative behavior patterns were more permissive of some behaviors than participants would allow or expect from their sons. Participants also observed inequitable administration of classroom behavioral expectations. Behaviors that were identified as maladaptive for their sons were ignored when other students in the classroom exhibited these same behaviors.

Motivation Toward Learning

Motivation toward learning is an academic behavior identified in the research. Participants described the various strategies they employed to encourage learning including enriched home environments and affirming messages regarding their expectations, goals, and aspirations for their sons. Penelope Rose explained how she expanded on her son's interest to enrich his experience:

> So I told him, give me 20 minutes I went and separated the puzzle and then buried them, I told him he can go find them, dust them off, and then put them together, so giving that like total process for him, he likes, he likes, digging up gem stones, and just like building things. … Making it work, is where he gets the enjoyment,

> he will spend 45 minutes to an hour building something just to knock it over and he's just so happy.

Liana shared artifacts that included videos of her home and her son's room. The spaces are colorful, engaging, and filled with preschool-related curriculum including primary colors, letters and numbers, coloring and reading spaces. Liana explained that her son also uses computer applications as a learning tool. "He does well with puzzles, and number games on the and Leap Frog [a skill building preschool software] on the computer, and he leads his class in phonics." Liana shared that their outings include the Children's Museum, going to the zoo, playing sports, bike riding, and games.

Aniyah described how she takes advantage of her son's career and other interests to provide messages that affirm her intent for his education to fulfill his life goals. She explained,

> I want him to understand that he is in control of what he can become. That the things he wants he's going to have to earn it. That the things he wants are going to be … if it's worth having it's going to take a little effort, and what I really want to instill in him is that, umm, that things are not going to come easily that you really have to work for it and you have to earn it, it's how I put the burden of responsibility back on him.

Participants recognized the various ways their sons are smart that are not measured academically/ Penelope Rose explained:

> He's not going to be the perfectionist here, he's not, but it's okay for him to struggle. … I know when I have to do to get through to him.

> He got a whole group of kids to starting putting their apple core in a corner in the field so they don't throw those away because they didn't have compost, and the principal was like "what are you doing?" He said we're going to plant some apple trees and this apple core is better for the environment than it is in the trash can, so she was like, so now they have a compost bin in the cafeteria. … But you know he's starting this young in kindergarten, yea, he started in kindergarten (Penelope Rose).

She identified compassion as an indicator of his intellect:

> He'll come with these like deep level of questions, and he'll, he's very considerate, I don't know where he got this consideration from… for awhile he was like, well I can't, I don't want anymore peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, I want ham and cheese, and I'm just like, he loves peanut butter and jelly, and so then I finally asked him, why did you decide to switch up? And he said "because my friend Allan has a peanut allergy and in order to sit with her at lunch I can't have peanuts in my food," and I'm just like wow, and "he's like yea well she sits alone," cuz they have a peanut allergy table and during their lunch it's only just Allan because they separated the kindergarten, the first, and third graders , so he's like, "I can have peanut butter and jelly at home, but she just looks so sad," but for him to like think that, come home and readjust his own life, but now him and Allan are not talking cuz she's mean, but he did that for her once (laughing), and that's what he'll do, he's like "sorry Allan, I have peanut butter and jelly today" I said, why don't you just tell her you don't want to sit with her? He said, "that's not nice, but this time if I tell her I have peanut butter and jelly, she won't feel

> bad" and I'm like for him to associate that, I'm like, wow … umm, and he does it with his friends, umm, almost too nice, he does, he has autism, so socially it's been interesting. (Penelope Rose)

> His need for Anime, and different cultures and reading, and science, computers games and stuff like that … I think he's going to be a techie (Lakeisha).

Similarly, Liana described her son as "friendly, sensitive and very outgoing." Participants articulated the goals for their sons:

> So I've got to get in there and figure it out, you know, to help him get where he wants to be. But it's crazy 'cause he does talk all the time about going to college. He talks about when he goes to college, not, you know, I think—He feels like he knows he's going to go. So I'm like, "As long as you have that attitude, yeah, we'll get through." (Azra)

> Because school came so naturally to me, I wanted it to come naturally to him, I just thought like it was genetic, like we'll be okay. (Penelope Rose)

> Ultimately it's his life and he will lead it the way he sees fit, but trying to encourage, you know, a positive path for him and just let him know that it's going to take some work to get where you want to be and telling him that early so that he develops a good sense of work ethic … about being you know, being a good person and like just being, not only just doing things for yourself but how to do things for others, or how the way you help yourself will in turn help others as well. (Aniyah)

> He's full of soaking up knowledge at this age, so I started teaching him French. And then my daughter speaks Spanish and French, and my other boys are speaking Russian. … I think he's going to do awesome. The question probably the teacher will be asking is, "Does he speak English?" 'Cause he's going to have all these languages that he's been exposed to. (Makayla)

> His confidence, just building his confidence to be able to do it! (Lakeisha)

Summary

Researchers suggested that the challenges African American male students face in educational institutional spaces are multifaceted and requires a complex response. Participants in this study employed a variety of strategies in supporting their sons. This oftentimes meant engaging in difficult conversations teachers and administrators about their disciplinary policies, pedagogies, and school and classroom rules that were being applied inequitably in the educational space to their sons, compared to their peers. This form of advocacy has been related in the literature in negative tones, accusing African American parents of being confrontational and irrational in their communicative approaches in addressing their concerns (Allen & White-Smith, 2018). In the current study, participants positioned themselves in the environment to participate in on-campus activities and other traditional forms of parental involvement as an acknowledgement of their interest in their sons' education, making themselves open and available and building trust and relationships with key staff on the school grounds.

Participants articulated instances that fit the theoretical framework of intersectionality that featured prominently in the findings in this section and as discussed in Chapter 2 of the current study referencing bicognition, a term used by R. G. Johnson

and Rivera (2015), meaning ways marginalized individuals navigate parallel social dimensions. In the context of intersectionality, bicognition represents an overlaying of an additional academic-preparation strategy to the general skills and knowledge examined in educational resources. Participants described circumstances where their influence effected change and adaptations in the educational setting as a result of their advocacy.

Vygotsky (1978) referenced ZPD as the influence of the more knowing others on those in their proximate spaces. Participants described their strategies in adapting to racially strained environments to their sons to teach coping skills and to support them in meeting academic and related behavioral expectations. Participants practiced positive messaging as a supportive measure in their academic development. Building their sons' academic self-confidence was the primary focus in the academic goals participants articulated in this study. This concept was identified in the activities participants performed with their sons or the enriching experiences they provided; affirmations of their perceptions that their sons possessed the knowledge and skills to perform well in educational settings; and their command and understanding of the potential obstacles that may obstruct their sons from meeting their full potential. Participants imparted these attitudes in the activism and advocacy presented as evidence in this chapter.

Summary of Major Findings

This chapter presented the findings of the research study. The study explored the perceptions of single African American mothers of sons on the educational expectations of their sons prior to entering kindergarten and whether the mothers' views contributed to their sons' early educational experiences. The researcher responded to four research questions using multiple sources of data that included interviews, artifacts, and

memoranda organized into three major themes and three subthemes that emerged from the data analysis. After participants' profiles, the presentation of the data was organized by the major themes followed by the subthemes. The indicators of support for academic and behavioral development were presented using participant quotations that responded to each research question.

The purpose of the study was to examine the phenomenon of the single African American mothers' perceptions of the cognitive ability of their sons prior to entering kindergarten. The research questions guided the data collection and presentation in investigating this phenomenon. In general, all participants affirmed their belief in their sons' preparedness for an academic environment. Indicators of these beliefs were represented using a myriad of terms, phrases, ideologies, and attitudes.

All participants expressed interest and engaged in their sons' education through a form of parental involvement, including traditional and nontraditional practices. According to the KSRQ (see Appendix B), adapted for use in the current study to represent participants' attitudes regarding their sons' academic development, 37% determined that their sons' academic readiness exceeded the expected grade-level requirements in subjects such as reading upon entering kindergarten. Participants attributed these skills to their support of their sons' academic development through placement in enriching educational settings; 63% of participants' sons attended preschool with the remaining 37% opting for in-home care.

Participants also attributed other factors to their sons' preparation including family routines such as nightly reading, accessing libraries, purchasing curriculum including computer-aided applications, educationally enriched outings such as trips to

museums, providing sensory and tactile experiences to broaden their sons' interests in learning, maternal messaging on academic and behavioral expectations, and support in school-related activities.

An unanticipated finding that resulted from the analysis was how the influence of participants' own educational experiences featured in the decisions they made in the school choices for their sons, beginning in preschool: 25% believed religious-based preschool was important, 12.5% opted for private preschool; 12.5% undertook public preschool placement; and 50% preferred home-based child care.

The findings represent the maternal behaviors and attitudes that stemmed from the mothers' perceptions of their sons' cognitive ability to perform in an academic environment. The KSRQ (see Appendix B) was used to collect attitudinal data as a point of interest to mothers' insights on kindergarten readiness. In application of the questionnaire to the current study, it was used as an indicator of mothers' understanding of basic kindergarten readiness. The questionnaire is not comprehensive in defining kindergarten readiness; instead, it identifies several academic skills identified in academic settings and in research as precedents of academic performance in kindergarten. Half of participants indicated "as expected" in referencing the overall impression of their sons' kindergarten readiness; 37.5% indicated their overall impression of their sons' kindergarten readiness was "consistently more," meaning their sons routinely exhibited the skills indicated in the questionnaire; 12.5% indicated "more than expected." No participants described the impression of their sons' overall ability to perform the skills indicated as kindergarten readiness on the scale as "less than expected." These data

triangulated with the interview data and the document review and supported the determination of themes and findings for the current study.

The indices of readiness related here apply to maternal perceptions of their sons' cognitive development and potential for success at the beginning of their educational career. Mothers' nontraditional parental engagement activities reflected these attitudes of performance. These perceptions of readiness counter the gender-based research conducted by Mandara et al. (2012), who suggested higher academic expectations for girls over males in African American households.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Discussion

The conceptual ideologies that have informed the skills and behavioral aptitudes recognized as prerequisite knowledge and abilities necessary to perform in today's kindergarten classroom implied a focus on readiness. Readiness, as it relates to these skills, is undefined in the literature; in practice, states have developed standards of performance for student adherence.

In 2010, California passed the Kindergarten Readiness Act. This act amended current legislation that defined the age-eligibility requirements for children to enroll in kindergarten and first grade. The change in age eligibility for kindergarten represented a major reform effort by stakeholders and early educators, namely kindergarten teachers. The act was preceded by years of failed proposals to make far-reaching changes in the kindergarten landscape. Under NCLB, schools and districts engaged in meeting the annual-yearly-progress goals at the federal level and the annual-performance indicators at the state level. These parallel performance indicators represented the state and federal accountability measures that aligned to NCLB.

Student testing was at the center of the indicators of performance, and a major concern for schools and districts was the performance score and school ratings that followed their students' performance on standardized tests. The impact of these high-stake ratings permeated the ranks of principals and teachers alike, with the potential of upending their positions at a school site, and threatening funding to districts. NCLB was

highly criticized for denigrating the school environment by becoming highly focused on test preparation for students.

It was in this educational reform environment that the Kindergarten Readiness Act of 2010 was introduced. For several years prior to the authorization of this law, countless legislative proposals were introduced in California intended to offer relief to teachers at the kindergarten level. The effect of NCLB on kindergarten environments included introducing subject-matter concepts in reading and mathematics in particular, to students earlier than their counterparts prior to NCLB. In effect, kindergarten became the new first grade as teachers attempted to "ready" their students to be prepared to respond to the curriculum that would be covered on the statewide test in second grade. Chapter 1 includes a discussion of the pushing down of educational requirements that were previously introduced in first grade into kindergarten, widely reported during this timeframe. In a journal article written by Bassok et al. (2016), the researchers tracked the ramping up of the academic requirements in the kindergarten year and posited the following:

> Recent accounts suggest that accountability pressures have trickled down into the early elementary grades and that kindergarten today is characterized by a heightened focus on academic skills and a reduction in opportunities for play. This paper compares public school kindergarten classrooms between 1998 and 2010 using two large, nationally representative data sets. We show substantial changes in each of the five dimensions considered: kindergarten teachers' beliefs about school readiness, time spent on academic and nonacademic content, classroom organization, pedagogical approach, and use of standardized

> assessments. Kindergarten teachers in the later period held far higher academic expectations for children both prior to kindergarten entry and during the kindergarten year. They devoted more time to advanced literacy and math content, teacher-directed instruction, and assessment and substantially less time to art, music, science, and child-selected activities. (p. 1)

The article explained the effect of removing "play and exploration" from the kindergarten environment as "developmentally appropriate learning practices" (Bassok et al., 2016, p. 1). The rush was on in California, a state with a large migrant population and many English learners, and home to one of the largest school districts nationwide, Los Angeles Unified School District, to change the landscape of kindergarten to meet these new demands. The shift in age-eligibility and the subsequent establishment of transitional kindergarten (TK) in public schools reformed the requirements for kindergarten entry. Officially the age change was the only legislative change; in practice, play and exploration as the primary learning modalities for children between 40 and 59 months was lost in the frenzy.

The kindergarten entrance age-eligibility legislative change was enacted around the same time California adopted the *California Common Core State Standards* (CCSS) for Grades K–8. Aligned with the CCSS were statewide assessments administered at the elementary and middle-school level to students in second and eighth grades.

Similar to the CCSS for K–8, California developed a system of learning foundations, curriculum, assessments, professional development, and program guidelines to inform the core learning foundations for preschool-level programs. The five components of The California Early Learning and Development System guides service

providers of infants, toddlers, and preschoolers through developmentally appropriate cognitive development. Access to these resources is not limited to state-run or state-funded programs and public access is available through the CDE website.

The *Overview Alignment of the Domains in the California Preschool Foundations with Domains in Key Early Education Resources (Domains)* includes a matrix of five developmental and academic content-based programs that reflect a continuum of development from prekindergarten through the kindergarten year. The domains are targeted for children from infant/toddler through the age of 5 in preschool programs, including federal Head Start programs, TK, and kindergarten. Each of the resources in the matrix support children's developmental stages with the intent to provide a solid learning foundation. According to Tom Torlakson, State Superintendent of Public Instruction,

> The foundations will help guide and support all California early learning settings in providing developmentally appropriate instruction and activities that engage young hearts and minds. As their alignment with key early education resources shows, the preschool foundations build on learning during the infant/toddler years, mirror the competencies that Head Start seeks to foster, and connect with the learning experiences children will encounter in kindergarten. Such learning will lead to children's well being and success throughout life. (*California Preschool Learning Foundations, Volume I,* ,2008, p. 7)

The SBE adopted the CCSS, the Smarter Balanced Assessment System, and the California Early Learning and Development System to provide an educational continuum for California's students. Although the intent is to provide an equitable foundation for all

California students, the noncompliant provision of these resources makes the assurance of equity for all students nearly impossible.

The discretionary use of these pillars of education means students may not receive a parallel education. The CCSS are accompanied by curriculum frameworks in core subjects that align with the CCSS. Local educational agencies may use these resources to guide classroom instruction; teachers may also opt to use supplemental materials that are not state-adopted. Other related issues include district use of SBE-adopted textbooks and instructional materials, and ensuring quantities of curricula are purchased sufficient to the pupil population. The SBE has designated the materials that have gone through a thorough development and vetting through this government body, as optional, giving districts the autonomy to determine what curriculum will serve the needs of their student population. The deficiency in adopting a statewide curriculum opens the door for discrepancies in teaching and learning and incongruities in academic development for students

In 2013, First 5 California posted information outlining "the most important skills that kindergarten teachers say children need to start school prepared," shown in Table 2.

The *California Preschool Learning Foundations Volume I* (2008) covers four domains: social-emotional development, language and literacy, English-language development, and mathematics, predating the CCSS. Released in 2008 under the former State Superintendent of Public Instruction Jack O'Connell, these foundations were designed to provide a high-quality learning experience for preschool aged children.

Table 2

Kindergarten Skills

COGNITIVE SKILLS—Your child:	•Holds a book correctly and can retell stories •Knows her first and last name •Can sort objects by color, shape and size •Is familiar with letters and numbers
APPROACHES TO LEARNING—Your child:	•Is curious about new things •Can stay with a task until completed •Follows basic rules and routines
SOCIAL EMOTIONAL – Your child:	•Gets along with others •Knows how to share and take turns •Follows two-step directions
COMMUNICATION SKILLS—Your child:	•Verbally communicates needs and ideas •Uses sentences of 5 or 6 words
SELF-HELP SKILLS—Your child:	•Demonstrates self help skills, such as dressing, toileting, and eating
MOTOR SKILLS—Your child:	•Can hold a pencil and cut with scissors •Runs, jumps, climbs and throws

Superintendent O'Connell commented:

> Young children are naturally eager to learn. However, not all of them are ready for school. All too often, children entering school for the first time as kindergarteners are already lagging behind their classmates, and this disadvantage can affect them socially and academically long past kindergarten. Children who have had the benefit of attending high-quality preschools are more comfortable in their surroundings, have been exposed to books, have learned how to play cooperatively, and are accustomed to learning with others. (*California Preschool Learning Foundations,* 2008, p. v)

> Research shows that all children can benefit from participating in high-quality preschool programs. And a recent study by the RAND Corporation shows that closing the school "readiness" gap will help to close the achievement gap, in which far too many socioeconomically disadvantaged students and far too many African American and Latino children are lagging behind and achieving below their abilities. Not all preschool programs are equally effective, however. Those that strengthen children's school readiness operate with an in-depth understanding of what children need to learn before they start school. (*California Preschool Learning Foundations*, 2008, p. v)

Although reportedly registered by teachers, these skills do not align with the kindergarten content standards that cover subject-matter skills. Social emotional, communication and self-help skills are limited behavioral aptitudes that are indirect to the listening, speaking, and communicating skills students are expected to know at the end of the kindergarten year. According to the *California Preschool Learning Foundations Volume I* (2008) in the area of social-emotional development,

> The goal of the California Department of Education (CDE) in developing these foundations was to describe the behaviors that are typical of preschool children who are making good progress toward readiness for kindergarten. The research focus was, in particular, on behavior reflecting age-appropriate competency for children in the 40- to 47-month age span and children in the 52- to 59-month age span. (p. 1)

Additionally,

> The CDE's endeavor to describe the behaviors typical of preschool children who are on course for school readiness involved three additional assumptions. *The first was the assumption that young children have access to the appropriate kinds of social interactions, experiences, and environments that normally support healthy development.* Young children growing up in markedly deprived settings experience greater challenges to healthy development because they are more likely to lack those supports; consequently, their readiness to begin school is hindered. *The second assumption was that the purpose of these foundations is to describe typical development rather than to articulate aspirational expectations for children's behavior under the best possible conditions or for the behaviors to be instilled in children.* (*California Preschool Learning Foundations Volume I,* 2008, p. 1)
>
> In order for these foundations to be useful, they must describe what can typically be expected of young children growing up in conditions appropriate for healthy development. *The third assumption was that these foundations, especially the behavioral examples for each foundation, are not meant to be assessment items; rather, they are meant to be guidelines and teaching tools.* (pp. 1–2)

The "readiness" premise touted here reflects an example of a typically developing White child. The verbiage in the statements regarding "the behaviors of typical preschool children" are examples of the bifurcated expectations of the preschool population.

The statements in the three assumptions lay the foundation for bias in the observations of children's behaviors that are atypical to the normative behavior expectations defined in this document. In a sense, it is "guiding" or directing preschool

teachers to assess the behavior of the atypical student from a deficit lens, establishing a basis for identifying students from "unhealthy environments" with a stereotypical behavioral label at the earliest stages of the educational experiences. The authors of the *California Preschool Learning* Foundations Volume I (2008) acknowledged concern for the misapplication of the behavioral illustrations to certain populations of students:

> Children in California are particularly diverse in their culture of origin. Culture is associated with family values and practices, language, and other characteristics that are directly related to the meaning of these foundations and their application to individual children, especially children who are from underrepresented groups, English learners, or from special populations. (*California Preschool Learning Foundations Volume I*, 2008, p. v)

> Although the developmental research literature is rich in studies of English-speaking, middle-class European-American children, there is, unfortunately, a dearth of studies focusing on children who speak other languages and have other backgrounds. The few studies that do exist are often so specific to children from particular backgrounds or circumstances as to be of limited generalizability. *California Preschool Learning Foundations Volume I*, 2008, p. 3)

The social aspect of children's behavior can be attributed to the environments to which they are exposed, contributing to their perceptions of behaviors and oftentimes mirroring effective behaviors. Emotions have an environmental as well as a biological imprint on individuals.

The statements or assumptions addressed in the preschool publication suggested that optimal environments are those that are typical of only a certain group of children: "English-speaking, middle-class European-American children." Earlier statements from this same publication indicated that the foundations are intended to meet the needs of all children. The emphasis on "all" is not inclusive of children from certain socioeconomic and ethnic backgrounds:

> And a recent study by the RAND Corporation shows that closing the school "readiness" gap will help to close the achievement gap in which far too many socioeconomically disadvantaged students and far too many African American and Latino children are lagging behind and achieving below their abilities. (*California Preschool Learning Foundations Volume I*, 2008, p. v)

Considering these statements of exemption, preschool as an intervention to the readiness gap for African American and Latino children, specifically, is a flawed proposition. The publication refers to cultural differences as perceived deficits, at least to the extent that the educational resources made available to educational institutions imply. A dearth in the research can also be meant to mean a lack of understanding in the most salient approach to improving the outcomes of all students, particularly those perceived to have atypical normative patterns of behavior associated with kindergarten readiness.

In the current study, participants expressed concern for the attention to the behaviors of their sons in the school and classroom. Participants identified inequity in the school and classroom rules that resulted in infractions and discipline for their sons, where other students exhibiting the same behaviors were overlooked for reprimand. Their sons'

behaviors were labeled maladaptive and, in some cases, represented a contribution to a learning deficiency or criminal behavior.

Dunbar et al. (2017) described the parental racial/ethnic emotional socialization in the African American community and the social-emotional development of children in these families. The study combined the constructs, racial/ethnic socialization, and emotional socialization and examined the aggregation of the two in the parenting behaviors of African American parents. Dunbar et al. noted the following in the socialization of African American children:

> African American parents prepare their children to navigate a society in which they are often marginalized. Racial/ethnic socialization refers to the messages parents transmit to their children about the significance of group identity, racial stratification, and intergroup and intragroup relations. (2017, p. 17)

> African American mothers, especially those of boys, are more likely than European American mothers to punish and minimize displays of negative emotions … non-supportive responses may not be as detrimental to African American children's adaptation and have even been linked to less aggression. Similarly, encouraging children to express negative emotions has been linked consistently to positive outcomes among European American children but to less competent interactions with peers for African American children. (Dunbar et al., 2017, p. 17)

Parenting differences in the African American community emphasize the preparation of their children for a society that has historically biased their social position.

R. G. Johnson and Rivera (2015), defined bicognition the ways in which marginalized individuals navigate parallel social dimensions. In the context of intersectionality, an aspect of the theoretical framework for the current study referenced in Chapter 2 represents an overlaying of an additional academic=preparation strategy to the general skills and knowledge examined in educational resources. Intersectionality from this perspective suggests a benefit and is a unique feature of African American families and possibly other communities that is not factored into traditional modes of parental involvement. Individuals become adept in their multidimensional identities and navigating social institutions; they then pass this knowledge to their children, presented as racial-socialization strategies.

In the current study, bias, what Dunbar et al. (2017) referenced as "emotional-centered racial coping" (p. 18) is articulated through racial-socialization practices under the theme, "protective factors." Participants expressed use of positive affirmations of expected behaviors and inventive coping strategies to support adaptation to normative behavioral expectations. Participants related practices concerning their sons' behaviors in the school environment, discussed later in this chapter.

Defining institutional educational and instructional resources, policies, practices, curriculum, and instruction in the current study establishes a foundation for the indices of educational development from an institutional perspective. These indicators of cognitive and behavioral development are evidence and points of reference of the nature of a readiness assessment for students and as a continuum of expected academic growth over the course of an educational career. The various educational resources, in combination,

also indicated an inequity in the intent to serve all students and semblance in the outcomes for all students.

The terms “ready to learn” and “ready to succeed” are staples in a standards-based environment. “Ready” regulates students’ entrance into academic environments and a target for later performance. The term is loosely defined and becomes an assignment of academic and behavioral competence rather than an ideological model. Ready for kindergarten supposes individuals have met a prerequisite to entrance. Currently, age eligibility is the only notable requirement for students to enroll in public- and some private-school kindergarten programs. Preschool is an informal entrance into social and academic environments and is not included in a system of compulsory education. Kindergarten enrollment is not mandatory, meaning children are not required to formally enter school until first grade.

State-funded preschool programs are limited to families that meet the poverty-income threshold and programs have limited slots that are not widely available. Federal Head Start programs have similar limitations to program access. Parents have the option of fee-based programs that may fill the gap in availability of state and federally funded programs. These businesses are generally more accessible to families; however, they may be cost-prohibitive particularly for single-parent households or families with multiple preschool and school-aged children.

Family, kinship, or nonrelative child-care arrangements may be inconsistent and require tying together several of these resources to address the family’s child-care needs. In comparison to a structured quality preschool program, in-home care arrangements may not fully provide children the same access socially and academically as their peers in

structured settings. That is not to say that children cannot excel in family or in-home care environments. Despite the research on the benefit of quality preschool programs, many families choose not to place their children in these environments and instead ensure they are enriched in the home environment and through the child-care arrangement.

Oftentimes, this means that a trusted friend, relative, or referral provides a more meaningful and safe experience than their children would otherwise receive. Family and in-home child-care arrangements would benefit from access to the resources that are available to preschools. Although the educational resources mentioned earlier in this document are available through a public portal, broad communication of these resources is needed for general outreach. In the current study, participants opting for in-home care required a higher level of care that included academic enrichment. Participants indicated this enhancement was supportive of the academic goals they set for their sons.

Efforts to bridge the *California Preschool Learning Foundations Volume I* (2008) and the CCSS have not fully articulated the two educational pathways. A review of a matrix intended to outline the alignment of the resources in the California system revealed the content in the preschool substrands "initiative in learning," "interaction with familiar adults," "group participation," "cooperation and responsibility," and "friendships" are not addressed in the kindergarten content standards and are not aligned to kindergarten standards (*California Preschool Learning Foundations Volume I,* 2008, pp. 23–24).

Additionally, in the cognitive-development domain at the infant/toddler level, the domain cognitive development covers a broad range of knowledge and skills. Cognitive competencies align with the foundations in the Mathematics domain at the preschool

level. Additionally, cognitive competencies align with the foundations in the preschool domains of Physical Development, History–Social Science, and Science. The chart indicated cohesion between all of the foundations for mathematics and English-language arts across four of the domains to the *California Preschool Learning Foundations Volume I* (2008). Findings from the current study suggested a need for quality preschools that prepare students for an academic environment. These preschool programs include home-based programs that would benefit from guidance on preparing students in these settings for kindergarten. The foundations are essential to the preparation of children for kindergarten and should reflect the identified essential skills and knowledge that assess students' knowledge in the kindergarten year. As a resource for parents, home-based, and center-based providers, the foundations should mitigate academic deficits identified in the kindergarten-readiness gap and increase the numbers of children who are kindergarten ready.

In 2014, SB 876 added language to the California Education Code to reflect credentialing requirements for TK teachers to ensure educators teaching at this grade level are grounded in early childhood education. This language represents another area where the educational system is misaligned. TK is the year between preschool and kindergarten for children who missed the cut-off date for eligibility. Curriculum and instruction are presented at the kindergarten level, taught by credentialed teachers. According to the CDE website, instruction at this level follows the *California Preschool Learning Foundations Volume I* (2008), making these classrooms a hybrid of preschool and kindergarten. Requirements for teaching at the preschool level include child-development competencies that differ from the practicum teachers are required to

complete for credentialing. SB 876 will bridge the gap in credentialing requirements. According to the law, teachers have until 2020 to complete 24 units in child development. The law took effect in 2015.

As a whole, the impetus on kindergarten readiness is convoluted with a myriad of political, policy, and practice concerns that make targeting the particular skills that a child should acquire prior to entering kindergarten evasive. From this perspective readiness as a concept is also difficult to generalize for students. Ready to learn is an ideology, not a requirement, because prerequisites to entering kindergarten are not specified. Readiness is idealized as a principle to afford the educational environment an opportunity to begin the teaching and learning process at an increased level and expectation for student performance. It does not imply that students entering kindergarten without these prerequisites are incompetent in the capacity to learn; rather, it measures what they know when they enter an academic-centered environment against an imagined "typical" student.

Observations of kindergarten students by classroom teachers serve as the assessment of student ability as well as teacher subjectivity. These observations are recorded twice a year in classrooms where the teacher has adopted this practice. Revisiting the premise expressed in the *California Preschool Learning Foundations Volume I* (2008), children from certain communities are considered below the standard before they begin, marginalizing the placement of these children to the bottom prior to any formal educational interventions such as kindergarten. What children know and what they can know are two different suppositions; the second requires input from the

educational environment. However, the first is what is reported in conjunction with student performance.

Adherence to classroom behavioral rules are important to academic performance. What this means is a student's academic performance can be hindered if they are identified as exhibiting behavioral concerns. Time spent out of the classroom may account for loss of content knowledge in some critical subject areas that build on previous knowledge. Referrals, suspensions, and expulsions are examples of the impact behavior has on academic development. The teacher–student relationship is an important one to consider in access to instruction and learning. The following is excerpted from the *California Preschool Learning Foundations Volume I:*

> Several studies have confirmed that young children's success in kindergarten and the primary grades is significantly influenced by the quality of the teacher–child relationship and that conflict in the relationship is a predictor of children's poorer academic performance and greater behavior problems, sometimes years later. (2008, p. 33)

Behavior is not definitively measured as a standard. Classroom rules generally are the standard measurement of behavior. These can vary by school site and can be assessed subjectively by teachers.

In addition to the subjective nature of behavioral expectations that are akin to an English-speaking, White, middle-class norm, implementation of academic standards in the classroom leave room for a similar misalignment. If school districts opt to use the CCSS, the application of these standards at the classroom level are the teacher's responsibility. In other words, teachers have the leverage and subjectivity to measure a

student's performance. As a guide, the standards and frameworks are a suggested approach to teaching. Adoption of the standards and framework standardizes the curricula; not the teacher's assessments of performance.

Research on the academic achievement gap suggested it begins as early as preschool (Halle et al., 2009). According to the research, access to quality preschool programs catalyze the differences in preparation for academic environments between African American male students and Caucasian and other minority students. These differences in preparation are noted as cognitive deficiencies that are attributed to a variety of environmental factors: the home environment, community, and economic conditions that are implied in the academic outcomes for African American males.

In aligning the tenets of sociocultural theory to the educational environment, Palincsar (1998) suggested that one failure of schools to serve all children includes "the internalization of negative stereotypes by minority groups who have been marginalized and may see school as a site for opposition and resistance" (p. 368). Described in Chapter 2 of the current study, Gorski (2013) affirmed the damage executed by a deficit way of thinking about students in poverty. Gorski's charge was to place in contempt the attitudes and other beliefs that set in motion stereotypes and judgments that are counterproductive to the students impacted by these attitudes and undermines the intent of education to serve all students.

Three major themes were identified in the current study: Parental Involvement, Protective Factors, Activism and Advocacy. Three subthemes supported two of the major themes, Protective Factors, and Activism and Advocacy. These are Social Diversity; Racial Socialization & Stereotype Threat; Intraracial & Self-Identity; Navigating

Educational Institutions, and Motivation Toward Learning. These themes and subthemes respond to the research questions and address the phenomenon: the maternal influence of single African American mothers on the cognitive development of their sons for kindergarten.

The research questions were the point of examination of this phenomenon. These questions guided the researcher in gaining the maternal perspective and insight into understanding of the impact of the maternal role in preparing sons for an academic environment. The following pages address the findings aligned with each theme and related subtheme.

Parental Involvement

The research identified parental involvement as critical to students' academic development. Typically, parental involvement occurs in the classroom, on the campus, or on school-related trips. Participants shared their engagement in traditional practices in addition to nontraditional types of parental support as indicators of parental involvement.

As a finding in the current study, the nontraditional modes of parental support were primarily used by participants to address their sons' academic needs. Penelope Rose's application of the school curriculum to her son's preferred learning style is an example of how this form of parental involvement attended to the particular needs of their sons.

Protective Factors

In Chapter 1, the researcher introduced the adage "loving our sons, raising our daughters" as a historical and culturally derived concept of gender-based parenting. From

a historical perspective, protective factors were a means to shelter enslaved children from the harsh realities of their condition (S. A. Hill, 2001, p. 498).

The research community has considerable debate on the origins of the female-headed household in the African American community with scholars debating viewpoints and findings on familial patterns in African American households. Using data from similar periods in the 19th century, for example, researchers produced conflicting evidence of the structural norms of former slaves with some evidence norming the single female-headed households in the Black community (Moynihan, 1965; Ruggles, 1994) and others finding an intact two-parent household as prodigious in the community (R. B. Hill, 2003; McAdoo, 2007). Despite the rationale for this family structure, a reported 57% of African American families are female headed, according to the *Digest of Education Statistics 2015* (Snyder et al., 2016). Generally speaking, and identified in the current study, these statistics signify the size of this subgroup—single African American mothers—and the potential impact they may have on the kindergarten readiness, academic development, and growth of their sons.

Protective factors, a finding in the current study, included the subthemes: social diversity, racial socialization and stereotype threat, and intraracial and self-identity that further defined the participant's parental guidance as an expression of their sons' academic development. Combined, these subthemes addressed several concerns mothers have in assessing what messages, positive and cautionary, need to be communicated to their sons. Viewed separately, protective factors, as defined in this study, are permutations of a general approach to biculturalism, meaning comfort and proficiency with one's heritage culture and the culture of the country or region in which one resides.

Biculturalism refers to individuals living in ethnic enclaves, where the heritage culture is likely to be maintained across generations, as well as to individuals from visible minority groups who may be identified as different from the majority ethnic group, even if their families have been in the receiving society for multiple generations. In the current study, biculturalism, is a concept that embodies the dual positioning indicative of individuals in a subgroup incorporating into another culture. Participants' support for their sons' self-identity as academic counters the stereotypes of African American male students as nonacademic (Howard, 2013).

Behavioral aptitude is a secondary aspect of academic preparation. In the current study, participants shared their experiences addressing disciplinary practices in the classroom and in school settings at school sites where their sons attended. Classroom teachers and school officials made accusations of maladaptive behavioral patterns. In the examples provided by participants, their sons' behaviors were measured against the classroom rules of expected behavior, but were targeted and applied unequally compared to others in the environment exhibiting the same behaviors. Participants shared their contentions about their sons' behavior identification as abnormal, and on some occasions, criminal, pointing out the African American male stereotype as the basis of these accusations.

> African American children's normative expressions of emotions, particularly those of boys, are consistently perceived by mainstream adults as more aggressive and threatening than those of non-Black children. Such biases stem from a social-political history of racial stratification in the United States, where the actions of Black individuals tend to be hyper- criminalized. Similar to racial/ethnic

> socialization, suppression responses and heightened levels of emotion talk among African American families likely reflect adaptive intergenerational child-rearing strategies that come from historic and current oppression. (Dunbar et al., 2017, p. 18)

Participants rallied against the ideologies that purported to stereotype their sons and subsequently label them. Stereotype threat has been defined as the threat that others' judgments or their own actions negatively stereotype them. In the current study, mothers' engagement with the school environment in responding to maladaptive behavioral accusations were an example of the adaptation of this theory.

Participants attempted to dissuade these labels of academic and behavioral deficiency with their sons to keep them from internalizing the threat. An example of this process was captured in Capria's response to her son's questioning his teacher's assumption of his communicating an untruth about the ownership of an eraser: "You know, mom, she automatically thought I was lying. Why would she think that? I would not lie." [Capria stated] "she stereotyped him … and then we had to talk through that. … She came into the school with a preconceived notion, you know, of whatever she had when she encountered my son." This example typifies the experiences iterated by participants in the current study on the challenges they confronted in the educational environment related to their sons' behaviors.

Conclusions

In referencing *all*, reflected in Chapter 2, researchers Blankstein and Noguera (2016) emphasized that educational equity should extend to all students. Recognizing the gains that the Civil Rights era of the 1960s afforded African American students at the

time, the authors suggested a shift in the equity framework to encompass "others" benefits from the wave of policy changes that flowed from civil-rights educational-reform efforts.

The Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 is example of a law that sought social justice for all students through equality in education. This law is still being enacted for this purpose and includes several significant policies in the last 2.5 decades of policy changes. NCLB, and more recently, the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015, are efforts to clear the path for all students to access a quality education. State-level reform efforts include a highly resourced funding system, the Local Control Funding Formula, accompanied by a district's plan of action, the Local Accountability Plan; state standards, the CCSS for K–12, and the *California Preschool Learning Foundations* (2008) for early learners are incorporated into an actionable plan to ensure all students benefit from a quality education.

Researchers indicated the use of the term *all* as inclusive of all students regardless of ethnicity, race, and gender, among other categories. From an equity standpoint, Gorski (2013), described in Chapter 2, posited that equity is a battle cry to the educational community to begin to peel off layers of stereotypes, labels, and attitudes that hinder all students from fully engaging in learning in public educational settings. Gorski's notion of equity is in juxtaposition to Blankstein and Noguera (2016), the two dissenting on the definition in the application of students identified as underperforming and low-income in the equity equation.

Others, including high level officials also have dissenting perspectives on the issue of equity and access, namely on how an intentionally targeted effort of equity

should be framed, and what groups should be included in this framework (Blankstein & Noguera, 2016). Juxtaposed to the ideology of equity for all, the concept of kindergarten readiness as a supposition imposes inequity, meaning it implies a set of prerequisite skills that are not fully attainable by all children prior to entering kindergarten. Access to these skills is of benefit to those in the position to reach these goals; for others it is an evasive target that is far from obtainable. As a result, and from a social-justice perspective, two types of children enter kindergarten—those who have the knowledge, skills, behaviors, and other acumen to be successful in kindergarten, and those who do not—resulting in an ideological academic deficiency commonly referenced as the kindergarten-readiness gap between African American children and Caucasian and other minority children. This historical foot race is captured in a popular animation that depicts the head start of the individuals with access, and the constant and persistent lagging behind of those students who were disadvantaged by the lack of access to quality prekindergarten preparedness.

Despite differences in preparation, the academic proficiency of all children in these environments are measured using the same assessments. Under these conditions, "not ready" becomes a label of comparison and an assignment of assessed cognition that does not consider the student's capacity for learning. Bringing attention to the student's capacity to learn may mediate the conceived cognitive deficits. Assigning the identification of students under this condition as a learner and not cognitively behind their peers, in addition to the natural variation in developmental stages, may underscore that their peers may have simply had the advantage of a head start.

From a philosophical perspective, the term egalitarianism, references educational goals that tout equity and quality for all students. In application, the goal to educate all

appears more philosophical than obtainable. Educational policies do not specifically define the pathway for educators to reach these goals. Addressing the needs of a varied student population statewide calls into question the target. Does equity and quality mean a simple majority receive an average education? Or is it a particular student type, such that once these targets are met the goal of all has been reached? Is the goal of education to create an "average" student with expectations that statistically some will fall above and below this target? A myriad of questions swirl around the proposition of education to serve all and benefit all students with equity as the goal.

As the status quo, inequity must be challenged; defining the issues is a first step. In the present study, mothers' influence on their sons' academic development provided a possibility for support of the academic performance of African American males. Research implies this subgroup is prominent in the kindergarten-readiness gap and academic-achievement gap. African American male students, are a subgroup creviced in a persistent rut that continues to widen throughout their educational career.

In the subgroup of African American male children, the imposition of the nonacademic stereotype was assigned equally to students who are academically challenged and those who are academically successful, due to their race, ethnic, and cultural membership in the subgroup. Howard (2013) explained that a "monolithic" label, that does not account for the multiple,"overlapping identities and diverse experiences" (p. 56) of this subgroup, is "insufficient to capture the full set of experiences of Black males" (p. 60). This placement is detrimental to all African American students, particularly male students in this position, when identification of academic proficiency is narrowed to an ethnicity rather than ability.

In 1903, W. E. B. Du Bois stated:

> It is a peculiar sensation, this double consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of the world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (p. 3)

An underlying lack of agency exists, meaning the capacity of individuals to act independently and to make their own free choices (Metcalfe, Eich, & Castel, 2010), or essentially to be themselves. This message of independence and self-identity rang true in the present study: participants direct messaging to their son on this issue included "there is nothing wrong with being different" and "it's his life, ultimately, he will choose what path he takes." The input from the maternal perspective of participants was for their sons to move forward with the assurance that they are standing with them in doing so.

The hegemonic positioning of the educational system as the authority over the education of all students appears finite, averring that the only way to a good education is through this system. Going beyond what is visible to what is imaginable and then to what is possible is necessary, rather than to what is predictable in the current state of the realm of education for particular groups of students that fall below the line of a typically performing student. The recommendations section of Chapter 5 further discusses outside influence, meaning access to external opportunities to enrich, inform, support, provide, and secure opportunities for atypical students to access education through varying modes.

Recommendations to Practice

The recommendations that follow are in consideration of the phenomenon under examination in this study, namely the single African American mother's role in preparing her son for kindergarten and her perception of his cognitive ability prior to entering kindergarten. Recommendations to stakeholders, policymakers, state, federal, and local administrators follow: (a) agreement in defining kindergarten readiness and the standards necessary to meet this requirement or prerequisite knowledge, skills, and behaviors student are expected to exhibit upon entering kindergarten, or first grade if parents opt out of kindergarten; (b) include kindergarten in compulsory education. From an equitable position, all students should be eligible to enroll in a local kindergarten class or a school of choice in districts where this option is available; mandatory kindergarten will support the foundational resources and educational expectations for students through access to credentialed teachers in TK or Kindergarten; (c) ensure articulation across all academic and behavioral resources, particularly those that are foundational and build on previous skills; (d) communicate broadly to parents or guardians the academic and behavioral expectations of students prior to entering kindergarten; and (e) inform and educate parents and guardians on the kindergarten-readiness gap and the academic-achievement gap. Provide opportunities for parental engagement, access to research, training, and support.

Last, parents should be viewed as an asset in the school community. A theory that emerged from the current study, *antithetical academic deficiency theory,* describes maternal behaviors to circumvent and reverse the nonacademic stereotypes of their African American sons. The theory informs nontraditional parental-involvement practices

and positive messages regarding the academic expectations and support mothers have committed to their sons. Meaningfully engaged parents should be viewed as members of the school community. The school should be perceived from a utilitarian rather than authoritarian perspective as a mechanism to support a family's goals of a quality education for their children. As a social institution, the school's persona is a reflection of society. A microcosm of the world-at-large, a school community has the responsibility to create environments that support and encourage positive development and attributes that will uphold the next generation of adults.

Recommendation for Further Research

This study has advanced the research on the influences of kindergarten readiness as represented by single African American mothers in a northern California metropolitan city. Further research should examine this phenomenon with similar populations in other major cities in the United States. A dearth of research examined the phenomenon of the kindergarten readiness of African American males from the perspectives of their mothers.

The theory, *antithetical academic deficiency theory,* resulting from the current study, describes maternal behaviors to circumvent and combat the nonacademic stereotypes of their African American sons. The theory informs nontraditional parental-involvement practices and positive messages regarding the academic expectations and support mothers have committed to their sons. Findings from empirical studies suggested that single mothers expressed minimal interest or time involving themselves in their sons' education (Mandera, 2012; Wood, 2009).

In contrast, mothers in the current study were significantly involved in their sons' academic development and were actively engaged. Future research should consider a

study design that would measure the impact that nontraditional parental-involvement efforts have on improving the educational outcomes of African American male students, particularly at the beginning of their educational careers.

Concluding Thoughts

A myriad of relative concerns are integral to an equity framework in education. This study unveiled the underpinnings of an educational system rooted in historical educational bias, indicating a propensity toward promoting an archetypical student that is English speaking, White, and middle-class. This educational bias is represented in educational policies and practices, curriculum, and pedagogies that favor the archetypical student. Educational reform efforts have made little impact in uprooting the social injustice these biases represent. In effect, the status quo is perpetuated in not only the institutional design, but also in the production of curricular materials and academic support that reflect the same.

An educational system that identifies a student's educational deficits that are defined by their acumen when they enter the system exposes its own flaws. As discussed in Chapter 1 of the current study, kindergarten readiness is a concept of learning that is undefined; the skills and behaviors that are reported to reflect a student's readiness to meet grade level expectations in kindergarten are not widely communicated and limit the exposure of parents, care providers, and early educators to access these prerequisites. The skills that have been deemed necessary for a student's preparation for kindergarten should be readily available to all children. Eliminating the vague and evasive nature of the general knowledge and skills necessary to be successful in kindergarten would

moderate for the kindergarten-readiness gap and address the racial and prejudicial divisions embedded in the system.

This study typified the challenges of an educational system that performs characteristically differently for identifiable students, sheds light on the social-justice issues that are integral to the educational system design, and adds to the research on the impact single African American mothers have on their sons' educational development, providing insight into the phenomenon of kindergarten readiness for the subgroup, African American males.

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APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Demographic Questions

1. Are you a mother to an African American male between the ages of 3 and 5?
2. Are you currently single, divorced, or widowed?
    a. As a single person, do you consider yourself to be the head of household?
    b. How would you describe your current employment situation?

Background

3. Tell me about living in Sacramento
4. How does living in this area compare to other places you lived as a child?
5. How would you describe your educational experience growing up?
6. How would you describe the support you received from your family when you were in school?
7. What was your experience like with your teachers or other staff at the school?
8. What type of activities did you participate in outside of school?
9. Describe an experience related to school that you remember as important to you.

Mother-Son Dyad

10. How would you describe your relationship with your son?
11. Where would you say you learned how to be a parent?
12. How do you believe you are doing as a parent?
13. Where do you turn to for help in raising your son?
14. What messages about life do you share with your son?

15. If you have other children, particularly daughters, how does the relationship with your son compare to your other children?
16. How would you describe your son's behavior?
17. How does your son's behavior affect your parenting style?
18. What types of activities do you do with your son? How often?
19. What are some of your son's favorite things to do?
20. What is something that you think your son does well?
21. What is something you think your son could do better?
22. What does your son say he would like to be when he grows up?
23. What would you like for him to be?
24. How would you say you are preparing him for his future?

Education

25. What type of child care arrangements do you have for your son?
26. How did you decide on where to place your son in childcare?
27. What are some of his favorite things to do while he is in childcare?
28. What would you say your son's interest is in learning new things?
29. How well do you think your son will do in kindergarten?

APPENDIX B

A PATHWAY TO SCHOLARSHIP: A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF THE SINGLE AFRICAN-AMERICAN MOTHER'S ROLE IN THE ACADEMIC DEVELOPMENT OF THEIR SONS FOR KINDERGARTEN

Name: Pseudonym Name:

Child's Name: Child's Pseudonym Name:

[Date]

Kindergarten Skill and Readiness Questionnaire

What is your ***overall*** impression of your son's readiness for kindergarten?

☐ Less than expected ☐ As expected ☐ More than expected ☐ Consistently more

What is your overall impression of your son's physical motor skill? (E.g. can hold scissors correctly and cut; climb, run, and skip; catch a ball; walk forward and backward on a straight line).

☐ Less than expected ☐ As expected ☐ More than expected ☐ Consistently more

What is your overall impression of your son's verbal language skill? (E.g. uses words to describe things in the environment; tells simple stories; sings; clearly expresses ideas; talks about daily experiences).

☐ Less than expected ☐ As expected ☐ More than expected ☐ Consistently more

What is your impression of your son's ability to self-help or be independent? (E.g. tie shoelaces, wash hands before meals and after toilet; uses toilet independently; clean up play area after playtime; brush his teeth without assistance; stay away from dangerous situations.

☐ Less than expected ☐ As expected ☐ More than expected ☐ Consistently more

What is your **overall** impression of your son's **academic** readiness for kindergarten?

☐ Less than desirable ☐ As expected ☐ Better than expected ☐ Consistently better

What is your impression of your son's social emotional development? (E.g. does he use pleasant words such as please and thank you; use words when angry to solve the situation; share toys with others; play cooperatively; comply with rules/limits/routines; take care of personal belongings; begin to control emotions; make needs known; show empathy

☐ Less than expected ☐ As expected ☐ More than expected ☐ Consistently more

What is your impression of your son's ability to…? (E.g. identify basic colors; understand concepts such as inside/outside/under/over; know age and birthday; identify some alphabet letters; count from 1 to 20; use comparative words such as bigger/closer; identify some shapes such as square/circle/triangle).

☐ Less than expected ☐ As expected ☐ More than expected ☐ Consistently more

What is your impression of your son's ability to…? (E.g. try to write his name; attempt to write letters; try to write numbers).

☑ Less than expected ☐ As expected ☐ More than expected ☐ Consistently more

What is you impression of your son's ability to…? (E.g. recognize his name in print; read or recognize some alphabet letters in print; recognize numbers in print; show interest in printed materials; understand that English is read from left to right).

☑ Less than expected ☐ As expected ☐ More than expected ☐ Consistently more

Please use this space to add additional comments about any of the responses provided above.

Comments:

[Add your comments here.]

APPENDIX C

PERMISSION FROM ANDERSON

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16 November 2018

Dear Onda Johnson,

Material requested: Kindergarten Readiness Questionnaire FROM Tagreed Fathi Abu Taleb (2013) Necessary school readiness skills for kindergarten success according to Jordanian teachers, Early Child Development and Care, 183:12, 1878-1890

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Fax:+44 (0)20 7017 6336

Web: www.tandfonline.com

e-mail: lee-ann.anderson@tandf.co.uk

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APPENDIX D

PROFILE OF GENERAL POPULATION SACRAMENTO COUNTY

	Number	Percent
Total population	1,418,788	
Male population	694,793	
Female population	723,995	
Age and sex		
Under 5 years	101,063	7.1
5 to 9 years	98,112	6.9
Males Under 5 years	51,669	3.6
Males 5 to 9 years	50,022	3.5
Females Under 5 years	49,39	3.5
Females 5 to 9 years	48,090	3.4
Race		
Black or African American	147, 058	10.4
White	815,151	57.5
Asian	203,211	14.3
Hispanic or Latino	306,196	21.6

Note. Provides a representation of the population relevant to this study. Source: American Community Survey, by U.S. Census Bureau, 2016, retrieved from https://factfinder.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?src=bkmk