Reflection of a Single Parent’s Struggle to Raise Academically and Psychosocially Successful Children

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Abstract

The author uses research on children from single parent homes as a catalyst for personal reflection on single parenting. The postmodern approach to research is intended to deconstruct meaning in order to enlighten the audience to the challenges and obstacles faced by students and parents in single parent homes. By creating understanding through meaning, it seeks a call to action by educators to focus attention on this specific population that statistically has poor academic outcomes.

Looking back on the past often leads us to the knowledge we need in order to move into the future. Parents often tell their children to improve their futures by ‘learning from my own mistakes,’ but children do not do it. My children do not listen to my advice. I did not listen to my parents’ advice. At the age of 21, I believed I knew what I needed and how I would find the life I dreamed I wanted. Shortly after my twenty-second birthday, I would marry against my parents’ wills. It would last happily for three years before turning into another eight years of discontent. After eleven years and three children, my life would change. I divorced in order to find a better life for myself and my children. If I had only understood how research should guide practice, then I would have possibly made different decisions in my young adulthood. However, I did not, and it would take a drastic life change for me to understand the statistical outcomes my children and I would face in a single parent home.

In America, there are 13.6 million single parents. Averaging about two children per single parent home, there are 21.2 million children living in single parent homes, which is about 26% of the population. In 2005, the nation experienced an all time high of 37% of all families living in single parent situations (U.S. Census Bureau, 2006). However, at any time, it is hypothesized that 50% of all students will, at some point in their education, live in a single parent home. That is due to the national statistic that close to 50% (48% in 2008) of all first marriages will end in divorce. Even more alarming are the statistics that 60% of second marriages and 72% of third marriages will end in divorce. Therefore, if a child lives in a home with subsequent marriages, he or she may experience the emotional stress of family breakups repeatedly. Census statistics (2006) state other challenges for single parenting. When understanding economic issues faced by single parents, it is important to know that 27.7% of single mothers and 11.1% of single fathers live below the poverty line. They are not poor because they do not try to get money. Seventy-nine percent of single mothers and 92% of single fathers are employed. Often, single parents are stereotyped as urban and lazy, seeking only a welfare check and having no time for their children. Statistics disprove the stereotype. Single parents transcend all populations. They are White, Hispanic, Black, or Asian. They may be poor, middle class, or wealthy. They may live in urban, rural, or suburban areas.
How could I be making my children a statistic? How could I become a statistic? Technically, everyone is a statistic, since everyone is in one of the 50% categories. However, I came from a good background. In my schema, single parents were uneducated and came from poor backgrounds. They were either Black urbanites or White trash. People from good families did not get divorced. Statistics, and life, proved me wrong. Single parenting is a phenomenon that all people in the United States face today. The breaking up of a family causes social, psychological, and economic issues that affect the greater whole. I personally did not care, at that moment, about how ending the marriage would have repercussions. At the time, I wanted my children and myself to move on in life as if nothing had happened. I would treat it like a new chapter in the books of our life. We would awaken to a new day and ignore that our lives had changed. I learned that, even if I could ignore it, the rest of society may not. I had not expected my children or myself to be ostracized. We were not “those” kind of people. Others saw it differently.

In education, there is a theory of deficit thinking. Deficit thinking is the negative belief educators hold toward students and their abilities because of a “deficit” those children bring from home (O'Connor & Fernandez 2006; Obiakor, 2007). Educators know there must be a focus on improving teacher-parent partnership to ensure the best possible chances of academic success for all children (Zoints, Zoints, Harrison, & Bellinger, 2003). However, it is often difficult to build that partnership when the parents feel judged and unwelcomed in the school environment. Zorn and Boler (2007, p. 144) state that teachers misconstrue the “problems of poverty as problems of single motherhood or poor parenting.” Educators often blame “parents’ failure to attend meetings or other officially organized events as failure to support their children or the school.”

I was a teacher at the school where my children were enrolled. When I got divorced, it was the beginning of my eldest daughter’s fifth grade year. My son was in second grade, and there was a younger child at home too. I was trying to hold everything together. A friend had explained how a psychologist had once told her the importance of keeping life as structured as possible for a year after a traumatic event. I did that. Bedtimes did not change. School routines were all the same. Grades and behavior expectations stayed the same. In my mind, the children were adjusting fine. However, one day the school counselor told me that my daughter needed therapy because she was doing poorly in her classes since I had gotten divorced. My daughter still had ‘As’, so I had not noticed her doing poorly. I asked her to see my daughter, yet I do not remember if she ever had any meetings with her. My son’s teacher actually recommended I reconcile with their father because my son was too bright to get ruined by a divorce. Obviously, I was flabbergasted. My children and I were being judged simply because our family structure had changed. I vowed to work that much harder to support my children in order for them to reach high levels of achievement. I learned that, at times, we must work to overcome not only our own situations, but the perceived conditions among society that may work to hold us back.

There are educators that will fail children by their short-sided views and behaviors. Students from single parent homes, for the most part, have enough challenges. They do not need the burden of more challenges imposed by deficit thinking. However, some research suggests that being from a single parent home will not create hardships in education (Shim, Felner, & Shim 2000). Even though some research recognizes positive outcomes of students from single parent homes, the majority of research in sociology, psychology, and education promote much more dismal outcomes. Young children are less involved in literacy activities, leading to delayed reading readiness. Social development is affected and is most apparent in the preschool years where there is delayed preschool readiness (Schneider, Atteberry, & Owens, 2005). Children from single
parent homes have lower standardized test scores on math and reading tests (Southworth, 1984; Schneider, Atteberry, & Owens, 2005). Research continues to show that academic challenges continue throughout secondary and post-secondary education. For instance, students from single parent homes have lower admission and attendance in college, and especially in highly selective institutions and among females (Schneider, Atteberry, & Owens, 2005; Bateman & Kennedy, 1999). Bateman and Kennedy found the reasons for lack of post-secondary achievement are due to financial strains and lack of parental support.

As a single mother, I struggled to maintain a balance between parenting, working, and socializing. Even though I grew up in the era of the ‘supermom,’ I learned after my divorce that it is impossible to achieve it all. There will not be a balance, for there are only so many hours in a day and only one person to manage everything, from children, finances, housework, and sanity. It was not that my children’s education was not important, but it often came secondary to meeting basic needs, which were provided by cooking, washing clothes, or paying bills. My two school aged children had to do their own homework, and I did not check over it like teachers suggest be done. My youngest child, who was of preschool age, did not attend a preschool because I could not afford it. Unlike her older siblings, she did not get bedtime stories every night. If she were still awake after all the other chores had been accomplished, I was too tired to lie with her and read a book. She went to kindergarten without phonemic awareness or phonics. She was not at the top of her class in those years, as she was developmentally behind her peers who had attended preschool. Compared to her older siblings who had experienced preschool while still in an intact home, the youngest scored lower on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills. Not until researching this topic did I realize that her struggles in the early years with academic success could be related to her family situation. It was not until now that I realize how much impact the family situation can have on children’s behavioral issues as well.

Children from single parent homes exhibit more behavioral issues than students from intact families. Psychosocial issues that stem from divorce and single parenting are revealed through different behaviors in males and females (Southworth, 1984). Female children from single parent homes are less likely than male children to develop behavioral issues. The most prevalent behavior issue in males is exhibited in antisocial behavior, ranging from being antisocial to delinquent. On the other hand, females from single parent homes also suffer from behavioral issues, but these issues focus on the need for affection, and are found by their being more sexually active. This sexual activity often leads to unbalanced teen pregnancies among this population (Schneider, Atteberry, & Owens, 2005). Schneider, Atteberry, and Owens also found that youth from single parent homes consume more drugs and alcohol than students from intact homes. Some behaviors are manifested through increased truancy and tardiness. However, some of the attendance issues are not only blamed on behavior, but also on the findings that more students from single parent homes have health challenges and visit the school health clinics more frequently than students from intact homes (NAESP, 1980; Schneider, Atteberry, & Owens, 2005).

As a teacher, I was always annoyed by the parent who refused to recognize certain behaviors in children. Empathy was hard. However, once I became a single parent and saw new behaviors in my own children, I began to understand how parents might suppress signs that indicate a child may need help. Although my children never exhibited delinquent characteristics, they were not completely psychosocially adjusted, which were most often manifested through health issues. One needed medication because of stomach ulcers, and one had episodes of losing their hair. These health issues, I believe today, were manifested because they did not act out behaviorally to the emotions.
they were experiencing. After the health issues were resolved about a year after becoming children in a single parent home, other antisocial behaviors began to appear. The children would prefer to stay at home or go places as a family instead of going to social events with people their own age. Even today, the eldest, who is almost eighteen, prefers quiet time with family to doing things with friends, of which she has only a few. Though the antisocial behavior is not demonstrated through bad behavior, it is obvious that divorce and family situations have impacted their personalities.

A child’s levels of depression, anxiety, and low self-esteem are attributed to stress due to psychological strain (Schneider, Atteberry, & Owens, 2005). Stress will occur at the onset of divorce (Bateman & Kennedy, 1999). However, extended time in a single parent home will create other psychological strains due to the single parent situation. One of the hardest strains on students from single parent homes is the likelihood of living in lower socioeconomic homes, which is supported by the increased number of students from single parent homes that qualify for federally subsidized food programs. Unfortunately, their economic outlook does not seem much better as they age and reach maturity. Bateman and Kennedy (1999) found that students from single parent homes grow to be adults who have lower economic attainment and job security. Likewise, the children from single parent homes often experience delayed marriages and are more likely to divorce as adults (Schneider, Atteberry, & Owens, 2005).

Single parenting has been hard. There have been times when I personally was battling stress and psychological strain. Though never clinically depressed, there have been various periods where life has seemed quite dreary. In those lulls, it has been difficult to know how to overcome them. As a single parent, when the children began to suffer different levels of anxiety or low self-esteem, it is doubly hard to fix. In reflecting on those times when life got me down the most, my grayest periods revolved around the extreme shortage of financial resources. The lack of money and my stress about it has been equally stressful to my children. My children and I all remember the times when there was not enough money to buy food until payday, so inventive cooking became the norm. Whenever pancakes became dinner, the children would eat them happily. I would try to explain the specialness of having breakfast for dinner, but the children understood that stress was masked behind the creased smile. They absorbed that stress and secretly carried it within themselves. I had not meant for my financial situation to cause psychological strains on them, but it did. On the day to pay bills, the children would suddenly go outside and away from me. I have come to learn that they would become so upset at my anxiety level that they preferred to go outside so “as not to bother Mommy.” There have been heartbreaking times when my children swore to me they did not want to go on a fieldtrip or participate in a school activity, offering a variety of excuses that seemed to make sense. However, I would later learn that they chose not to go because they did not want to stress me by asking for money when I did not have it. I eventually took a second job to help the financial situation. The children never have seen it as a way to have some leeway in the budget. They have seen it as a way to make ends meet. Their selfless acts of ‘doing without’ so as to lighten my stress still break my heart.

The one constant found in research is that single parents can influence their children’s academic achievement. One of the prominent findings is that a parent’s educational level correlates to positive academic outcomes. Research has found that the father’s educational level was more important to the children’s academic outcomes than the mother’s educational level when the child was in an intact home. However, in a single parent home, the educational level of the parent with whom the student resides was the important characteristic (Bateman & Kennedy, 1999). Another finding that influences academic success is the level of expectations set on the child by the parent
with whom he resides (Schneider, Atteberry, & Owens, 2005). According to research, parents from intact homes set higher expectations for their children than do single parents; high expectations have shown to be the most important factor in helping kids attain high levels of achievement and self-efficacy (Bateman & Kennedy 1999; Shim, Felner, & Shim, 2000). Unfortunately, parents in single parent homes have 20% lower expectations than parents in intact homes (Shim, Felner, & Shim). Students perceive parents as having lower expectations when parental behaviors criticize the children’s choices and behaviors. This also deters the child from attaining high educational goals (Bateman & Kennedy, 1999). That is why it is important that single parents transmit expectations for values and behaviors to their children through strong parental involvement (Schneider, Atteberry, & Owens 2005).

Alas, I believe that I have understood the research that stems from teaching more than from single parenting. Teachers have been taught to understand the importance of high expectations and parental involvement. As a single parent, there were many times in the education of my children where the role I played was more of a teacher than of a parent, for this is what I knew would work. My children had high expectations set upon them in their school efforts. I would accept a low grade if I believed my child worked to the best of his ability. However, the expectation was that, even if struggling with academic material, the effort had to be in place and, if needed, the search for help. By working hard and expecting the same from my children, I have tried to instill the importance of attaining high educational goals. I have modeled the need to pursue more education in order to realize a better life. As a single parent, all I have been able to provide them with is love and the opportunity to overcome hardships by focusing on attaining academic success.

**Conclusion**

It is said that research guides practice. But it is personal reflection that provides us with a focal point that guides our actions. By understanding a way to meld research and reflection, I plan to implement more empathetic leadership in educational administration. My personal reflection of the hardships faced by raising students in a single parent home is not mine solely. At any given period, the life I have lead with my children is similar to half of the U.S. population. Though they are my reflections, they are not mine to keep. It would be shortsighted to believe that what I have lived with my children has not affected us in many ways. Likewise, it would be narrow-minded to think that the issues faced by my children and me are unique to my situation. I am educated, middle-class, and White. I am from an intact family. That is a norm for single parenting, as is being uneducated, poor, rich, Black, Hispanic, or Asian. Single parents come from all types of family backgrounds. They are not alike by any standard, yet they are all alike. They struggle to help their children succeed in getting ahead in life.

As educators, it is suggested by the researcher that this group of students be addressed in the affective and cognitive domains. Students from single parent homes are not coded in PEIMS as at-risk. However, research shows that the academic outcomes of these students are no different from the many other at-risk students. Hopefully, my reflection will enlighten educators’ and call for reflections on ways to help all students, including those from single parent homes, overcome the obstacles that hinder academic success.
References


