**Identifying Needs for Single-Parent Households in Order to Promote Parental Involvement in Head Start**

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**Abstract**

This study investigates levels of parental involvement among single-parents and what needs they might have that would help to promote parental involvement in Central Virginia’s Head Start program. Studies show that children from single-parent homes experience more economic hardships and therefore may have lower academic performances in comparison to children in multi-parent homes (Hawkins, 2020). Research was conducted from seven different Head Start locations by using a mixed-methods study. This included surveys with open-ended and close-ended questions, as well as interviews with parents, grandparents, and legal guardians that collected quantitative and qualitative data. The quantitative data came from the close-ended questions while the qualitative data came from three open-ended questions. Themes may include obstacles inhibiting parental involvement such as economic hardships, time constraints, and parent-teacher relationships, which may lead to lower academic achievements, lack of motivation, and less access to educational resources. Implications of this study include providing more access to educational resources and support to both children and parents of single-parent households.

*Keywords:* Parent Involvement, Survey Research, Head Start, Single-Parent, Academic Performance

**Introduction**

Parental involvement is key for educational engagement and educational success (Paulson et al., 2021). However, parental involvement is even more critical in early education as children often rely on their caregivers to provide them with the guidance they need to succeed, especially in schooling. This is a significant period in life in which children are developing and growing, and schools are a major factor in positive development (Paulson et al., 2021). Children typically do much better in school when they have parents or guardians that are involved with their schoolwork and have relationships with their teachers. However, this presents a problem for single-parents as they face hardships that inhibit involvement in their child’s education. Single-parents face challenges such as economic hardships, time-consuming jobs, lack of emotional support, and may have a harder time forming a parent-teacher relationship, which is said to be crucial (Olszowy, 2012; Watt, 2020; Hawkins 2020). As a result, children in these households often fall behind academically and may have a more difficult time paying attention or retaining information in school (Sasser et al., 2015).

Many studies in this field focus specifically on low-income single mothers who have to work multiple jobs to support their families rather than looking at and comparing both single-mothers and single-fathers of young children. This topic is important to look at in order to understand how schools and teachers can help support children in single-parent households. By understanding how schools and teachers can assist single-parents, there is more potential for improvements in the educational success of children impacted by these challenges. Additionally, by addressing these issues there is a better chance for educators to understand and assist single-parents in order to promote parental involvement in a way that works for them.

**Literature Review**

When it comes to early childhood education, parental involvement is crucial in development. Epstein (1995) has a widely accepted definition of parental involvement as a kind of partnership or mutual relationship between a school and a family. However, when it comes to single-parent households, the ability to maintain a strong relationship with a school and education may prove to be challenging. For instance, single-parents are often forced to take on multiple roles at once, such as head of the family and the family breadwinner (Bruckman & Blanton, 2003). As a result of this, single-parents may not have as much time to dedicate to educational involvement. Single-parents are also more likely to experience economic hardships, with poverty levels being much higher in single-parent households, which may negatively impact children and their educational achievements (Watt, 2020; Hawkins, 2020; Varga, 2021).

Single-parents face a multitude of struggles when it comes to balancing their daily responsibilities. According to Hawkins (2020), single mother households are more likely to experience economic challenges and are more likely to have jobs that are not substantial in pay. Poverty impacts nearly 50% of single-parent households (Watt, 2020). As a result of lower incomes, children may not have access to the resources they need to succeed academically. Children from single-parent homes experience similar economic hardships and typically have lower academic performances in comparison to children in multi-parent homes (Hawkins, 2020). Children may lack both academic and emotional support from parents and teachers alike. Additionally, single-parents have to sacrifice their time to work extra jobs to earn more income to support their families, which can result in less time to spend with children. Olszowy (2012) expands this by claiming that when a family earns more money, there are far more opportunities for academic achievements.

Parental involvement in education is crucial for academic success. Students from families where parents are involved have better grades, attendance, and more confidence (Watt, 2020). Olszowy (2012) claims that teachers and school officials should reach out to students in need and offer help, as many children look to schools as a branch of support. However, this could be a challenge as Watt (2020) claims that parents and teachers may experience tension and hardships within their relationship. Watt (2020) goes further to claim that many teachers felt as though parents did not show them respect and often challenged their academic input and authority.

In summary, children in single-parent homes are more susceptible to economic and academic hardships in addition to a lack of parental involvement and support. As a result, these children may fall behind academically when compared to children of multi-parent households (Olszowy, 2012; Watt, 2020; Varga, 2021; Carlson & Berger, 2013). Studies agree that there is a positive correlation between parental involvement and academic success. Most of the research claims that single-parent households that are low-income have a more difficult time with parental involvement, may have less access to educational resources, and may have less free time. However, there is not much research on correlation between single-parents and parental involvement among those who are higher income. In my research, I aim to discover what kind of needs parents/guardians have that, if met, would help increase parent involvement in education.

**Data and Methods**

**Instrument**

An online survey questionnaire was created by a research collaborative at Longwood University. The survey created in Qualtrics included an informed consent question and open and close-ended items. There are 23 close-ended items that cover parent needs including resources, comfort, time, finances, mental health needs, and demographics. The questionnaire included three open-ended items. The questionnaire had an estimated completion time of 10 minutes.

**Sample**

The convenient sample for this project is parents and legal guardians of Head Start children who are between the ages of three and five who reside in seven counties in Central Virginia. There are approximately 100 families in this sample population. Head Start headquarters e-mailed the online survey to county Head Start teachers. Teachers then e-mailed the survey to all families in their classroom. Surveys were e-mailed home at least three times during data collection. This resulted in 26 surveys being submitted. The response rate was approximately 25%. No incentive was offered for completing the survey.

**Quantitative Analysis**

Quantitative data was analyzed using descriptive statistics. The dependent variable of interest was “How involved do you feel in your child’s education on a scale from 0-10” and the attributes were 0 (not at all) through 10 (extremely involved). The independent variable of interest was “Does your child live in a single-parent household?” and the attributes were yes, no, or prefer not to say.

**Qualitative Analysis**

Qualitative analysis was based on the open-ended items. Thematic coding was used to analyze parent responses.

**Findings**

**Quantitative Findings**

The sample size in the research was N=25. The dependent variable was “How involved are you in your child’s education”. On a scale of 0 (not at all) - 10 (extremely involved), the mean was 8.81. This mean shows that most of the responses were on the higher end of the 0-10 scale, showing a high amount of parental involvement. The standard deviation was 2.06. This standard deviation shows that there was a lot of variation within our data. The independent variable was “Does your child live in a single parent household?”. Table 1 shows that 12 respondents, which was 57.1% of the sample, said yes. 8 respondents, which was 38.1% of the sample, said no. 1 respondent, which was 4.8% of the sample, said they prefer not to say. Table 2 shows the comparison between respondents’ parental involvement and single parent households. The mean for respondents who said “yes” to having a single parent household was 8.91, which shows a high parental involvement. The mean for respondents who said “no” to having a single parent household was 8.63, which also shows a high parental involvement. The mean for the “prefer not to say” category was 10 because the data was based on 1 response.

**Table 1.**

*Percent of respondents with single parent households*

| Does your child live in a single parent household? |  | Count | Percent |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Yes |  | 12 | 57.1 |
| No |  | 8 | 38.1 |
| Prefer Not to Say |  | 1 | 4.8 |

*Note*. N=25

**Table 2.**

*Mean parental involvement by single parent households*

| Does your child live in a single parent household? |  | Means | Standard Deviations |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Yes |  | 8.91 | 1.70 |
| No |  | 8.63 | 2.77 |
| Prefer Not to Say |  | 10.00 | n/a |

*Note*. N=25

**Qualitative Findings**

There were three open ended questions, with one question focusing on activities respondents enjoyed doing with their children, another question focusing on dealing with stress, and a final question asking whether there was anything else the respondent cared to share with the researchers regarding their needs. In the first open ended question, there were two themes - outdoor activities and education. In the second open ended question, there were two themes - self care and communication.

When asked about what activities respondents enjoyed doing with their children, the two themes were outdoor activities and education. Respondent 1 stated that they enjoyed “outdoor adventures”. Respondent 23 stated that they enjoyed “playing at the park”. Respondent 11 stated that they enjoyed “horseback riding”. For the educational theme, Respondent 2 stated that they enjoyed “[helping] them learn and go over what they learn everyday”. Respondent 12 stated “[going over] their school work and seeing how much they learn from being here”. Respondent 15 stated “teaching and learning”.

When we asked about how respondents deal with stress, the two themes were self care and communication. Respondent 2 stated that they “take a walk”. Respondent 10 stated that they deal with stress by “relaxing and [doing] yoga”. Respondent 17 stated that they deal with stress by “journaling”. Respondent 18 stated that they “take deep breaths and pray”. For the communication theme, Respondent 1 stated that they “talk with family and friends”. Respondent 9 simply stated “communication”. Respondent 23 stated “therapy”.

**Conclusion**

Research has agreed that parental involvement in early childhood education plays a critical role in academic success and future educational achievements. Children who have parents that are involved in their schooling typically get better grades and have fewer issues with poor behavior and inattention (Paulson et al., 2021; Hawkins, 2020). However, issues that single-parent households face such as financial hardships and time constraints have shown to present several difficulties for parental involvement in education. Children in single-parent households are less likely to have access to the materials needed for academic success and parents are less likely to have positive relationships with their teachers and school staff, which leads to lower levels of academic support. Additionally, low-income single-parents often have a more difficult time finding the time to assist their children, often because they are forced to work multiple jobs.

A majority of the survey respondents selected that they lived in single-parent households, with 57.1% answering “yes” to the single-parent question. The results of the survey showed a positive correlation between single-parents and self-assessed levels of parental involvement, with the mean response being an 8.91. However, the results showed that some respondents did not have emotional support systems or that they did not have time to deal with stress. These findings help to expand on the idea that some single-parents lack the time to be involved in their child’s education. These results matter because they show the significant role that emotional support and time play in a parent’s ability to be involved, whereas many times single-parents do not have time or support systems - an issue that is equally challenging for the parent and the child, often leading to behavioral or attention problems in educational settings. There needs to be a stronger focus on supporting single-parents and children who may face hardships in their educational involvement and success in order to promote better grades, better behavior, and more access to academic resources.

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