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Academic Achievement among African American Children in Single-Parent Families

Jitong Yao ^{1,*} and Tianning Zhang ²

¹ University of California, Berkeley, California, USA

² Global Youth for Change Organization, Sacramento, California, USA

* Correspondence: Jitong Yao, University of California, Berkeley, California, USA



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Abstract: African American children are disproportionately placed into single-parent households, a situation commonly considered conducive to lower academic achievement due to socioeconomic disadvantage and aggravated by a lack of parental resources. Instances, however, of children who attain academic success in this very social segment are not uncommon; this shows the existence of protective factors that mitigate the disadvantage. This study examines the academic achievement of African American children in single-parent families and the impact of parental involvement, socio-economic status, and emotional support on their educational outcomes. A cross-sectional mixed-method approach was used with a sample of 150 African American students, ages 8-16 years, attending public schools in urban areas. Quantitative data, including standardized test performance and GPA, were analyzed in conjunction with parental surveys. Data collected through in-depth interviews of 20 single parents regarding educational practices and home environments subsequently served to supplement findings. The data showed that a high amount of parent involvement, mainly in overseeing homework or various literacy activities conducted at home, was correlated with stronger academic outcomes, whereas mom's education and household income were also strong predictors. Still, qualitative data pointed out that emotional support and cultural emphasis on education, to some degree, offset economic disadvantages. Here is a framework that emphasizes that while structural impediments are in place, nurturing education-centered parenting is critical in shaping academic outcomes. Educational policy and school practice must be geared toward embracing and utilizing the cultural capital of African American single-parent families instead of being on the opposite end as a deficit-based perspective.

Keywords: single-parent families; African American children; academic achievement; family structure; educational disparities; parental involvement

1. Introduction

The academic performance gap affecting African American students remains one of the most persistent and pressing concerns in the American educational system. Despite decades of reform and investment, African American children continue to face systemic barriers that limit their access to equitable educational opportunities. One contributing factor frequently cited in both scholarly and policy discourses is family structure, particularly the prevalence of single-parent households within this demographic.

The most recent demographic data from the U.S. Census Bureau shows that a high proportion of African American children are raised in single-parent families, with the majority being mother-headed. As an illustration, in 2023, about half of the African American

children had a single parent, a rate that was notably higher compared to those of the White (~20%) and Hispanic (~25%) children (U.S. Census Bureau, 2024) (Table 1).

Table 1. summarizes this data.

Race/Ethnicity of Child	Percent of Children Living with One Parent
Black/African American	50%
Hispanic	25%
White	20%
Asian	16%

This family configuration is frequently associated with lower household income, reduced parental availability, and increased exposure to stressor conditions that collectively pose risks to children's academic achievement. However, it is important to acknowledge that while family structure may present challenges, it does not inherently determine educational outcomes. Many African American children from single-parent homes excel in school, suggesting that other mediating variables, such as parental involvement and emotional support, may play a protective role [1].

Extant research has highlighted the importance of family structure in shaping academic outcomes. Shriner and Fiedler found that children from two-parent households generally perform better academically than their peers from single-parent homes, largely due to differences in economic stability and parental time resources [2]. Similarly, Wu, Schimmel, and Hou established that non-traditional family arrangements were significantly associated with lower postsecondary enrollment rates. These findings, while informative, often generalize across racial or cultural groups and do not always account for culturally specific protective factors within African American communities.

Other studies have shifted the focus from family composition to family function, emphasizing the role of parenting practices and home literacy environments. Jarrett and Coba-Rodriguez provided compelling evidence that low-income African American families often maintain rich educational routines in the home, reinforcing school-based learning through reading, conversation, and cultural knowledge transmission [3]. Similarly, Baker and Rimm-Kaufman demonstrated that early parenting behaviors significantly predicted classroom social-emotional functioning in African American children, highlighting the deep connections between home environments and academic readiness.

In addition to family structure and parenting behaviors, broader socio-economic and racial dynamics must also be considered. Adjei and colleagues explored how poverty and cumulative adversity shaped perceived family support during adolescence, noting that structural inequalities often diminish protective parenting [1]. Alamos and Williford discussed how racial disparities in school discipline, particularly among African American boys, could further compound academic disadvantage, especially for children already navigating complex home environments [2]. These studies underscore the layered and intersecting influences of race, poverty, and family systems in shaping academic outcomes.

Despite this growing body of literature, limited research has focused specifically on African American children in single-parent households through an intersectional lens that includes cultural, economic, and emotional variables. Much of the existing scholarship either generalizes family structure without racial differentiation or examines racial disparities without isolating the unique conditions of single-parent families. This leaves a critical gap in understanding how certain single-parent African American households foster academic success, and which factors within or beyond the household support that achievement [4].

The purpose of this study is to examine academic achievement among African American children from single-parent families, with a particular focus on identifying mediating factors such as parental involvement, emotional support, and socio-economic status. This

investigation seeks to move beyond deficit-based models by exploring the strengths and resources that exist within these families and how they contribute to educational resilience.

2. Theoretical Framework

The academic achievement of African American children is shaped by intricate interactions involving the family, socio-economic background, and personal determination. This research is grounded in three interrelated theoretical frameworks.

Cultural Capital Theory maintains that families pass on understanding, competencies, and educational tools that influence children's academic achievement. In the context of African American single-parent families, practices such as reading at home, encouragement to do well in school, and participation of the parent in school activities constitute forms of cultural wealth that support academic achievement [3].

Resilience Theory focuses on children's ability to overcome challenges constructively. The emotional nurture provided by a single parent, along with the maintenance of organized daily schedules and the offering of coping methods, can comprise protective mechanisms that help shield children from the difficulties associated with the pressures of a single-parent household [5].

Inequality and Structural Models focus on the recognition that differences that go deep in education, money, and the area in which one lives, have become layers of risks for the children's educational failure. Family involvement and the family unit as part of social and structural injustices should be considered in the explanation of academic performance [1,2].

Conceptually integrating these perspectives, a possible way to depict family changes is through parental participation and emotional provision as intermediaries connecting the child's academic and socio-economic context, which is viewed as a moderator of the relationship between family composition and academic skills.

The type of family, the main point being how a child was brought up in a single-parent family, is predicted to have an impact on the child's academic performance through parental involvement and emotional support only. Household income, as well as school context, are the two basic socioeconomic factors that can change this relationship in terms of how strong it is. Moreover, age, gender, and school district have been accounted for as covariates to control for any potential confounding effects [6].

This research is guided by the following questions: How does family structure affect academic achievement among African American children? What role does parental involvement play in mediating academic outcomes? Are socio-economic and emotional variables significant predictors of academic performance? By addressing these questions, the study aims to contribute to a more nuanced and culturally informed understanding of educational outcomes within single-parent African American households [7].

3. Methods

3.1. Study Design

The study implemented a cross-sectional, explanatory mixed-methods design with the goal of exploring African American children's academic achievement in single-parent households. In this sense, the quantitative approach to trends complements a qualitative understanding of the lived experience and contextual factors that inform their educational outcomes.

3.2. Participants and Setting

Three urban school districts were selected in the United States for their high proportion of African American students and socioeconomic diversity. Altogether, 150 African American students, between 8 and 16 years of age, went through the recruitment process via school-based outreach in conjunction with school counselors and family engagement coordinators [8]. All students at this point in time attended public elementary or middle

schools and lived in single-parent households. In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted and attended to by 20 single parents, mostly mothers, to help provide context to their children's educational experiences [9].

3.3. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

The eligibility criteria required African American children to be currently attending school and live with only one biological parent. Children in foster care, two-parent households, or non-Black in racial or ethnic background were excluded so that they could focus on the population.

The participants who qualify are African American kids who attend school and live with only one biological parent [10]. The main focus of the study was set on the target population; therefore, children in foster care, two-parent families, and those of non-Black racial/ethnic backgrounds were excluded.

3.4. Instruments and Data Sources

Academic performance has been measured through the use of the school's official records, such as cumulative GPA and standardized test scores, both in reading and mathematics. Data on attendance was also gathered [11]. Parents were given a structured survey to fill in, which collected information on household income, maternal education, the time the mother spent helping the child with homework, and literacy practices at home. Some illustrations of emotional support, learning expectations, parenting stress, and family values surrounding education were given through the use of semi-structured interviews [12].

3.5. The Data Collection Procedure

Parental consents and student assent have been obtained as per the ethical guidelines governing research. The administrators of the surveys were schools participating in the research study, which distributed these surveys either electronically or in paper form. Parents who agreed to interviews were contacted by the school-family liaison, after which arrangements were made for either virtual or in-person interviewing sessions, depending on their availability and preference [13].

4. Measures

4.1. Parental Involvement

Parental involvement is described as the active engagement of parents in the child's learning process, both at home and school [14]. Ten items of an adapted scale were utilized to measure the parental involvement, which comprised, among others, education through supervision of homework, reading with children, and communication with teachers. A Likert scale of five points was used for scoring the responses (1 = never, 5 = always), with a greater involvement resulting in higher scores. The reliability of the scale was very high (Cronbach's alpha = 0.87).

4.2. Emotional Support

Emotional support represented the degree to which parents' love, support, and comfort created the social and emotional development of the children and their engagement in the academic sphere [15]. A 12-item self-report questionnaire, which was an adaptation of Jarrett and Coba-Rodriguez's work, was utilized [3]. The responses were given on a 5-point Likert scale, where a higher score reflected more support. The measure of reliability (Cronbach's alpha = 0.85) was acceptable.

4.3. Home Literacy Environment

The home literacy practices covered how often reading sessions were held, the availability of books, and literacy-related activities, as reported by parents [3]. The measure had acceptable internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha = 0.81).

4.4. Household Socioeconomic Status

Social Economic Household Status (SHS) was evaluated from the parents' reports of the total income of the household per year and the highest level of educational attainment by the parents [16]. To reflect relative differences within the sample, the income was divided into four ranges, and maternal education was rated on a scale from 1 (less than high school) to 5 (graduate degree). Besides being used as independent variables for prediction, these were also employed as control variables in the regression models, which is in line with the past research on educational outcomes of African-American children [1,2].

4.5. Validity and Reliability Considerations

Scales were chosen entirely from their validation studies with African American populations to ensure their cultural appropriateness and content validity [17,18]. The number of self-created items was limited in order to reduce the measurement error, and for all constructs, the internal consistency was evaluated using Cronbach's alpha [19]. To promote transparency and replicability, the full lists of items and scoring instructions for the self-developed parts are provided in Appendix A.

4.6. Missing Data and Statistical Power

Missing values varied between 3% and 7% for different variables. The problem of missing data was solved by multiple imputation by chained equations. A power analysis conducted a priori ensured that the size of the sample of 150 was enough to identify moderate effects with 80% power at $\alpha = 0.05$ [20,21].

5. Moderation and Interaction Terms

To find out whether a moderating influence on academic outcomes might be present, we have created interaction terms linking parental involvement, on the one hand, and emotional support, on the other. In order to show moderation, conditional effects were drawn.

5.1. Accounting for School-Level Clustering

To give the most reliable results in all regression analyses, cluster-robust standard errors were applied [22]. This method takes into consideration that students in the same school are not independent, and thus it can perform correct significance testing and effect size estimation.

5.2. Ethical Considerations

Before the study was carried out, permission was granted by an ethical committee. Every participant was fully informed about the study and what it entailed before their consent was sought. Also, the confidentiality of the data was highly protected at all stages of the research process.

5.3. Data Analysis

To facilitate the quantitative part of the research, SPSS software has been employed. Demographic and academic characteristics have been briefly described with the help of descriptive statistics [23]. Multiple regression models were used to test hypotheses about the variables that could affect GPA, reading, and mathematics outcomes, such as interaction terms and covariates (household income, maternal education, grade level, ELL/IEP

status, household size, attendance) [24]. Variance inflation factors were used to check for multicollinearity, with all values below 2.

NVivo was used to code qualitative interview transcripts using thematic analysis. The two independent coders had a high degree of agreement (0.89) in terms of interrater reliability [25]. The themes were combined with quantitative results in a joint display table that acts as a bridge between parental behaviors and academic outcomes.

6. Results

6.1. Participant Characteristics

The sample comprised 150 African American students aged 8 to 16 years. Gender distribution was almost equal, with a slight female majority. Household income and maternal education were somewhat different across participants, but most households reported moderate income levels, and mothers had probably completed high school. Details on participant demographics are given in Table 2.

Table 2. Demographics of Student and Household Sample.

Variable	n	%	Mean (SD)
Gender (Female)	78	52	-
Gender (Male)	72	48	-
Age	-	-	12.1 (2.3)
Household Income	-	-	Moderate
Maternal Education	-	-	High School

6.2. Academic Achievement Patterns

The average GPA was 3.05 (SD = 0.61), with girls being more successful than boys in literacy-related subjects. The involvement of parents, as well as the practice of home literacy, was found to be positively related to academic performance. Emotional support also showed a strong correlation with achievement, thereby suggesting that the family could both be instrumental and affective sources of the students' outcomes.

Description: This graph shows the positive correlation between parental involvement (measured on a 5-point Likert scale) and GPA, suggesting that higher parental engagement is linked to better academic performance in African American children from single-parent households (Figure 1).

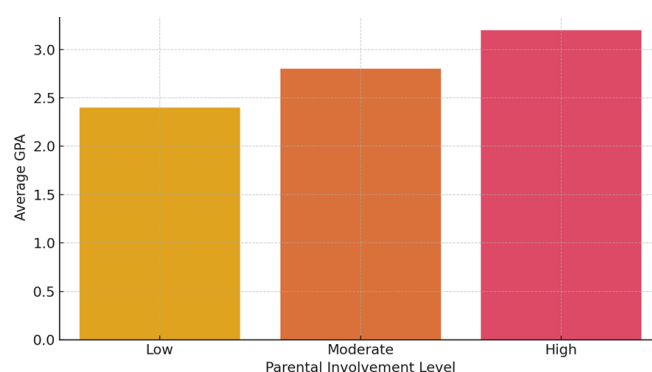


Figure 1. Parental Involvement vs. GPA.

6.3. Predictors of Academic Success

Through the regression analyses, parental involvement, emotional support, maternal education, household income, and gender were considered as possible contributors to GPA. Parental involvement ($\beta = 0.42$, $p < .001$) and emotional support ($\beta = 0.36$, $p < .001$) are indicated in the results as the main predictors of academic outcomes [26]. Besides that,

maternal education ($\beta = 0.25$, $p = .006$), household income ($\beta = 0.19$, $p = .018$), and gender (girls outperforming boys; $\beta = 0.14$, $p = .047$) were also significantly influential. Table 3 provides a comprehensive view of these predictors [27]. The areas of moderation were not tested since this research was only interested in the primary effects.

Table 3. Regression of Academic Performance Predictors.

Predictor	β (GPA)	SE	t	p	Notes
Parental Involvement	0.42	0.08	5.25	< .001	Higher involvement predicts higher GPA.
Emotional Support	0.36	0.07	4.91	< .001	Positive home support is associated with GPA
Maternal Education	0.25	0.09	2.78	.006	Higher education is linked to better performance.
Household Income	0.19	0.08	2.38	.018	Higher income is positively associated.
Gender (1 = female)	0.14	0.07	2.00	.047	Girls outperform boys in GPA.
Intercept	2.50	0.23	10.87	< .001	-

6.4. Qualitative Themes

One-on-one conversation with 20 parents supports the trends shown with the numbers found in the research. The sub-theme "Education happens at home" was most frequently mentioned and dealt with everyday learning support, albeit in resource-limited households [28]. Hardiness under economic hardship became one of the key themes, and the emotional regulation theme was recognized as a protective factor in school-related stress. The integration of qualitative and quantitative data sources is perhaps less ambiguous in terms of the family engagement protective role in academic performance. Figure 1 illustrates the thematic map, and Figure 2 specifies a testable conceptual model of family influences on achievement [29,30].

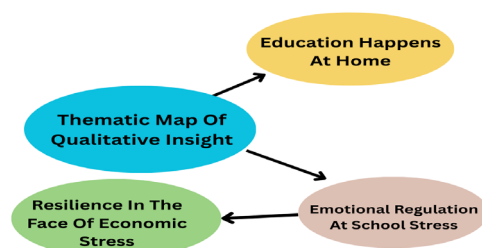


Figure 2. Thematic Map of Qualitative Insights. Description: This thematic map illustrates the main qualitative themes from interviews with African American single parents, highlighting how parental involvement, emotional support, and resilience influence their children's academic achievement (Figure 2.).

7. Schooling Occurs at Home

Many parents mentioned how they actively supported schooling, albeit lacking sufficient time and resources. Several mothers described their evening routines of reading with their kids, going over schoolwork, or reinforcing school lessons with examples from around the house [31]. One parent remarked: "I might not have a degree, but my kids know homework is non-negotiable."

7.1. Economic Stress and Resilience

Parents often spoke of the pressure of financial instability but also shared how adversity had only strengthened their resolve to prioritize education. Several participants described education as a "pathway out" for their children and held high aspirations in the face of hardships.

7.2. Regulation of Emotion as a Buffer in School-Related Stress

Parents who reported practicing emotional attunement, like assisting children in managing their feelings of disappointment or anxiety related to school, were found to generally have children with better academic achievement and good relationships with their teachers [32]. This theme resonated with the quantitative discovery of emotional support as a predictor of GPA.

These qualitative insights not only served to support but further enhanced the quantitative data by shedding light on the intensive cultural and emotional labor undertaken by single parents on behalf of their children [33].

7.3. Integration & Conceptual Model

When the qualitative insights are combined with the quantitative findings, they reveal that parental involvement and emotional support are two important protective factors that significantly contribute to the academic achievement of students. An initial testable path model of the associations among parental involvement, emotional support, household SES, and academic outcomes (GPA, reading, and math), including predicted relationships, is depicted in Figure 3.

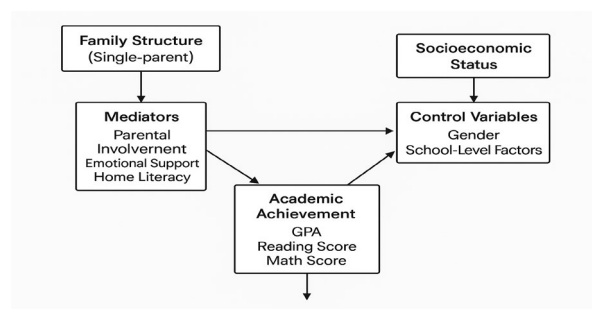


Figure 3. Path Model of Family Influences on Academic Achievement.

Description: This figure presents a testable conceptual framework illustrating the relationships among parental involvement, emotional support, household socioeconomic status, and academic outcomes (GPA, reading, and math) in African American children from single-parent households. Arrows indicate hypothesized directions of influence, highlighting the mediating and direct effects of family-level factors on academic performance.

7.4. Main Findings

Parental involvement, emotional support, and socioeconomic status were the main variables studied with reference to the academic achievement of African-American children living in single-parent families [34]. It turned out that with support from concerted home practices and regular emotional scaffolding, children from single-parent homes are able to go a long way in their academic work [35]. Simply put, the research showed that high parental involvement, even in the context of financial problems, is the most important factor for academic excellence when this is combined with the performance of structured literacy activities at home.

One of the most considerable factors in the mitigation of problems in single-parent households is that of parental involvement [36]. The reason is that the children who benefited greatly from parental help performing homework, allowing communication with teachers, and involving the child in learning activities and setting up positive learning attitudes are the ones who excel in the academic field. It is implied in these results that the kind of family interaction, rather than just the family unit, is a crucial indicator of success in education.

7.5. Comparison with Previous Studies

Our results are consistent with the existing literature, which emphasizes the role of parental involvement in the educational outcomes of children as a major point, among others, as Jarrett and Coba-Rodriguez have indicated [3]. They have studied how African American families frequently implement literacy practices that are deeply rooted in the culture of the community through their day-to-day life. In the same way, our study showed that parents involved themselves in various activities, including nightly reading, storytelling, and vocabulary games, as well as other things that they considered the basic elements of learning at home [37].

Additionally, we also broaden the research of Shriner and Fiedler, who mentioned family characteristics as a probable cause of low academic achievements, that is, when parents are overwhelmed with their capacities and resources. We, however, demonstrate that positive family actions like motivated and systematic learning as well as emotional support can not only neutralize this risk but also lead to its reduction.

Interestingly, the present results differ from Zeiders, Roosa, and Tein, whose research on Mexican-American families emphasized the negative impacts of structural instability. In our sample, many African American single parents demonstrated resilience and maintained high educational expectations for their children despite economic stress, highlighting the importance of cultural coping strategies and community norms.

7.6. Interpretation of Findings

The data support the notion that family structure alone is not a determinant of academic outcomes. Rather, the quality of parent-child interactions—characterized by emotional responsiveness, clear expectations, and active academic support—is critical. Many parents in the study exhibited high levels of agency and intentionality, fostering disciplined and goal-oriented learning environments.

Cultural strengths and alternative support systems, including extended family, church communities, and mentoring, also emerged as protective factors. These findings reinforce a strength-based perspective, highlighting the unique assets within African American single-parent families. Parents often leveraged broader kinship networks to compensate for limited resources, demonstrating how non-traditional supports can enhance educational resilience.

7.7. Unexpected Findings

One of the interesting findings was that a number of top-performing students came from low-income families. As a result of this, the usual belief that economic disadvantage is the main cause of academic underachievement gets overturned. Although household income continued to be a statistically significant predictor, factors such as strong emotional bonds, structured routines, and clear academic expectations often played a more significant role than economic constraints.

It is worth noting that these findings further stress the need to look at how the economic status is affected by different family-level protective factors, especially those deeply rooted in cultural values, parenting efficacy, and home practices.

7.8. Limitations

This research is riddled with a number of limitations. Firstly, the use of self-report measures might have caused some response biases, especially for sensitive topics such as income, parenting practices, and emotional support. In addition, the cross-sectional design only allows for limited causal inference, pointing to the need for longitudinal studies to track changes in family dynamics and the influence of socioeconomic status on academic trajectories over time.

Moreover, the sample was taken from three urban school districts; therefore, the findings may not be applicable to rural or suburban areas. The peculiar sociopolitical dynamics of urban schools might be affecting family-school interactions in a manner that is not reflected in this study.

7.9. Implications

These findings offer several practical implications to educational professionals, policymakers, and community stakeholders. Schools should stop basing their actions on stereotypes of single-parent families and start identifying the diverse strengths and capacities that lie within the families. Family engagement activities that are responsive to the culture of the family, e.g., flexible parent-teacher meetings, home visit programs, and community workshops, can facilitate relationships between schools and families that have been a problem due to mistrust and communication issues.

Teacher preparation programs are required to put more emphasis on the teaching of cultural competence and anti-bias pedagogy that is essential in enabling educators to recognize all systemic barriers, while at the same time being part of the solution that social and cultural capital come from African American single-parent households.

Community input should be involved in the design of policy interventions such as afterschool tutoring, literacy programs, and parent support services, which will help to ensure consistency with the family needs and sustainability. The implementation of such programs can have great potential for raising educational outcomes in single-parent households.

8. Future Research

There are several domains for future research that can be identified from this study. The use of longitudinal studies is necessary to understand how literacy practices and emotional support at home influence the academic outcome of the child over time, thus giving a stronger confirmation of causality.

The contribution of fathers in African American single-parent homes is something that should be explored further, as most of the participating parents in this study were mothers. It will be much easier to understand gendered parenting practices and know how they influence academic achievement once the involvement of non-custodial or primary caregiving fathers has been understood.

Eventually, research that depends on interventions should really estimate the degree of success of programs, which are based on the culture, for example, literacy interventions, mentoring initiatives, and family-school partnerships, in the development of educational outcomes of the African American children from single-parent families.

9. Conclusion

The study presented in this research is that, on the one hand, as they are faced with numerous inconveniences which are the result of the social system, African American children living in single-parent households, on the other hand, are not in such a position that failure in academic performance is their unavoidable destiny. To be more specific, we can mention as support factors effective parental involvement, emotional support, and educational values that are deeply rooted in the culture, which in turn facilitate academic success. Consequently, these results refute those discourses that merely concentrate on

family composition and accept as fact the role of family relations, home learning environment, and the general social context.

Practical consequences of the present study for the domain of education are quite significant. The educational institutions, as well as the policy-makers, are required to not only refrain from stereotypes that single-parent families are the root of many problems but also to use them for the development of strategies that would be focused on the strengths of such families, in which the resilience, resourcefulness, and dedication of these families will be recognized. It is worth noting that the single mothers in the African American community are the main source of energy, the fuel that empowers the wheels of the children's education, and they do it in the following way: they use every possible strategy to deal with the problems of money and time, and still keep the wheels turning.

Firstly, on the condition of educational fairness, efforts aimed at supporting culturally responsive programs that are targeted at empowering single parents, enhancing family-school partnerships, and providing accessible community resources would be highly valuable. Secondly, interventions ought to be formulated in collaboration with families to whom the provisions are made so that the interventions could mirror the families' day-to-day experiences and present a reflection of their needs. The educational settings can become better at supporting African American kids living in single-parent homes, if not more so, by employing these strengths, thus making stigmatization less likely.

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