HIGH ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT FOR ADOLESCENTS IN BLENDED

AND STEPFAMILIES: A HEURISTIC INQUIRY

by

Vernette Leola Gilbreath

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this heuristic study is to understand the lived experiences (i.e., values, attitudes, and practices) of 10 biological parents in blended and stepfamilies in which at least one child experienced high academic achievement at the middle school and high school level. Building on dynamic systems theory and educational resilience theory as theoretical underpinnings, this qualitative study seeks to answer the following central research question: What are the values, practices, and attitudes experienced by biological parents in blended and stepfamily units that contribute to high academic achievement for adolescents in these families? Participants living in the Southeastern area of the United States were recruited via criterion and snowball sampling. Recruiting efforts were conducted via local schools' Parent Teacher Associations and social media platforms. Data was collected via face-to-face semi-structured interviews with biological parents of blended and stepfamilies and via various forms of documentation, such as school records and family photographs. Data was analyzed via coding, clustering, memoing, and member checking. Three major themes and seven subthemes were extrapolated from the data. The three themes were as follows: (1) independence, (2) future orientation, and (3) strong support system. The seven subthemes were as follows: (a) giving choices and consequences, (b) custodial parent as "head coach," (c) "strict" parenting, (d) high expectations, (e) strides toward stability, (f) good role definition and family cohesion, and (g) high parental involvement.

Keywords: blended families, stepfamilies, educational outcomes, academic achievement, dynamic systems theory, educational resilience

Dedication

At the beginning of this year I began the journey of discovering the far-reaching branches of my family tree. Knowing what I know about my African-American heritage and that of America, I expected there would be dead ends and lost stories along the way. However, my journey along my maternal grandfather's branch led me down a long and fascinating road in search of great grandparents matched with historical documents and pictures of land. That's when I met her. My fourth great grandmother. She had only her first name. Her last name was given to her by the man who purchased her and, subsequently, had children with her. I thought about what she might have looked and sounded like. Then I thought about what she might have dreamt for her life. I wondered what she wanted for herself, her children, and her grandchildren. I imagined what conversations she may have had with the people she loved. I also imagined what gifts she might have been able to explore if only she had the chance. I quickly found myself weeping and realizing how much I loved her and was grateful for her life.

This work represents who I am to her and who she is to me. It represents the deferred dreams, the unrealized potential, and the hope of a woman who could have never known that her life would show up in mine.

For Frankie.

Acknowledgments

No one has supported and cheered for me through this ordeal more than my husband, Dale. Your willingness to pinch hit for me for days on end while I travelled to conduct interviews or remained cloistered in my office has never gone unappreciated. You believed there was value in my efforts even when I was certain I had bitten off way more than I could chew. Thank you for listening to me talk about my research and sometimes even being interested. Thank you for the shoulder and foot rubs on nights I just couldn't peel myself away from my computer and thank you for the vision you have for this journey when I feel uninspired, unsure, and unable. You are a gift to my life. I love you like the 80s!

I would also like to acknowledge my big fat blended family. To my children: Jemond, Jeremie, SueSánna, Mandissa, Joel, TiyeNandi, and Jonte. You have given me more than enough reasons to believe this work would be helpful to people like us. For the weeks you held it down when I had to go away for my intensives, for the nights you had to fend for yourselves for dinner, for the moments I barked at you to be quiet and stop interrupting me with your adolescent demands, and for the hugs, kisses, and tender reminders that you're proud of me, thank you! My love for you is boundless. I pray that my efforts serve a reminder that, once you learn what education truly is, the books and the teachers don't matter.

To my Chair, Jen. I can't thank you enough for your commitment to work through the time differences, long emails, and incoherent ramblings as I pushed through this research. Your patience and encouragement often made the difference in whether I decided to be good or just good enough. To my committee members, Dr. Gable and Dr. James, thank you for thoughtfully and thoroughly combing through this research and allowing me to benefit from your expertise. Your willingness to serve this work with your time and talents has made me a better scholar.

To my co-researchers, your transparency and generosity has been invaluable. Thank you for opening up your lives and homes to me. I pray that this work fully honors the delicate information you have entrusted to me. I believe that your stories will be agents of hope for families like ours. Thank you.

Finally, this work could have never been completed without the One who was made strong in my many moments of weakness. Of this I am certain, that my Lord heard and graciously answered every single prayer said on my behalf. As Christ is my Savior, I believe it is my duty to bring glory to Him in everything I do. I am immeasurably grateful for the gifts He's given me to complete this program and to use what I've learned to bring a message of healing and hope to blended families.

Table of Contents

List of Tables

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

This research study is a heuristic inquiry, which seeks to understand the lived experiences of biological parents in blended and stepfamilies with adolescents who demonstrate high academic achievement. This study is based upon the current body of research indicating that children in such family structures tend to have poorer educational outcomes than children in so-called traditional, two-biological parent households (Cavanagh & Fomby, 2012; Tillman, 2008a, 2008b). Research points to various factors that adversely impact academic achievement for children of blended and stepfamilies, such as school mobility (Cutili et al., 2013; Sandstrom & Huerta, 2013), decreased resource and social capital (Henretta, Wolf, Van Voohis, & Soldo, 2012), and timing of family construction (Cavanagh & Huston, 2008). However, there is a gap in the research that provides an in-depth, contextual understanding of the dynamics at play for adolescents who perform at high academic levels, despite the risk factors common in blended and stepfamilies (Brown & Robinson, 2012). This heuristic study addresses this gap in the literature by examining the lived experiences of parents who have intimate involvement with their high achieving students within the context of blended and stepfamily structure.

Chapter One discusses the conceptualization of this heuristic study by providing background information on the prevalence of blended and stepfamilies and the risks uniquely experienced by these families. Following is the study's situation to self and the problem statement. The purpose statement and the significance of the study are then discussed. Chapter One concludes with the research questions, research plan, definitions, delimitations, and limitations.

Background

Conceptualization for this study is influenced by two factors: a) the growing numbers of children from blended and stepfamilies in American classrooms and b) the inverse correlation between blended/stepfamily status and educational outcomes. According to the U. S. Census Bureau (2011), 5.3 million children lived with at least one stepparent in 2009. Of all children who lived in a two-parent household, 10% of them lived in a blended or stepfamily construct. Over 4 million of these children resided with their biological mother and a stepfather (U. S. Census Bureau, 2011). There is research asserting that there are now more blended and stepfamilies in the United States than first families (Dupuis, 2010), indicating that, over the course of their lifetime, the majority of youth in the United States will live in a blended or stepfamily structure (Cavanagh & Fomby, 2012). In approximately half of these reconstructed families, each parent brings at least one child from a previous relationship and half of those families give birth to at least one child after blending (Tillman, 2008a). These complex, instant families create periods of adjustment and instability for family members. It is not surprising that the tenuous nature of this family system results in a dissolution rate that is 60% higher than that for first families (Dupuis, 2010; Steele, Sigle-Rushton, & Kradval, 2009).

There are several risk factors that contribute to poorer educational outcomes for children in blended and stepfamilies. The unique and multifarious composition of blended and stepfamilies is often compounded by residential relocation and school changes (Cutili et al., 2013; Sandstrom & Huerta, 2013). Financial shifts and deviations in parental involvement and support are also common in restructured families (Skogrand, Davis, & Higginbotham, 2011; Wojtkiewicz & Holtzman, 2011). Attention is also given to how changes in familial roles and boundaries impact the well-being of children in blended and stepfamilies (Adler-Baeder &

Lucier-Greer, 2012). Research has also examined how family restructuring at certain points in children's development impacts children's academic achievement (Cavanagh & Huston, 2008; Wu, Costigan, Hou, Kampen, & Schimmele, 2010).

In examining the relationship between blended/stepfamily status and educational outcomes, researchers have drawn on attachment theory, social learning theory, family systems theory, and social capital theory (see, e.g., Harcourt, Adler-Baeder, Erath, & Pettit, 2013; Shriner, Mullis, & Shriner, 2010; Sweeney, 2010). However, there is inadequate research that examines educational outcomes from a theoretical model that speaks to the dynamic interplay of internal and external experiences. Additionally, the vast amount of research on educational outcomes for children of blended and stepfamilies has been empirical in nature and qualitative research is sorely lacking. Lastly, research has focused primarily on stating the problem of poorer educational outcomes (in its various manifestations) but a literature review conducted by Sandstrom and Huerta (2013) suggested the need for more research on how societal and family supports might be engage to create resilience in children and encourage them to thrive. Furthermore, Brown and Robinson (2012) stated, "While a lot is known about the stressors and challenges that these families face, more information about the strengths that enable these families to adapt and survive is needed" (p. 114). This study aims to use dynamic systems theory (DST) and educational resilience theory as its theoretical underpinnings in order to address the interplay of internal (e.g., cognitive, emotional) and external (e.g., school, familial, social, economic) experiences that facilitate high academic achievement.

The growing prevalence of blended and stepfamily structures is an educational concern that has important implications for the national and global workforce (Dupuis, 2010). The current body of research indicates that children of blended and stepfamilies lack the

psychological, familial, social, and economic resources to experience the same level of educational outcomes as their peers in biological two-parent households (e.g., Cutili et al., 2013; Skogrand, Davis, & Higginbotham, 2011). Available research also indicates this is particularly so for adolescents, whose biopsychosocial changes dramatically impact school functioning and who also innately struggle to find balance between the need for autonomy and the need for parental protection and guidance (Teunissen et al., 2011). The study conducted by Teunissen et al. is an important step in informing classroom teachers, school counselors, and school psychologists on ways to address the particular needs of students and families in such family structures. This heuristic study seeks to benefit educators and families with potential strategies for fostering positive educational outcomes. This study adds to the existing literature by offering a foundation upon which to provide family education for fledgling blended/stepfamilies and/or couples that may be considering entering a blended or stepfamily. It also supports educators in their practice to fortify the connection between home and school by helping educators and policy makers avoid taking a deficit approach in trying to repair what is presumed to be missing in blended and stepfamily households (Auerbach & Collier, 2012).

Situation to Self

The impetus for conducting this study is rooted in my personal experience of being a mother in a stepfamily construct. My husband brought four sons to the marriage and I brought three daughters. At the time, our children ranged in age from 3 years old to 16 years old and everyone lived in the same household full time. It was immediately apparent that each child varied in his or her level of adjustment to rules and outlooks. While our expectations were in sync, my husband and I had different methods of addressing conflict, discipline, and most prevalently, schooling. These differences appeared to manifest themselves in our children's

approach to education, which prompted me to consider the possibility that the change in our family status may have impacted each child's motivation to achieve academically. I began pondering the age of each child when we became a family and how that may have played a part in their academic achievement. I also thought about the sex of each child and his or her birth order (which happened to shift once the family structure changed).

 As a psychologist with experience working with juvenile offenders, I started conducting parenting classes for parents and guardians whose children had been in trouble with the law. These juvenile offenders nearly always had remarkable trouble within the educational setting. I learned that many of the families had profound histories of cumulative destabilizing events, including changes in family structure. These issues motivated me to begin researching studies examining outcomes for children in blended and stepfamilies. My philosophical orientation is ontological, in that I embrace the notion that blended and stepfamilies experience the subjective and contextual reality of their family structure in ways that extend into all other areas of their lives. These experiences are depicted through the co-researchers' own voices, as captured in interviews. From an axiological standpoint, my primary biases are twofold. First, there is the assumption that academic achievement or positive educational outcomes are intentional and prioritized in families that experience such outcomes. Second is the assumption that positive educational outcomes are a result of cooperative efforts within a family structure and not a solitary effort on the part of the student. I approach this research with the assumption that their realities can be known and, therefore, understood contextually. It is my goal that this study will help inform practical application. Therefore, I adhere to a pragmatist orientation in identifying what works for high achieving adolescent students whose families restructured.

Problem Statement

The context for this study is rooted in the problem of poorer educational outcomes for children in blended and stepfamilies. Part of this problem may be fostered by new couples' avoidance in discussing how familial restructuring will impact the offspring one or each of them brings to the new marriage. In an exploratory investigation of how 99 stepfamily adults in New Zealand prepared for family restructuring, Cartwright (2010) found that 25% of adults admitted that they did not have much discussion about managing the change in family structure for children. Subsequently, 42% stated that, in hindsight, they were not very realistic in their expectations of family at the time of repartnering. For example, couples in Cartwright's (2010) study commonly chose to avoid conversations about how a blended or stepfamily structure will impact children. In doing so, specific considerations like resource allocation were not addressed. This was problematic specifically for stepchildren, who appeared to benefit significantly less than children from two-biological parent households from the financial contributions of parents at the postsecondary educational level (Henretta, Wolf, Van Voorhis, & Soldo, 2012).

More specifically, there is a lack of research in the body concentrating on factors that protect students from these outcomes. Ono (2011) proposed that biological children in first marriages were twice as likely as stepchildren to enroll in college, even when neither group received financial assistance from parents. Conversely, when both groups received approximately $2000, college enrollment was similar. While economic factors moderate educational outcomes for children in blended and stepfamilies, research has also pointed to role ambiguity, conflict, and family cohesion (Martin-Uzzi & Duval-Tsioles, 2013) as possible factors contributing to poorer educational outcomes. Additionally, Tillman (2008a) has examined sibling complex in blended families as a contributing factor. While these studies

examine the negative effects of blended and stepfamily status and associated factors that contribute to poorer educational outcomes, the problem is they do not offer ideas on what contributes to positive outcomes (see, e.g., Wojtkiewicz & Holtzman, 2011). To benefit families and the professionals who serve them, it is important for future research to "disentangle the timing and duration of family status arrangements" (Wu, Costigan, Hou, Kampen, & Schimmele, 2010, p. 576). Future studies also need to develop more multifaceted models for predicting well-being for youth in various family structures (Adler-Baeder et al., 2010). The problem this study seeks to address is the circumstances under which educational resilience and academic achievement are fostered within a blended and stepfamily construct.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this heuristic study is to understand the lived experiences of 10 biological parents of blended or stepfamilies in which at least one child experienced high academic achievement at the middle school or high school level. The theories guiding this study are dynamic systems theory and educational resilience theory. With respect to children of blended and stepfamilies, destabilization occurs during familial restructuring and must be examined within the context of children's biopsychosocial development. Dynamic systems theory suggests that the occurrence of destabilizing events during critical moments in development present opportunities in which novel and adaptive behaviors may be shaped (Thelen, 2005). Educational resilience theory postulates that students faced with significant adversity also have the ability to adapt via specific protective factors in ways that promote academic achievement (Werner, 2012). Educational outcomes are reliant upon student performance, which is inextricable from the educational resilience necessary for students of blended and stepfamilies—an established at-risk

population. Family transitions and restructuring can be considered an adverse circumstance,

particularly for adolescents who are enduring other biopsychosocial transitions.

Significance of the Study

The need for this study arises from a lack of research that assesses the lived experiences

of parents of blended and stepfamilies as they relate to high academic achievement. Because

educational attainment is positively associated with the attainment of one's socio-economic

status in adulthood (Fomby, 2013) and a competent workforce, the findings of this study are

meaningful to classroom teachers, school administrators, school counselors, and school

psychologists by providing an in-depth understanding of decisions family members make to

foster academic achievement. Additionally, research has established that education programs

directed at stepfamilies are effective in cultivating family cohesion and realistic expectations of

stepfamily life (Adler-Baeder & Lucier-Greer, 2012; Skogrand, Davis, & Higginbotham, 2011).

This study seeks to enrich the field of family education by incorporating the cases of both

stepfamilies and blended families, which are distinct in their composition (Coleman, Ganong, &

Jamison, 2011; Harcourt, Adler-Baeder, Erath, & Pettit, 2013).

Additionally, Thelen's (2005) dynamic systems theory (DST) had demonstrated utility in

understanding human development and resilience in the face of trauma (Keenan, 2010a, 2010b).

However, research has not been found indicating how DST might be used to explain educational

outcomes for youth who experience destabilization of family structure. In that way, this study

will inform educators and clinicians interested in the relationship between academic achievement

and adolescents' biopsychosocial development. It is important to note, however, that resilience

is not necessarily global; it is domain specific. An adolescent who demonstrates educational

resilience does not inevitably demonstrate resilience in other areas of his or her life (Cunningham

& Swanson, 2010). Therefore, it is the aim of this study to examine the specific experience of educational resilience in students' educational functioning.

Research Questions

According to Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), qualitative research questions are developed directly from the conceptual framework, or the principle things to be examined. They embody the aspects of a phenomenon the researcher wants to study. Research questions are different than the purpose statement, in that they are more specific and lead to more focused data collection methods (Creswell, 2013; Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña 2014). With regard to heuristic study, Moustakas (1990) outlined the following characteristics necessary for research questions in a heuristic study:

1. It seeks to reveal more fully the essence of meaning of a phenomenon of human experience.

2. It seeks to discover the qualitative aspects, rather than quantitative dimensions, of the phenomenon.

3. It engages one's total self and evokes a personal and passionate involvement and active participation in the process.

4. It does not seek to predict or to determine causal relationships.

5. It is illuminated through careful descriptions, illustrations, metaphors, poetry, dialogue, and other creative renderings rather than by measurements, ratings or scores (p. 42).

This heuristic study is aimed at examining and understanding the attitudes, values, and practices of blended and stepfamily biological parents that promote academic achievement for high performing adolescent students. Based on research highlighting the factors that impair

academic achievement, academic success is likely a matter of what blended and stepfamilies do and experience rather than how they are constructed (Sandstrom & Huerta, 2013). Dynamic systems theory and educational resilience theory, which hold that there is a dynamic interplay between internal and external resources contributing to adaptive development and behaviors, provide the theoretical framework for this study. The conceptual framework for this study is driven by the pragmatic assumption that what is effective in promoting high academic achievement will satisfactorily answer the questions being asked by the study (Creswell, 2013).

In order to explore how these concepts (attitudes, values, and practices) interact with each other, the central research question to be answered in this study is: What are the values, practices, and attitudes experienced by biological parents in blended and stepfamily units that contribute to high academic achievement for adolescents in these families? Ginther and Pollack (2002) postulated that poorer educational outcomes for children of blended families were likely moderated by resource allocation (e.g., time, money, attention), stress within the blended family system, role ambiguity, family income and perhaps cumulative transitions. However, there may be more unexplored and idiosyncratic factors that explain the association between poorer educational outcomes and family status (Ginther & Pollack, 2002). It is important to examine whether these issues or issues yet to be uncovered also contribute in some way to the high academic performance of youth in blended and stepfamilies. Creswell (2013) advised qualitative researchers to provide a small number of subquestions that bring the central research question into sharper focus. To that end, this heuristic study asks the following subquestions:

1. What perceptions do biological parents in blended or stepfamilies have regarding the impact of family status on students' academic learning experiences during the adolescent years?

Research demonstrates that destabilizing events occurring during the adolescent years compounds difficulties in school, as this stage in development is already rife with increased insecurities, self-consciousness, and negotiating the balance between growing independence and the need for continued support from parents (Cavanagh & Fomby, 2012; Teunissen et al., 2011). Adolescence, as a transitional window, is compatible with the portion of DST that contends "human beings are acutely sensitive to the environment and have the capacity to respond with existing subsystem organization, to respond by modifying a subsystem, and to respond by transforming a subsystem when at thresholds, or tipping points" (Keenan, 2010b, p. 1041). Cavanagh and Fomby (2012) suggested that familial instability occurring during the already tempestuous period of adolescence exacerbates academic, social, and behavioral inequalities among youngsters. Therefore, it is critical to examine how blended or stepfamily status impacts high achieving adolescents within the context of family structure.

2. In what ways are biological parents in blended and stepfamilies deliberate in promoting academic achievement?

Sandstrom and Huerta (2013) asserted there is a gap in the literature examining parents' role in lessening the stress children experience during challenging disruptions. This subquestion is predicated on the assumption that academic achievement is not an unintentional phenomenon and, therefore, neither is parental influence to that end. Understanding intentional practices is relevant in understanding the phenomenon within the context of family status (Vincent & Maxwell, 2016). Not only are intentional practices on the part of parents considered vital in the enrichment of adolescents' academic careers (Vincent & Maxwell, 2016), they are critical in promoting educational resilience when risk factors have the potential to derail a youngster's educational pursuits (Williams & Portman, 2014). Cunningham and Swanson (2010) contended

that when parental monitoring, involvement, and intentional exposure of their children to opportunities are high, student competence is fostered and resilience is exercised. Additionally, Cunningham and Swanson indicated that youth's perception of personal problems was positively associated with parental monitoring.

3. What do biological parents in blended and stepfamilies perceive as challenges in facilitating academic performance?

This question is an extension of the previous question, which follows the logic that greater understanding of protective factors will result from inquiring about perceived obstacles. Fomby (2013) cited three possible trajectories associated with poorer educational outcomes for adolescents in blended and stepfamilies: a) repetitive repartnering of parents, b) diminished resource capital, and c) adolescence itself. Because DST would suggest that these pathways are not mutually exclusive but could involve an interplay of each (Thelen, 2005), it is important to consider whether these challenges are confronted by high achieving adolescents and integrated into their experience so that new and functional pathways might emerge and promote positive educational outcomes (Keenan, 2010b).

4. How do biological parents in blended and stepfamilies address limited resource and social capital as it relates to school/academic performance?

Considerable attention has been given to the notion that children in blended and stepfamilies are at a disadvantage educationally because there is a thinner distribution of economic and social resources within the family (Chiu & McBryde-Chang, 2010; Skogrand, Davis, & Higginbotham, 2011; Wojtkiewicz & Holtzman, 2011). With regard to resource and social capital, the complexities of blended and stepfamilies are illustrated by Tach (2014):

The prevalence of multiple-partner fertility for parents and half siblings for children

raises questions about how parents in blended families transmit cultural and economic

resources to their children. Children in blended families potentially have access to

different economic and cultural resources than their half and stepsiblings even though

they live in the same household, because they have different biological, step, and

nonresident parents. Furthermore, all children in blended families may receive few

parental resources if parents make contributions to family members outside the household

in the form of alimony, child support, and time spent with nonresidential children. This

potentially reduces parental investments in both residential and nonresidential children

(p. 90).

Wojtkiewicz and Holtzman (2011) found that children reared in a stepfamily household

were less likely than 2-biological parent and mother-only households to attend 4-year colleges.

The researchers presumed that this was because children of stepfamily households had less

monetary and emotional support than their counterparts. This heuristic phenomenological study

seeks to add to this body of knowledge by investigating how the factor of resource and social

capital is experienced by blended and stepfamilies with a high achieving adolescent.

Definitions

1. *Blended family*–There is at least one child biologically related to both parents in the home
   and there is at least one child who is biologically related to only one parent. There is a
   half-sibling relationship present (Coleman, Ganong, & Jamison, 2011).

2. *Stepfamily*–no child in the family is biologically related to both parents. At least one
   parent has a child from a previous union and the newly partnered couple has no
   biological children in common (Coleman, Ganong, & Jamison, 2011).

3. *Step-nuclear hybrid family*–Also conceptualized as a blended family. Harcourt, Adler-Baeder, Erath, & Pettit (2013) use the term "mutual child" in this definition to refer to the child who is biologically related to both parents in the home.

Summary

Research has established an association between family structure and educational outcomes (Tillman, 2008a, 2008b). Specifically, children in blended and stepfamilies tend to have poorer educational outcomes than children in two-biological parent households (Cavanagh & Fomby, 2012). This occurrence may be due to disruptions in school enrollment and attendance, changes in social and economic resources, and the age of the child at that time of family restructuring (see, e.g., Cutili et al., 2013; Henretta et al., 2012; Cavanagh & Huston, 2008). While research has identified factors that may contribute to poorer educational outcomes of children in blended and stepfamilies, there is a gap in the research that addresses factors that contribute to positive educational outcomes for children of blended and stepfamilies. Using dynamic systems theory and educational resilience theory as theoretical underpinnings, the aim of this heuristic study was to examine the values, attitudes, and practices of biological parents of high achieving adolescents in blended and stepfamilies. This study used Moustakas's (1990) method of heuristic inquiry to explore how blended or stepfamily status impacts educational experiences during the adolescent years. This study also investigated ways in which parents deliberately foster academic achievement. Parents' perspectives on achievement, family status, and dealing with perceived barriers were studied.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

Blended and stepfamilies are a reality of contemporary society that shows every indication of growing in both incidence and complexity (Cavanagh & Fomby, 2012). Researchers have sought to understand and explain the ways in which blended and stepfamily structures impact educational outcome and, by extension, society (Turunen, 2014; Wojtkiewicz & Holtzman, 2011; Chiu & McBryde-Chang, 2010). Much of the literature examining the relationship between blended and stepfamily status and children's educational outcomes has indicated that children of blended and stepfamilies experience decreased social and resource capital (Henretta, Wolf, Van Voohis, & Doldo, 2012; Shriner, Mullis, & Shriner, 2010), lower levels of parental involvement (Olszowy, 2012; Ono, 2010), greater school mobility (Cutuli, et al., 2013), and more cumulative family instability (Cavanaugh & Fomby, 2012) than children in two-biological parent households, which adversely effects academic achievement and overall educational attainment. There is also evidence that there are sensitive developmental windows (from ages 10-15) that are particularly impacted by familial restructuring (Wu, Costigan, Hou, Kampen, & Schimmele, 2010). However, there is comparatively little research present in the literature that examines the factors (e.g., values and behaviors) that contribute to the academic success of children in blended families. There is a gap in the literature that seeks to understand what works for children of blended and stepfamilies with respect to positive educational outcomes.

Given the risk factors that are both common and unique to blended families in general, and the children of these families in particular, one might inquire as to whether there are also common and unique practices carried out by blended families that help children defy the odds so

prevalently established in the literature. Using dynamic systems theory and educational resilience theory as the theoretical framework, this study aims to understand the factors that contribute to the academic success of adolescents of blended and stepfamilies. This chapter will provide a contextual understanding of dynamic systems theory and educational resilience theory and deliver a review of current literature that establishes a need for this heuristic phenomenological study.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical underpinnings for this study are dynamic systems theory (DST) (Thelen, 2005) and educational resilience theory (Werner, 2012). These theories address the sensitive period in development that is adolescence and one's process of adaptation to destabilizing phenomena within the educational context (Keenan, 2010a, 2010b). Furthermore, these theories give attention to individual, contextual, and the social aspects that inform educational outcomes (Cunningham & Swanson, 2010). Each theory provides insight into the values and practices of individuals in blended and stepfamilies and guides the purpose and design of this study to understand the factors that contribute to positive educational outcomes for adolescents in these family structures.

Dynamic Systems Theory

Thelen (2005) postulated that human development is continuous (second by second) and nonlinear. Dynamic systems theory emerged from the mathematical and physical sciences, but it also fits into the realm of biology and developmental psychology (Miller, 2011). Dynamic systems theory also builds on Brofenbrenner's bioecological model of human development, which assumes changeability, various trajectories, and the timing of internal processes and environmental factors on individual development (Keenan, 2010a). It supports the notion that

interaction effects are essential to studying human development (Véronneau & Dishion, 2010).

Central to this theory is the ideal that the whole of an organism is greater than the sum of its parts

(Miller, 2011). DST was developed specifically from chaos theory, which is based on the

concept that certain thermodynamic conditions cause organisms to self-organize and create

ordered patterns from its parts (Thelen, 2005). Individually, these parts do not possess the code

to reorganize on their own. Rather, it is the cooperative response that results in the emergence of

a new pattern.

Thelen likened this theory to a mountain stream: "We can see whirlpools, eddies, and

waterfalls, places where the water is moving rapidly and places where it is still" (2005, p. 259).

Likewise, child development has patterns in which the social, biological, and historical patterns

impact behavior and future change. Development is nonlinear in that one event at one point in

time may yield a small effect. Yet, at another point in time, that same action may yield a

profound and enduring effect (Thelen, 2005; Thelen & Bates, 2003). Furthermore, that same

action may impact one child in adolescence dramatically and another, more resilient adolescent

much more mildly (Thelen, 2005). According to DST, humans self-organize through the

interchange of two processes, which are positive feedback and negative feedback (Granic &

Patterson, 2006). Positive feedback is understood as the introduction of a destabilizing event that

points an organism toward novel behavior. Negative feedback is when the interplay of

trajectories remains undisturbed and stability is maintained (Granic & Patterson, 2006). Both

forms of feedback are needed in the process of human development because positive feedback

triggers disruption in an organism's response to ecological changes, and the organism's process

of self-organizations is sustained through negative feedback (Granic & Patterson, 2006). These

mechanisms are operationalized within the principles of complexity, continuity, and dynamic stability.

DST embodies three principles: a) complexity, b) continuity, and c) dynamic stability (Thelen, 2005). Complexity indicates that all human behavior, from cognition to physical action, is the product of internal, external, and interdependent parts working in concert within a given context (Thomas, 2001). The concept of complexity shifts the focus of human development away from causality and toward connection between internal and external factors (Thelen, 2005). Human development occurs without directions, steps, or phases. Yet, there is fluidity and order (Keenan, 2010b). Continuity refers to the idea that human beings are continuously self-organizing organisms (Spencer et al., 2006). Specifically, the present state of a system is the ending point for its previous state and the starting point for its future state. There is a continuous interrelationship between the developmental process and the feedback received during that process (Keenan, 2010b). Spencer et al. (2006) suggested that this is the case for every level of organization within an organism. Furthermore, the interaction between development and feedback takes place in an organism's environment (Keenan, 2010b). For example, one's sense of self as an empathic person will evoke feedback from others that contributes either to the continuity or dimming of that belief and behavior (Keenan, 2010b). Finally, dynamic stability is based on the notion that human behavior is organized "softly," in that it is generally stable, yet flexible (Spencer et al., 2006). Behavior changes to suit a need or a demand. When that demand is no longer present, or the behavior is insufficient to meet that demand, novel patterns emerge (Thelen & Bates, 2003). DST suggests that development is facilitated by the continuous and nonlinear emergence of novel behaviors (Thelen, 2005). In order for problem-solving to be

triggered, however, instability must occur. Too much stability without flexibility inhibits

adaptability (Keenan, 2010a).

As complex organisms, humans develop continuously and nonlinearly within the context

of their environment (Thelen & Bates, 2003; Thelen, 2005; Thomas, 2001). There is no value

attached to disruptions or destabilizing events in that they are neither good nor bad (Keenan,

2010a). Multiple pathways may be formed in response to these disruptions based on that

person's biopsychosocial history and present state (Keenan, 2010a). These pathways inform

future trajectories (Keenan, 2010a; Thelen, 2005). Likewise, stability should not be

misinterpreted as necessarily desirable and stability of behavior does not imply adaptability

(Granic & Patterson, 2006). Instead, there are merely tipping points at which new patterns of

behavior are developed and new trajectories are formed (Keenan, 2010a). Dynamic systems

theorists refer to these tipping points as phase transitions, or perturbations (Granic & Patterson,

2006). Too much flexibility at these tipping points and a person might be thrown into a chaotic,

dysfunctional pattern of behavior that impairs reorganization. Too much rigidity at these tipping

points and a person might become fixed and unable to develop novel and adaptive patterns of

behavior (Keenan, 2010a). Maladaptive behavior can be stable and resistant to change,

particularly if the context offers feedback that encourages maladaptive behavior [e.g., antisocial

or deviant behavior (Granic & Patterson, 2006)]. Such context is established by developmental

and interaction history (Granic & Patterson, 2006).

Whether internal or external, disruptions or destabilizing events are not considered

adverse from a DST perspective:

The capacity to shift and change from imbalance to balance requires some periods of

instability as existing order makes way for new order or patterns. Thus, periods of

destabilization need not be viewed negatively, avoided or feared; rather, they signal a needed response to something in one's environment and serve as the threshold to a new reorganization. Such an understanding redefines our idea of well-being; instead of a steady state, well-being is the ability to move between imbalance and balance when needed or desired, tolerating the experience of transitional uncertainty and discomfort (Keenan, 2010a, p. 309).

Thelen (2005) claimed that dynamic systems theory (DST) is able to stand under the weight of both predictable and unpredictable features of development. DST forces us to reconsider pure causal explanations to certain outcomes. Thelen's (2005) contention was that even the smallest disruptions in processes may have consequences seen throughout the life cycle. Thelen (2005) provided an example of a baby crawling and, subsequently, learning to walk. The behavior of crawling is temporarily stable and the preferred mode of locomotion until it is no longer useful. Yet, an inexperienced walker will return to crawling when that novel behavior is not stable enough in a given context (e.g., a slippery floor or not enough furniture to support self). Broadly, practiced behavior is the default of novel behavior but novel behavior can be practiced and, consequently, can become "old" behavior (Thelen, 2005). DST suggests that development is facilitated by the continuous and nonlinear emergence of novel behaviors. In order for problem-solving to be triggered, however, instability must occur. A person's response to destabilization is contingent upon that person's history and internal and external resources (Keenan, 2010b). That person's developmental history also determines the extent to which he or she demonstrates resilience, particularly in the context of his or her educational experiences.

Educational Resilience Theory

Garmezy and Masten (1991) described resilience as "a process of, or capacity for, or the outcome of successful adaptation despite challenging and threatening circumstances" (p. 459). Werner and Smith (1982) suggested that, despite certain risk factors in a person's history or current environment, some individuals develop the capacity to thrive. They further argued that vulnerable individuals are at risk to the extent that factors such as poverty, undereducation, and family instability are salient in their lives. Yet, that susceptibility does not necessarily translate into cyclical maladaptive behavior (Werner & Smith, 1982).

Resilience is often misconceived as a personality or character trait (i.e., a resilient child) or the mediated by a single event (Downey, 2008). Rather, it is a process or a behavior of functional adaptation though adverse life events (Werner, 2012). Resilience is also considered domain specific. Educational resilience theory does not postulate that students necessarily demonstrate resilience in other areas of their lives but it does indicate that positive choices are made in an area that greatly impacts life outcomes well into adulthood (Cunningham & Swanson, 2010). Educational resilience theory addresses the question of how vulnerable students, or students at risk of poorer educational outcomes, succeed academically despite hardships and obstacles (Paat, 2015). Educational resilience theory postulates that students faced with significant adversity also have the ability to adapt via specific protective factors in ways that promote academic achievement (Downey, 2014).

Specifically, these protective factors are grouped into personal protective factors, family protective factors, and community protective factors (Downey, 2014). Williams and Bryan (2013) similarly grouped protective factors into home factors, school factors, and community factors. Cutili et al. (2013) argued that the most instrumental protective factors include the

student's sensibilities and ecology. Personal protective factors include internal resources such as the ability to think critically, solve problems, concentrate, and exercise discipline and self-control (Downey, 2014). Furthermore, educational outcomes are largely contingent upon students' personal goals and aspirations (Paat, 2015). While the primary construct in educational resilience is exposure to significant adversity, the secondary construct is adaptability (Cunningham & Swanson, 2010). It involves intrinsic motivation or high academic self-esteem, influential role models, and long-term social support from parents and/or teachers (Cunningham & Swanson, 2010). Self-esteem is promoted when student receive sincere feedback that addresses their strengths and areas of improvement (Downey, 2008). Intrinsic motivation suggests than an individual's adaptive behavior is its own reward. Fostering intrinsic motivation gives students a sense of control over their academic performance, whereas they may not have that sense of control in other areas of their lives (Cunningham & Swanson, 2010). Family and home factors include the establishment of rules and high but reasonable expectations (Downey, 2014; Williams & Bryan, 2013). Parents' high aspirations and expectations of their children is a form of social capital that becomes intergenerational, as this protective factor tends to produce children who function like their parents (Paat, 2005). Furthermore, high expectations may mitigate barriers associated with educational inequities (Paat, 2005). When parents have high expectations, provide consistent monitoring of students, and expose student to opportunities, student competence is fostered and resilience is exercised (Cunningham & Swanson, 2010).

Students facing adversity or difficult life experiences cannot be expected to thrive under temporal programs or momentary fixes. Rather, they are best helped through supports that are enduring and applied to daily functioning, namely in the classrooms where they spend the most time (Downey, 2008). School and community factors include the presence of organized

extracurricular programs and activities, stable social support networks, and reliable relationships with adults at school (Downey, 2014; Williams & Bryan, 2013). Schools can help foster educational resilience by creating an environment in which there exists high academic standards, incentives and rewards, meaningful feedback for students, and the expectation that students will take responsibility for problem solving and successes (Downey, 2008). Moreover, educational resiliency is cultivated by a nurturing teacher-student relationship in which students know the teachers care.

Influential role models are adults in a student's life who offer respected advice and demonstrate behaviors that resilient students find meaningful and applicable in their lives. These adults serve as buffers against negative circumstances (Cunningham & Swanson, 2010). Additionally, educational resilience is furthered in students who have meaningful relationships with other resilient students (Williams & Bryan, 2013). Véronneau and Dishion (2010) asserted that students who are accepted by high-achieving students could be expected to demonstrate pro-social behavior and greater commitment to their academic performance. Conversely, adolescents who experience simultaneous rejection by pro-social peers and acceptance by deviant peers are more likely to demonstrate maladaptive behaviors in school and the community. It is incumbent upon teachers to remember that at-risk does not mean apathetic or incompetent (Downey, 2008). Vulnerable students tend to demonstrate higher academic achievement when they engage in cooperative learning projects and tutoring (Downey, 2008). These activities help build their social support network and encourage problem-solving strategies (Downey, 2008). Furthermore, providing an academic climate in which educational resilience is realized teaches transferrable life skills (e.g., critical thinking, problem solving, conflict resolution, effective communication) that promote educational and occupational development over the life cycle (Downey, 2008).

With respect to this study, dynamic systems theory and educational resilience theory argues that there are internal and external factors working in concert and within the context of adolescents' biopsychosocial development that contribute to their academic success in the face of familial reconstitution. Familial restructuring that leads to a blended or stepfamily status is a destabilizing event that research has shown is associated with poorer educational outcomes (see, e.g., Cavanagh & Fomby, 2012; Tillman, 2008a, 2008b; Turunen, 2014). Children in blended and stepfamilies are considered at greater risk of poorer outcomes because they are faced with diminished levels of parental involvement, decreased access to resource capital, increased role ambiguity among family members, and higher rates of school mobility (Henretta, Wolf, Van Voorhis, & Soldo, 2012; Wojtkiewicz & Holtzman, 2011; Turunen, 2014). Yet, educational resilience theory argues that risk does not invariably decide outcome (Downey, 2008). Additionally, DST contends that development occurs when adaptive behaviors emerge from the interplay of internal and external factors present during destabilizing events (Thelen, 2005). For example, students' peer and parent-child relationships form a distinctive mesosystem that may buffer against or compensate for factors that may increase risk (Véronneau & Dishion, 2010).

The aim of this study is to address the gap in the literature that does not adequately explain what personal, familial, and community factors promote educational outcomes and how those factors operate together based on students' development. To that end, this research adheres to a pragmatist orientation, in that knowledge gained from this study is intended to inform practical application. This philosophical orientation asserts that knowledge results from a transaction between the self and the environment. It is predicated on the notion that solutions are derived from deliberate choices—not merely trial and error—within the context of certain experiences. Pragmatism contends that knowledge is produced as a result of what works in the

pursuit to solve a particular problem (Hammond, 2013). Pragmatism holds that knowledge is tentative and evolves through various forms of data and inquiry (Bishop, 2015). Moreover, it asks the question of whether the knowledge gained is useful or meaningful within a specific context (Bishop, 2015; Creswell, 2013).

This philosophical orientation is compatible with the theoretical framework of this study, in that each contends that problems are solved based on context and one's position within that context. As it relates to this study, pragmatism, educational resilience, and DST hold that adolescents in blended families experience academic achievement as a function of how the bonded family system influences and is influenced by internal and external factors. The following review of the literature discusses factors that are considered to adversely impact the educational outcomes of children of blended families and what factors or measures may serve to moderate educational outcomes.

Related Literature

Destabilization and School Performance

Family structural changes are partly due to socio-economic and cultural shifts (Ripoll-Núñez & Carrillo, 2016). According to the U. S. Census Bureau (2011), 5.3 million children lived with at least one stepparent in 2009. This number accounted for 10% of all children who lived with two parents. Most of these children lived with their biological mother and a stepfather (4.1 million) (U. S. Census Bureau, 2011). This trend is expected to increase, which suggests that the majority of youth in the United States will live in a blended or stepfamily structure at some point during their life span (Cavanagh & Fomby, 2012). Moreover, blended families tend to have a higher dissolution rate than first married couples, adding to the cumulative fragility and instability of this family structure (Adler-Baeder, Lucier-Greer, 2012). The compounded

fragility of blended and stepfamilies commonly then results in what Tach terms "serial partnering" (2015, p. 89), which refers to the frequent repartnering of adults who experience increased dissolution of blended and stepfamily systems. One of the outcomes of serial partnering is that approximately one-third of children end up living in a stepfamily complex before the age of 18 (Tach, 2015).

Educational outcomes appear to suffer under the unique stress of being in a blended or stepfamily. Research has identified several factors that result in poorer educational outcomes for children in blended and stepfamilies. These factors include school mobility, economic transitions, and cumulative changes within the family structure (Henretta, Wolf, Van Voorhis, & Soldo, 2012; Wojtkiewicz & Holtzman, 2011; Turunen, 2014). Fomby (2013) suggested that there are three possible trajectories associated with poorer educational outcomes for children who have experienced familial destabilization. These trajectories are cumulative family instability [e.g., serial partnering (Tach, 2015)], decreased resource capital, and adolescent behaviors that are encouraged by cumulative changes in family structure. Fomby also indicated that parental involvement is considered to manifest differently within blended and stepfamilies, which may be associated with poorer outcomes. Less discussed in the literature is the impact that familial roles within the blended or stepfamily may have on academic achievement. From a dynamic systems perspective, these factors must be examined as discrete, yet converging, concepts that lead to a better understanding of educational outcomes. Each of these components will be examined in the following sections.

School mobility. Residential mobility is positively associated with school mobility and highly mobile students are shown to be at significant risk for lower academic achievement (Cutuli, et al., 2013, Fomby, 2013). Family reconstitution is a common reason behind school

mobility (Dupere, Archambault, Leventhal, Dion, & Anderson, 2015). Children of blended and stepfamilies often encounter higher school mobility than children living in biological two-parent households due to residential changes that occur during family restructuring (Sandstrom & Huerta, 2013). The reasons for this may be complex. For one, the marriage dissolution rate for blended family couples is higher than for first-time married couples, which contributes to the cumulative effect of familial, residential, and, by extension, educational instability on children's lives (Cavanaugh & Fomby, 2012). According to Cavanagh and Fomby (2012), a child in a blended or stepfamily may experience relocation upon entering a new family system and, should that union dissolve, experience another relocation. Furthermore, changes in family structure may also come with changes in parental employment or income. Variances in family income may also affect school mobility (Sandstrom & Huerta, 2013). Should changes in school enrollment result in movement to a school of lower quality or in a less desirable location, the risk of poorer educational outcomes is heightened (Paat, 2005).

The blended and stepfamily system, which is inherently born of loss and instability, is automatically a more fragile unit than traditional families (Gonzales, 2009). School-age children experiencing both familial restructuring and school changes are at higher risk for adjustment problems, creating cyclical family and academic stress (Dupere et al., 2015). When a child in that family system is then faced with the stress that accompanies school or residential mobility, that student is then positioned to have to navigate through a changed home life and a new school community (Wu, Costigan, Hou, Kampen, & Schimmele, 2010). The co-occurrence of school disruption and familial reconstitution create significant barriers to adjustment and positive educational outcomes (Dupere et al., 2015). This may be particularly difficult for adolescent

students, as they are already experiencing significant changes in behavioral, cognitive, socio-emotional, and physical development (Paat, 2005). Further,

> During this life stage, young people spend more waking hours at school than in any other setting…[and] have more freedom and autonomy from adults. [They] become increasingly self-conscious and cognizant of social comparisons…academic pressures are greater, and academic motivation and achievement decline compared to what students experience in elementary schools. Taken together, the curricular organization of schools becomes more open and less structured just as young people's motivation and opportunities to disengage and act out increase (Cavanagh & Fomby, 2012, p. 82).

When school mobility is also met with changes in resource and social capital, the influence may be both unexpected and enduring. Because blended and stepfamilies bring more children to the family equation, resource allocation may be adversely impacted, and these families are more likely to face issues of economic instability (Tillman, 2008a, 2008b). Therefore, changes in resource and social capital appear to be a by-product of familial reconstitution.

Changes in resource and social capital. Literature on resource dilution theory indicates that parents' finite economic and interpersonal resources are more sparsely disseminated as the number of children in a family increases, resulting in poorer educational outcomes for children (Chen, 2015). Adding to the complex challenges of blended and stepfamily status is the management of money, which is more likely to be done separately than in traditional nuclear families, resulting in parents handling the expenditures of their biological children more often than their stepchildren (Raijas, 2011). This has significant implications for children's educational attainment. Educational outcomes consider not only academic achievement at the

primary and secondary school levels, it considers educational attainment at the post-secondary level (Henretta et al., 2012). In a study examining the correlation between college attendance, parental contributions to college costs, and family structure, it was found that being a stepchild significantly reduced the likelihood of attending college. Additionally, having a stepmother in the family constellation substantially reduced the amount of financial support college students received (Henretta et al., 2012). It should be noted, however, that Henretta et al. drew a distinction between blended families and stepfamilies. A blended family was defined as one in which at least one child in the home was biologically related to *both* parents and there was a half-sibling complex, whereas a stepfamily was defined as one in which there was no half-sibling complex and all children were biologically related to only one parent. Their study demonstrated that blended family status had no effect on college attendance. As expected, children in both family types received less financial support for college than children living with two biological parents and no half-siblings (Henretta et al., 2012). This may largely be due to the idea that stepparents feel less inclined to provide financial support to their stepchildren than they do their biological children (Turunen, 2014). These findings are important in that they have implications not just for college attendance, but college graduation.

Children living in stepfamilies who do attend college appear to have a lower probability of actually finishing their postsecondary educational pursuits (Fomby, 2013). Adolescents who experience familial destabilization tend to have lower resource capital to facilitate transition to higher education and, for those admitted to college, approximately 25% are less likely to finish than their peers who do not experience family structure change (Fomby, 2013). Family income has been demonstrated to play a significant role in the correlation between students who live in a stepfamily and their educational attainment at the postsecondary level (Wojtkiewicz &

Holtzman, 2011). School-age children's academic achievement has been shown to be positively related to family resource capital (Shriner, Mullis, & Shriner, 2010), which makes it safe to assume that academic achievement beyond the school-age years is colored by the effects of family resource capital. This assertion must be qualified within the context of other variables, such as race. With regard to competence and well-being, Adler-Baeder et al. (2010) reported no significant difference between African American youth living in stepfamilies and youth living in traditional two-parent families competence. It has been proposed that African American families tend to be communal-oriented in their approach to family and children, which may translate into shared social and economic resources (Adler-Baeder et al., 2010). Future research should examine this claim more fully.

While children's educational outcomes appear adversely impacted by changes in resource capital, there is also evidence supporting the idea that children's access to social capital is adversely altered as a result of familial restructuring (Skogrand, Davis, & Higginbotham, 2011). Social capital is generally understood as an individual's access to social networks or supports that provides benefit to all involved (Colton, Janzen, & Laverty, 2015). Skogrand et al. asserted that one of the largest obstacles blended families face is the lack of a viable social support system. This is problematic, as there is a positive correlation between one's social capital and one's social, mental, and emotional well-being, particularly for those who lack adequate resource or economic capital (Colton et al.). As it relates to student mobility and economic transitions, repeated relocations may have an adverse effect on social networks, making it difficult for family members to access needed support during difficult times (Sandstrom & Huerta, 2013). Moreover, children may find themselves unable to adjust and attain adequate educational development (Halpern-Meekin & Tach, 2008).

Additionally, blended or stepfamily status tends to result in diminished time, attention, and involvement on the part of the parent (Cavanagh & Fomby, 2012). The instant family dynamic—the presence of stepsiblings—means that children not only have to compete for financial resources, they must also compete for time and attention within a stepfamily unit. Chen's (2015) study demonstrated that only children had a meager advantage over children with siblings, particularly when compared to first-borns in a two-sibling complex, over whom they had no advantage at all. While only children were able to monopolize parents' economic and intangible resources, they did not outperform their counterparts on measures of academic achievement. It is important to note that Chen's research focused on Taiwanese only children living with their biological parents. No research was found to indicate whether American only children living in a stepfamily structure outperform children with siblings in a stepfamily structure.

Nonetheless, Chiu and McBryde-Chang (2010) reported that children who compete for family resources demonstrate lower reading scores, which are highly predictive of overall academic success. The number of siblings in the family likely determines how educational resources are allocated (Schmeer & Teechman, 2009). Furthermore, there may be a symbiotic relationship between families' and schools' social and resource capital. School districts with varying degrees of social, economic, and cultural resources may impact how and to what extent individual and family resources are managed (Cavanagh & Fomby, 2012). Blended families in which the parents are both socially and financially equipped to navigate parenting appear to be the best safeguards against poorer educational outcomes for youth (Wen, 2008). Equitable dissemination of social and economic resources depends not only on what is available, but also on the level of commitment and involvement of both biological and stepparents (Wen, 2008).

Parental Involvement

Parental involvement is believed to influence motivation, study habits, competence, and expectations for educational pursuits beyond the high school level (Brueck, Mazza, & Tousignant, 2012; von Otter, 2014). Yet, there is no single definition of parental involvement upon which scholars agree. Dimensions of parental involvement may include parental engagement, parental availability or parents' provision of educational resources (Ripoll-Núñez & Carillo, 2016). Brueck et al. operationalized parental involvement as parents' expectations of academic performance, encouragement of performance improvement, overall academic guidance, parental communication with instructors, and parental involvement in school activities. One useful way of conceptualizing parental involvement is to examine it along two dimensions: 1) parents' involvement beliefs and 2) parents' involvement practices (von Otter, 2014). Involvement beliefs include parents' attitude toward school as a priority and their educational aspirations for their children. Involvement beliefs are positively associated with educational attainment beyond the high school level (von Otter, 2014). Involvement practices refer to the overt actions parents take regarding educational support, such as helping with homework or purchasing educational materials. Involvement practices appear to be positively associated only with academic performance at the primary and secondary educational level (von Otter, 2014). Parental involvement, whether exercised in beliefs or practices, are associated with parenting style (Ripoll-Núñez & Carillo, 2016).

Parenting style. Parenting style is instrumental in children's academic performance and is manifested in the degree of parental involvement (Majumder, 2016). Majumder (2016) asserted that parenting style impacts not just educational outcomes at the secondary level but at the post-secondary level, as well. Majumder (2016) described four parenting styles: 1)

authoritative, 2) authoritarian, 3) permissive, and 4) uninvolved. Uninvolved parenting was described as those who are low on demandingness and low on responsiveness. Whereas low parental warmth and low expectations tend to impair students sense of competence and confidence, supportive parenting relates positively and significantly to engagement coping, and consequently, to academic achievement (Goeke-Morey et al, 2012; Swanson, Valients, Lemery-Chalfant & O'Brien, 2011). Supportive parenting may also be understood as authoritarian parenting, characterized by high demandingness and high responsiveness (Majumder, 2016). Conversely, controlling parenting was negatively related to achievement and physical health (Swanson et al, 2011). Controlling parenting, or authoritative parenting, is characterized by high demandingness and low responsiveness (Majumder, 2016), and has the most adverse effect on student performance. Swanson et al. (2011) concluded that "supportive and controlling parenting practices are related to students' ego resilience, and ego resilience is related to students' performance in school, social competence, and physical health" (p. 563).

The issue then becomes a matter of what is considered appropriate and necessary parental involvement within the blended family unit. During the adolescent years, students in blended and stepfamilies may reap the most benefit from parental involvement if it develops as the child develops (Wen, 2008). For instance, supportive parental involvement that promotes educational outcomes may shift from school involvement and helping with homework—meaningful practices in the primary school years—to conversations about future goals and facilitating processes as the student transitions from high school to college or career (Carolan & Wasserman, 2015). Research emphasizes the importance of parents remaining actively involved in adolescents' school performance, as it provides a basis upon which their post-secondary educational pursuits are actualized (Brueck, et al. 2012). Regardless of the mechanism through which parental

involvement occurs, there appears to be a reciprocal relationship between parental involvement and academic performance, each reinforcing the other (von Otter, 2014).

      Parental involvement and family structure. Parental involvement is believed to decline during adolescence (King, Boyd, & Thorsen, 2015) and when couples enter a blended family relationship, thereby adversely impacting the educational attainment of students (Turunen, 2014). Decreased parental involvement may also be associated with students' transition into adolescence because it is also a time when peers take on a more salient role in adolescents' lives (Véronneau & Dishion, 2010) and adolescents contend for more autonomy and independence from their parents (Granic & Patterson, 2006). This natural transition, working in concert with family structure, may compound the effects of parental involvement on educational outcomes. In Wojtkiewicz and Holtzman's (2011) study examining the difference in college graduation rates between students in stepfamily households, single-mother households, and two-biological parent households, children from stepfamily households were at a significant disadvantage when controlling for parental involvement. Controlling for parental involvement explained approximately 19% of the variance between college graduation rates of students in stepfamilies and their counterparts (Wojtkiewicz & Holtzman, 2011).

      Similarly, in Downey's (2014) qualitative study examining children's perspectives on factors and mechanisms that fostered educational success in the face of personal, social, and/or academic adversity, parental involvement—termed *family assistance*—was specifically identified as one of those factors. According to students, family assistance in the area of helping to create an environment conducing to completing homework was paramount. As demonstrated in social capital research, parental involvement often struggles under the weight of blended/stepfamily structures (see, e.g., Fomby, 2013; Raijas, 2011). One explanation for this is

stepfamily members experience weaker attachment and bonding to non-biological family members, which keeps them from experiencing the parent-child communication needed to serve as a protective factor against social and educational risks (Ripoll-Núñez & Carrillo, 2016). Nonresident children in stepfamilies tend to experience less parental involvement than children who live with both their biological and stepparent (Stewart, 2005). For instance, fathers who are members of blended or stepfamilies are more likely to have children living in households apart from them (Baxter, 2012). However, Baxter (2012) suggested that both residential stepchildren and nonresidential biological children spend less time and experience lower levels of involvement with fathers who have children living elsewhere. This may include less time engaging in activities such as helping with homework or simply talking to their children. While family structures in which the father has residential and nonresidential children tend to experience diminished parental involvement from the father, it does not necessarily mean that fathers' value parenting less (Baxter, 2012). Parental involvement may also vary due to the degree of role ambiguity and family cohesion (Halpern-Meekin & Tach, 2008).

Role ambiguity and role conflict. In blended family structures, the relationship between biological parent and child(ren) is older than the couple relationship. Consequently, there is naturally a vying for position with each relationship, a dynamic not present in traditional families. Stepfamily functioning is a reflection of couple functioning. This complex interaction creates stress for the couple, the stepparent and the children (Martin-Uzzi & Duval-Tsioles, 2013). At the core of these challenges is family members' struggle in defining who does and does not belong in the new family construct (Stewart, 2005). Unlike with traditional families, boundaries are not easily set by residence, kinship, or social roles (Stewart, 2005). Role ambiguity may be exacerbated by the flexibility of family boundaries that result from the

increase of blended and stepfamily structures and changes in household and family configurations (Castrén & Widmer, 2015). A child living in a blended or stepfamily construct can have an additional set of parental figures, which may bring with them additional grandparents and other relatives who are challenged to define their role in that stepchild's life. This leads to the question of who is included and excluded in a restructured family (Castrén & Widmer, 2015).

These competing priorities, however managed, are certain to impact family functioning and, by extension, academic achievement. In a study examining the relationship between marital relationship quality and youth educational outcomes, there was a positive relationship between the quality of the marital relationship and youths' motivation and commitment toward higher education (Orthner et al., 2009). It is the parents who ultimately set the tone for how family members relate to one another. The quality of the couple and/or parental relationship may have the greatest influence over sibling relationships and overall adaptation of the family (Anderson, 1999; Deater-Deckard, Dunn, & Lussier, 2002). As it relates to stepfamilies, however, couples more commonly point to parent-child roles within the stepfamily (e.g., stepparent-stepchild relationship and parenting concerns) as the greatest concern, especially in the formative years of familial restructuring (Adler-Baeder & Lucier-Greer, 2012). Ripoll-Núñez and Carrillo (2016) asserted that the quality and frequency of communication between the child and the biological parent might help determine the quality of communication between the child and stepparent. Moreover, stepfamily members who hold consistent and compatible ideas about family roles and expected behaviors experience greater satisfaction in relationship subsystems (e.g., stepparent-stepchild, biological parent-stepparent) (Stewart, 2005). Conversely, diverging ideas about roles and expectations within a blended or stepfamily system are positively correlated to feelings of

resentment and disconnection within subsystems (Stewart, 2005). Stepmothers, in particular,

may report feeling ill-prepared for the role of stepmother, leading them to feel isolated,

frustrated, and anxious, which is often met with friction within the marital relationship (Riness &

Sailor, 2015). Likewise, adolescents report experiencing limited trust and significant distance in

their relationships with their stepmothers. Furthermore, residential stepmothers may have a

competitive relationship with nonresidential biological mothers, who tend to be more involved in

children's lives than nonresidential biological fathers (Ripoll-Núñez & Carrillo, 2016). As might

be expected, a strong dyadic marital relationship within the stepfamily unit, primarily as it

pertains to stepmothers, appears to be associated with decreased parental stress (Shapiro, 2014)

and perhaps less role ambiguity.

On the other hand, when couples struggle between their role as a parent and spouse in a

blended or stepfamily relationship, such role ambiguity perpetually leads to conflict and

destabilization in an already tenuous family construct (Ghorpade, Lackritz, & Singh, 2011).

Weaver and Coleman's (2010) grounded theory study addressed what was termed the *mother*

mandate. The mother mandate posited that, within a biological mother and stepfather complex,

mothers tended to manage conflict between their children and their husband by protecting their

children. Mothers did this by assuming any combination of four identified roles: a) defender, b)

gatekeeper, c) mediator, and d) interpreter. According to the mother mandate (Weaver &

Coleman, 2010), operating within these roles left mothers disillusioned with marriage and

wondering whether they were better off as single parents. This presents the question of whether

the mother mandate would create further role ambiguity for stepfathers in blended or

stepfamilies. Stewart (2005) suggested that it was wives, not husbands or stepfathers, who

experienced greater distress from role ambiguity. This may be attributed to their expectations of

clearer role definition (Steward, 2005). However, Ripoll-Núñez & Carrillo (2014) contended that stepfathers who have biological children in a blended family tend to be more involved than stepfathers who live in stepfamily households.

Research also indicates that adults in reconstituted families have different ideas about family membership than children do (Castrén & Widmer, 2015). Children in blended and stepfamilies tend to view family membership as more inclusive in an attempt to maintain ties with non-custodial parents and non-residential family members. Children living in stepfamilies tend to fortify their relationship with their nonresident biological fathers more than children who live in traditional families with both biological parents (Ripoll-Núñez & Carrillo, 2016). Likewise, the partners of re-partnered mothers may perceive more inclusiveness in their family structures, particularly if they have non-residential children from previous partners (Castrén & Widmer, 2015). Conversely, re-partnered mothers more often view family membership as more exclusive and limited to the new bounded family system (Castrén & Widmer, 2015). It is critical to examine role ambiguity in the study of educational outcomes because role ambiguity between stepparents and children may be associated with diminished resource capital, in that parents and stepparents may have competing expectations about how and by whom children's post-secondary education is funded (Fomby, 2013).

Weaver and Coleman's (2010) research added credence to the idea that there is an association between role ambiguity, role conflict, and amplified burnout. Burnout within an organization (in this case, a blended family organization) might create additional problems in how members understand and interpret their roles within that system, which may have an adverse effect on children's sense of achievement (Ghorpade et al, 2011). Another factor that appears to impact academic achievement of children in a blended family is family cohesion.

Family cohesion. Family cohesion is believed to minimize the gulf between student's aspirations and their educational attainment (Paat, 2005). Furthermore, during adolescence, when peer relationships commonly exert greater influence on students' behaviors and choices than in early childhood (Cavanagh & Fomby, 2012), family cohesion has been demonstrated to offset the influences of a negative peer group and promote academic achievement in students otherwise considered at risk for poor outcomes (Stanard, Belgrave, Corneille, Wilson, & Owens, 2010). Homes low in conflict and high in cohesion nurture academic success and manage adolescents' biopsychosocial development (Goeke-Morey et al., 2012). While role ambiguity refers to the extent to which each family member understands how to operate within a particular role, family cohesion refers to the extent to which family members experience belonging (King, Boyd, & Thorsen, 2015) and social-emotional connectedness within a family unit. "Promoting family cohesiveness is less prominent when children grow older and the promotion of individuation comes to the fore" (Favez, Widmer, Doan, & Tissot, 2015, p. 3269). There is some speculation in the literature that role ambiguity decreases and family cohesion increases among half siblings and stepsiblings the longer they live in a blended or stepfamily (Anderson, 1999). However, research has shown that adolescents in blended and stepfamilies are less likely to include their stepsiblings as members of the family system than half or full siblings (Anderson, 1999). While stepsiblings may experience less family cohesion, they ironically experience less negativity or hostility than do half siblings and full siblings (Anderson, 1999; Deater-Deckard, Dunn, & Lussier, 2002). This may be due to the notion that the relationship among many stepsiblings is experienced as a "satellite relationship" in which there is companionship without the degree of antagonism frequently experienced between full or half siblings (Anderson, 1999; Deater-Deckard, Dunn, & Lussier, 2002).

Family cohesion is a unique challenge for blended and stepfamilies because the relationship between biological parents and children predates the couple's relationship. There is evidence indicating that the stepchildren's perception of family belonging is moderated by the biological mother-child relationship and stepfather-child relationship significantly more than it is by the mother-stepfather relationship (King, Boyd, & Thorsen, 2015). However, there is also compelling research demonstrating that co-parenting relationships between the biological mother and stepfather and between the biological mother and non-custodial biological father are moderators for family cohesion (Favez et al., 2015; Jensen & Shafer, 2013). There was no research found examining if similar results were obtained on stepmothers and biological fathers or non-custodial mothers. Turunen (2014) asserted that stepmothers tend to feel less financially obligated to provide financial support for stepchildren's education than for their own biological children, it stands to reason that stepchildren's educational outcomes would be associated with their sense of belonging within a stepfamily unit, regardless of the sex of the biological parent. This sense of belonging appears to be independent of the family's material resources and more associated with the quality of the marital relationship and by the biological parent's ability to maintain a secure relationship with the child (Jensen & Shafer, 2013). While understanding family cohesion as it relates to parent-child relationships is important in examining educational outcomes, exploring the implications of sibling composition within the blended family unit is also worthwhile.

Sibship composition and achievement. Feinberg, Sakuma, Hostetler, and McHale (2013) proposed sibship as a social construct not merely determined by biological relatedness. While sibling relationships may yield outcomes that may range from delinquency to achievement, depression to greater self-esteem (Feinberg et al., 2013), the frequency and

intensity of conflict and hostility in sibling relationships tends to decrease as children get older (Anderson, 1999; Deater-Deckard, Dunn, & Lussier, 2002). In the case of blended and stepfamilies, sibship composition and educational attainment is interrelated because students living in a blended or stepfamily household tend to report lower college expectations (Tillman, 2008a). Henretta et al. (2012) suggested that not all children in a blended family are at decreased likelihood of attending college, only stepchildren. Blended families where there is at least one half-sibling (i.e., a child who is biologically related to both parents) and at least one stepchild (i.e., a child who is biologically related to only one parent), it is the stepchild who is at increased disadvantage (Henretta et al., 2012).

The addition of a half-sibling into the blended family dynamic creates more complexity because "a 'mutual child' in a stepfamily has typically been classified as living in a two-biological parent family (i.e., nuclear family), whereas his or her half-sibling is classified as living in a stepfamily" (Harcourt, Adler-Baeder, Erath, & Pettit, 2013, p. 251). Harcourt et al. (2013) introduced the term "step-nuclear hybrid" family to describe such a construct. Consistent with findings in research done by Henretta et al. (2012), children in step-nuclear hybrid families demonstrate overall poorer outcomes on measures of well-being (e.g., delayed sexual activity, coping, and substance use) than biological children in nuclear families *and* children in stepfamilies (Harcourt et al., 2013). It is important to remember that family structure and household complex are different constructs (Manning, 2014). For example, a child may be a member of a step-nuclear hybrid family but reside in a single-parent household. Research examining the educational outcomes for children whose household complex differs from their family structure was not found. Future researcher should also address whether sibling complex

and relationships within a blended family affect the academic needs of children as much as or more than parent-child relationships.

In examining the correlation between adolescent well-being and parental characteristics, parental investment, sibling complex, family cohesion, and cumulative instability, Halpern-Meekin and Tach (2008) found that biological children of the so-called step-nuclear hybrid family demonstrated lower behavioral and psychological outcomes. Poorer behavioral and psychological outcomes may arguably indicate poorer academic outcomes but research is lacking in this regard. However, these findings are compatible with research indicating that there is more to living in a two-biological parent household than commonly thought; there is something distinctive in the family dynamic in which there are half-siblings that moderate educational outcome (Tillman, 2008a). The literature is lacking in attempts to explain this phenomenon. Of note, however, Fomby, Goode, and Mollborne (2015) concluded that, by the age of 4, approximately 16% of children in the United States live with step- or half-siblings, regardless of parents' marital status. They further determined that sibling complexity predicts children's aggressive behavior independently of parents' marital status. Children residing with step- or half-siblings demonstrated greater aggression than children who lived with parents with the same marital status but with full siblings or no siblings (Fomby et al.).

There is evidence suggesting that, not only does sibship composition appear to impact academic achievement within blended families, so does the sex of siblings within that complex. Tillman's (2008b) research suggested that males who live in a blended family unit have more disturbed sibling relationships and lower GPAs than females who live in a blended family unit. These results indicate that there are gender *and* sibling complex differences within a step-nuclear hybrid family.

Summary

Research has indicated that children of blended and stepfamilies demonstrate poorer academic performance and overall educational outcomes (Tillman, 2008a). These outcomes may be attributed to changes in parental involvement that occur as a result of family reconstruction, which speaks to a shift of the availability of social and resource capital available to children (Henretta, et al., 2012). Dissemination of family resources may also be impacted by the degree to which blended and stepfamilies experience ambiguous roles and boundaries (Fomby et al., 2015). Outcomes may also be impacted by the likelihood that children in blended families experience more cumulative instability and transitions than children in traditional, two-biological parent families (Cavanagh & Fomby, 2012), including more student mobility (Cutuli, et al., 2013; Sandstrom & Huerta, 2013). Research also suggests that greater role ambiguity and role conflict (Martin-Uzzi & Duval-Tsioles, 2013), along with low levels of family cohesion (King et al., 2015), adversely affect the academic achievement of children in blended families.

From a dynamic systems and educational resilience viewpoint, educational outcomes for children of blended families appear to be a product of social influences (Chiu & McBryde-Chang, 2010), school culture, familial influences (Cavanagh & Fomby, 2012), family structure (Tillman, 2008a; Tillman, 2008b), and students' psychological and physical development at the time of stepfamily formation (Cavanagh & Huston, 2008). Keenan (2010b) stated:

> Thus, it is not risk and protective factors alone that determine particular trajectories. Rather, it is the history and current conditions of a person or subsystem, inclusive of risk and protective factors that determine whether a particular person or subsystem is destabilized and the response pathway that is followed (p. 1047).

The current body of research solidly establishes that these factors, working in concert, tend to yield poorer academic outcomes for these children. However, the literature does not provide insight into what factors work together to contribute to positive educational outcomes for children of blended families. According to Thelen (2005), patterns must be destabilized in order for new patterns to develop. Therefore, researchers must take care not to assign value to the destabilizing process of family reconstruction. Dynamic systems theory holds that, as it relates to blended families and children's educational outcomes, novel and unique academic pathways could emerge by students who efficaciously navigate this family change according to their developmental experiences and external influences. The current heuristic phenomenological study examined blended and stepfamilies' the lived experiences of biological parents in blended and stepfamilies regarding their adolescents' positive educational outcomes.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Overview

The purpose of this heuristic study is to understand and depict the lived experiences of biological parents in blended and stepfamilies with adolescents who demonstrate high academic achievement. Data collection included a variety of documents, including school records and family photos, and semi-structured interviews with biological parents. Data was analyzed using Moustakas's (1990) method of analysis of heuristic inquiry, including immersion, incubation, illumination, explication, construction of structural and textural descriptions of individual experiences, and developing a creative synthesis of the experienced phenomenon.

Design

The present study is qualitative in nature. Qualitative studies present holistic, contextual information that offers an in-depth examination of the underlying, essential, or ambiguous aspects of human experience (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). A heuristic design was the best choice for the present research because it was important to examine what it means to parent a high achieving student within the context of a blended or stepfamily. Giving voice to the biological parents who live in this experience added a layer to understanding the relationship between family structure and academic achievement that could not be captured quantitatively. Additionally, a heuristic design was appropriate for this study because it was important not merely to describe the lived educational experiences of the co-researchers, but to depict and render them in a way that stayed true to the individual stories. Heuristic inquiry allowed the research participants' lived experiences to be fully illustrated throughout data analysis, so they were not treated as mere bits of files or records, but as entire people (Moustakas, 1990). Heuristic methodology was the most suitable choice based on my history and experience as a

parent of both high achieving and underachieving adolescents in a stepfamily household. Moustakas's (1990) heuristic model calls for the researcher to have directly experienced the phenomenon being studied. Heuristics demands that the researcher have had a direct, personal encounter with the phenomenon being investigated. In order for the researcher to achieve the deepest possible understanding of a particular human experience, he or she must relate to the lived experience of the co-researchers.

Blended and stepfamilies families are a growing and complex social phenomena (Cavanaugh & Fomby, 2012) that need to be examined and understood within the context of real life, conscious experiences. Equally, real life experiences–namely, academic achievement–need to be examined and understood within the context of family structure. A heuristic design offered vivid and intense insight into the essence of high academic achievement within the blended and stepfamily construct. To that end, I began with what Moustakas (1990) referred to as initial engagement. It is from this phase that the research questions and subquestions were formulated, clarified, understood, and expressed.

The next phase in heuristic research involved immersion, which Moustakas (1990) describes as a time of "going wide open to discover meanings in everyday observations, conversations, and published works" (p. 44). This process required intense and intentional focus on the research questions and the available literature. This phase is referred to as acquisition, which is the point of data collection (Douglass & Moustakas, 1985). Data collection was driven by tacit knowledge, considered critical in heuristic study because it moves the researcher into areas of suppositions and knowledge that do not yet have a way of being explained (Douglass & Moustakas, 1985). In this heuristic study, I collected data through available school records and semi-structured interviews with the co-researchers. Because heuristic methodology is intended

to render depictions of individual experiences, data collection also included personal documents such as photographs. Moustakas (1990) contended that such documents are not for the purpose of interpreting co-researchers' experiences but to illuminate them.

After reviewing the research data, I departed from the research during a period Moustakas (1990) termed incubation. Incubation is a process that allows what has been known in conscious awareness to expand during a period of detachment from the research. Incubation is a phase in heuristic methodology that pertains not only to qualitative research, but to empirical practice as well. For example, in Sriraman's (2004) qualitative research on mathematical creativity, mathematicians described entering a period of incubation as a part of their scientific process. Mathematicians found that transitioning away from intense examination of a problem was the next step to solving it. This sort of incubation allowed for unconscious work on the problem, which commonly resulted in a breakthrough. Heuristic inquiry demands a period of incubation in order for understanding to deepen and, subsequently, bring about the next phase of heuristic study, which is illumination (Moustakas, 1990).

Illumination may be best understood as a breakthrough in which new knowledge and qualities of a lived experience are brought to consciousness, absent of concerted concentration (Beckstrom, 1993). Ideas may be modified and understanding becomes more crystalized. Examining these ideas and clustering the information into new constituents and themes is the process of explication (Moustakas, 1990). It is in the explication phase that the nuances of the lived experience are elucidated, culminating in the final phase of heuristic research—creative synthesis (Beckstrom, 1993). Once I analyzed all the data thoroughly, explicating the dominant constituents, themes, and meanings of the experience, I pulled them together to illustrate the lived experience of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1990).

Research Questions

Critical to heuristic study is uncovering the essence of a lived experience that is rich, clear, and succinct (Moustakas, 1990). This study's research questions were designed to be comprehensive and pointed so as to capture the lived experiences of the co-researchers in a direct and insightful manner. The central research question for this study was: What are the factors that contribute to positive educational outcomes for adolescents of blended and stepfamilies?

The subquestions for this study were:

1. What perceptions do biological parents in blended or stepfamilies have regarding the impact of family status on students' academic learning experiences during the adolescent years?

2. In what ways are biological parents in blended and stepfamilies deliberate in promoting academic achievement?

3. What do biological parents in blended and stepfamilies perceive as challenges in maintaining academic performance?

4. How do biological parents in blended and stepfamilies address limited resource and social capital as it relates to school/academic performance?

Setting

The present study was conducted in American City (pseudonym), located in the Southeastern United States. American City was chosen because it is where I live, which allowed for optimal opportunity to conduct as many interviews and member checks as needed. According to census data collected between 2009 and 2013, it is a city comprised of approximately 204,000 people, 51.6% of whom are female. Nearly three-quarters of the population are living in the same home for at least one year and the median value of owner-

occupied housing is $125,800. Median household income is $44,900 with 17.6% living below the poverty level. Home ownership rates in American City are below the state average, 49.9% (American City) and 66.4% (across the state). As of 2013, 17.6% of the population is enrolled in high school and 37.1% is enrolled in college. Both statistics are higher than state average. Nearly 15% of the population is in the armed forces, compared to slightly more than 1% across the state (U. S. Census Bureau, 2013).

Participants

Moustakas (1990) used the term co-researcher, indicating a sense of cooperation and mutual openness and commitment to the study. That terminology was used for this heuristic study so as to communicate that heuristic inquiry underscored relationship and shared experience (Moustakas, 1990). Co-researchers were selected via criterion and snowball sampling (Creswell, 2013). Creswell suggested that phenomenological studies should use between 5 and 25 participants. Therefore, 10 parents were included in the study and they must have been members of a blended or stepfamily. This provided at least 20 interviews (initial and follow-up), which, according to Mason (2010), was enough to produce saturation. Criterion for family structure was met if couples were married, there was at least one stepparent in the home, and there was at least one child born of a previous relationship living in the home. Research on blended and stepfamilies has largely focused on family structure as it relates to household structure (Adler-Baeder et al., 2010; Shriner, Mullis, & Shriner, 2010; Tillman, 2008a; Wu et al., 2010). Therefore, there is considered to be a qualitative difference in how blended and stepfamily status influences adolescence who live in the home with half-siblings and/or stepfamily members and those who do not (Tillman, 2008a, 2008b). Likewise, because there are distinctive differences between simple stepfamilies and blended (i.e., step-nuclear hybrid) families, it is important to

examine whether there are similarities and/or differences in attitudes and behaviors between these family structures based on the common criterion of academic achievement. Ten biological parents participated in this study, seven of which were members of stepfamilies (i.e., no half-siblings) and three of which were blended families.

This study examined the lived experiences of biological parents that facilitate the positive educational outcomes for high achieving adolescents of blended and stepfamilies. In each family, the identified high achieving student was the biological child of only one parent in the blended or stepfamily. It was important to examine academic achievement in terms of family structure and within the child's biopsychosoical developmental context (Keenan, 2010b; Thelen, 2005). Research demonstrates that students' transition from elementary school to middle school occurs generally around the age of 11 (Véronneau & Dishion, 2010). Their movement to 6th grade is also accompanied by significant changes in biological, cognitive and emotional functioning, as well as shifts in social relationships with peers and parents (Véronneau & Dishion, 2010). In the United States, secondary school lasts through a student's senior year in high school. These secondary grades (6th-12th) capture the adolescent years of the students and present one of the most concentrated periods of cognitive, emotional, biological, and social development (Granic & Patterson, 2006). Therefore, criterion for adolescence was met if students were between 6th and 12th grades.

Criterion for academic achievement was met if students' GPA was at least 3.0 on a 4.0 scale or students had achieved A/B honor roll status at least 75% of their time in middle school. Grades and GPA are the most commonly used indicators of academic success in educational research (York, 2015). Furthermore, students' GPA is considered to be "more important in terms of life outcomes than achievement measures derived from standardized assessments"

(Carolan & Wasserman, 2015, p. 180). Because students do not typically have a GPA at the middle school level, grades were considered the primary measure of academic achievement.

Procedures

I obtained approval from Liberty University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) prior to collecting any data for this study. Once IRB approval was granted and my dissertation chair approved my proposal, I solicited participants by speaking with parents participating in PTA and parent support groups at area middle and high schools. I also solicited volunteer participants via social media platforms and through snowball sampling (Creswell, 2013). Participants were asked to sign an informed consent agreement (see Appendix B). Participants were able to contact me via email or phone. All hard copies of data collection were securely stored in a locked cabinet in a dedicated office space in my home.

Once I obtained IRB approval, and prior to beginning data collection, I conducted a pilot test of the interview questions and methodology in order to fortify the construct validity of this study (Creswell, 2013). Pilot tests allow researchers to discover whether their interview questions are unclear or lack the necessary language to capture desired information (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2010). I administered the interview questions to members of one stepfamily unit not included in the actual study. The stepfamily participating in the pilot test was selected from the pool of participants gathered for the actual study. Conducting a pilot study helped me refine my interviewing skills and ensured that the questions were sufficient to gather the information intended.

Due to the sensitive nature of the study, I met face-to-face with individual parents to obtain consent and answer any initial questions in parents' presence. Participants were informed that they may decline participation at any point during the study. Face-to-face interviews were

scheduled at parents' convenience and conducted individually in the environment most comfortable to them, typically my home or theirs. Interviews were conducted between 60-90 minutes and participants were informed that more than one interview may be necessary. All parents produced school records (e.g., report cards, transcripts) in order to verify achievement. Semi-structured face-to-face interviews were conducted and digitally recorded for later transcription. I used Rev.com to have the interviews professionally transcribed. All interview transcriptions are stored in a locked cabinet in my home office. Transcripts are also stored on Rev.com, using 128-bit SSL encryption. Stake (1995) asserted that the meaning gathered from interviews is more important than verbatim accounts and Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014) warned that interviews may run the risk of incorporating too much unnecessary, unfocused information that overwhelms data analysis. I found this to be the case as I began my first cycle of coding. However, using an interview guide, rather than strict interview questions, and taking rigorous field notes allowed for nuanced information to be gathered. The interview guide also allowed opportunities for me to view documentation such as family photographs. Photographs illustrated the lived experiences of the family and serve to bring up memories or stories that were not necessarily captured by the interview questions. In addition to information gathered from interviews, family photographs provided a literal picture of family cohesion. Family photographs demonstrated an honest portrayal of who was included and excluded from meaningful family moments. As heuristic study is marked by the internal frame of reference, my priority was to maintain an atmosphere where co-researchers felt comfortable disclosing information because there was a shared experience between them and I (Moustakas, 1990).

The Researcher's Role

As the "human instrument" in this study, I have personal and professional experience with the phenomenon being studied. My training as a psychologist equipped me with the ability to draw out in-depth information through dialogue and to gather meaning through family photographs and historical data. I am also trained to recognize and deal appropriately with countertransference issues so as to place professional distance between those from whom I am gathering information and myself. This includes remaining nonjudgmental and taking care not to impose my values and experiences upon them (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). It should be noted, however, that my choice to use heuristic methods requires the internal frame of reference, as described by Moustakas (1990). I was my experience that co-researchers were more open and at ease during the interview process knowing that I have experienced many of the complex issues common in blended and stepfamilies.

My relationship with the co-researchers was strictly academic in that they granted me access into their lives based solely on their belief that this study was of value to the field of education and clinical practice. While my relationship with the co-researchers was strictly academic and did not go beyond the purposes of this study, they were made aware that I am a stepfamily parent with years of experience as such. As a parent in a stepfamily, I assumed that certain adjustments to family restructuring are hard fought, especially the stepparent-stepchild relationship (Adler-Baeder & Lucier-Greer, 2012). I did not assume that all relationships are intact; such an assumption would have colored my data analysis, possibly misappropriating an obstacle/challenge as a protective factor. I did not expect all blended and stepfamilies to look or function as mine, although that was a bias I had to keep in check. I came from an empathetic stance, understanding the unique challenges and pitfalls faced by these family structures.

However, each blended and stepfamily had its own dynamic and each family member had his/her own voice. I made it clear to participants that, while my own experience was a point of reference for this research, findings were not gauged against my own family structure and mine was not one of the cases being studied.

<center>**Data Collection**</center>

The purpose of this heuristic study was to understand and depict the lived experiences of parents in blended and stepfamilies with adolescents who demonstrate high academic achievement. Moustakas (1990) contended that researchers must compile all the data collected and organize them in a manner that creates a picture of the whole person and his or her lived experience of the phenomenon being investigated. Once individual stories are composed, the researcher produces a creative synthesis that represents the lived experience of all the co-researchers. Therefore, data collection consisted of school records, family photographs, and interviews with biological parents.

Data collection was completed within 180 days and data will be maintained for a period of 3 years, per federal guidelines. After that time, hard copies (paper) will be shredded and audio recordings will be deleted. Data was secured in a locked cabinet in a dedicated office space in my home. Interviews were transcribed by Rev.com Transcription Services.

School Records

Parents were asked to furnish copies of grade reports and/or transcripts for the previous and current academic year in order to verify academic achievement. All parents furnished either hard copies of report cards or granted me access to PowerSchool, which is an online grade reporting system that keeps record of students' grades, attendance, standardized test history, teacher comments, and high school GPA. Trends and disruptions were often evident in school

records (attendance, teacher comments, enrollment, etc.) and were considered in light of students' grades and GPA, but not as unique measures of academic success. In cases where disruptions were identified through reviewing school records, they were discussed with parents to learn how they were managed in order to promote continued achievement.

Photographs

Family photographs were also collected as data. I did not take possession of photographs but I took notes on what I observed in the photos and what parents disclosed about them during the course of interviews. Photos trigger memories and elicit information that may not get captured in an ordinary interview. Photographs were expected to give insight into disruptions, strides toward cohesion, parental involvement, challenges, and other defining factors. For example, the analysis of family photographs has been used in research on parental attachment (Bherens & Umemura, 2013), social and cultural conflict (O'Connell, 2014; Pasternak, 2013), and siblings of children with autism (Latta et al., 2014). These studies highlighted how family photographs elicit emotion, point to the important moments in family life, and provide a timeline of the family's biography.

Interviews

Face-to-face, one-on-one, semi-structured interviews were conducted with custodial biological parents whose child is academically successful. Interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. Biological parents' relationships with their (child)ren predate the family structure and offered insight into their child's academic history and personal timeline. I pursued an interview with noncustodial biological parents of each family represented in this study but I was not able to procure any. Noncustodial parent refusal of an interview did not disqualify the family from the study. On the other hand, a custodial biological parent's refusal to participate in an interview

would have grossly limited the richness of the data, making it essentially useless. An interview with the custodial biological parent was indispensable to the study. Had a custodial biological parent declined participation, that family system would not be included in this study.

Parents were made aware that follow-up interviews might be necessary. Each interview was expected to last between 60 and 90 minutes. It was important that co-researchers' experiences are depicted accurately and thoroughly. Therefore, member checking was employed with individual parents. Meaningful quotes selected for reported findings were reviewed with each co-researcher to ensure interpretations were complete and correct. I also reviewed my explanations of family photographs with parents to ensure accuracy and fullness.

Stake (1995) contends that interviews are key to gathering participants' interpretations of their realities. Gathering meaningful perspectives of the case demands the use of appropriate interview questions. The following questions were grounded in the research and were designed to elicit pertinent data in a conversational format that allowed for each participant's unique story. Standardized Open-Ended Interview Questions

1. What do you believe contributed to your child's educational resilience and academic achievement after becoming a blended/stepfamily?

2. How would you describe your co-parenting relationship with your current spouse?

3. How would you describe your co-parenting relationship with the other parent?

4. What is your perspective on your child's relationship with the noncustodial (or custodial) parent?

5. What changes in residency and school attendance resulted from your family restructuring?

6. What were some of the academic and non-academic effects of these residential changes?

7. How did your involvement with your child change upon reconstitution?

8. What new obligations did you have once becoming a blended/stepfamily?

9. How did your student respond to those changes?

10. What sort of financial decisions have you and your spouse (or you and other parent) made regarding your students' education after high school?

11. What sorts of co-parenting decisions were made regarding extracurricular activities?

12. How has everyone decided which parent will pay for which educational opportunities?

13. Describe how your family handled the challenge of role definition and what you did/did not do to overcome them.

14. Tell me about some of the challenges facing the family now that your child is an adolescent in a blended/stepfamily and how the family worked/is working through them.

Children in blended and stepfamilies tend to demonstrate poorer academic achievement and lower GPAs (Tillman, 2008a, 2008b). Scholars agree that resilience, particularly educational resilience, plays a part in a person's capacity to thrive, despite certain risk factors (i.e., blended or stepfamily status during adolescence) (Cunningham & Swanson, 2010; Werner, 2012). Question 1 was based on this finding and upon research that indicates there is a difference between children's perspectives and adults' perspectives regarding factors that promote educational resilience (Downey, 2014). It was important that this heuristic inquiry captured the biological parents' viewpoint, as they were the ones who were likely to have the most insightful and mature experience with their student's academic career. Questions 2 through 4 were necessary in order to gain an understanding of how cohesion was experienced and operationalized in a blended or stepfamily. Becoming a member in a new family structure is commonly difficult for teens because they have to get used to a new parent and possibly new

siblings in the home (Skogrand, Davis, & Higgenbotham, 2011). Family cohesion, which is associated with children's cognitive and social development, is moderated by the co-parenting relationship (Favez, Widmer, Doan, & Tissot, 2015). Also, it is not unusual for children's relationship with their biological parent to change once that parent chooses a spouse other than the child's other biological parent (Jensen & Shafer, 2013). Experts in the field of stepfamilies agree that children's relationship with their biological fathers greatly impact their social, emotional, and cognitive functioning after their parents separate (Jensen & Shafer, 2013). Reconstituted families that manage to defy the unique odds set against them (i.e., higher dissolution rates) have been shown to possess notable resilience, particularly stepfamilies in which there are adolescents (Brown & Robinson, 2012).

Questions 5 and 6 were important because research has demonstrated that blended and stepfamilies have a higher rate of residential instability and school mobility (Sandstrom & Huerta, 2013). It is necessary to examine biological parents' experiences with residential instability and school mobility in order to understand how they managed these life changes and their perceived impact on their child's academic functioning. Questions 7 through 9 pertained to parental involvement. There is a correlation between family instability, parental involvement, and academic achievement (Cavanagh & Fomby, 2012). This heuristic study sought to examine biological parents' experience with that correlation. It was necessary to capture the lived experiences of parents who may have had to modify the scope and quality of their involvement with their children once becoming a blended or stepfamily. It was equally important to capture the lived experiences of biological parents who may not have experienced such changes in order to get a picture of their differing practices.

Some research argues the notion that students in blended and stepfamilies have access to less financial capital, which is associated with a decreased educational attainment at the postsecondary level (Raijas, 2011; Turunen, 2014; Wojtkiewicz & Holtzman, 2011). Questions 10 through 12 provided good insight on how financial decisions are operationalized in the co-parenting relationships often present in blended and stepfamilies. These questions led to a discovery of how parents' financial decisions contribute to students' academic achievement in families where there is likely more separation of finances and less inclination to pool monetary resources (Wojtkiewicz & Holtzman, 2011).

Question 13 and 14 were designed to capture biological parents' attitudes about where each family member fits into the blended or stepfamily unit and how they came to settle into those roles. One of the challenges unique to blended and stepfamilies is that of role ambiguity (i.e., learning how each family member functions within their new roles) and parents often feel caught in the middle or like an outsider (Martin-Uzzi & Duval-Tsioles, 2013). By giving voice to biological parents' attitudes and beliefs about where and how family members function within the unit, greater understanding is gained in how role definition impacts student achievement. This is especially the case for families with adolescents because there are the additional challenges of a changing social circle and a growing need for the child to be more independent (Cavanagh & Huston, 2010).

Data Analysis

Data analysis began once all interviews were completed and transcribed and all documents had been received and/or reviewed. Moustakas (1990) provided a procedural guide for data analysis for heuristic inquiry. I first entered into what Moustakas referred to as "timeless immersion" (p. 51) in order to thoroughly synthesize all data collected on each

individual co-researcher. After a period of incubation, or distancing myself from the study, I returned to the data to further examine the themes and essential qualities of each co-researcher's lived experience. Once a depiction of each co-researcher's experience was constructed, I developed a composite depiction of the lived experience. This resulted in a creative synthesis that illustrates the essence of the lived experience.

Review of School Records

School records reviewed included report cards, transcripts, differentiated education plans, attendance records, End-of-Grade test records, and other standardized measures that established current high academic achievement. Documents were also analyzed for possible trends and disruptions that provided insight into parents' experiences with obstacles and intentional practices to foster academic achievement.

Photographs

Photographs were analyzed through analytic memoing. Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014) recommended memoing when analyzing visual data and stressed the importance of talking to co-researchers to see how they respond to images and learn what they think and feel about them. Analytic memoing is also intended to be conceptual so as to develop patterns, categories, and themes (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). I dated analytic memos and documented them in narrative form, indicating my reflections and ideas so they may be incorporated into my creative synthesis (Moustakas, 1990). Analytic memos incorporated my impressions as well as co-researchers' explanations.

Interviews

Interviews were transcribed into text, read, and coded. I used the data analysis method as described by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), which includes First Cycle coding and

Second Cycle coding (pattern coding). First Cycle coding will be In Vivo coding. This method of coding is compatible with heuristic research because it maintains the individual's voice (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). This method is also compatible with Moustakas's (1990) procedures for data analysis, in that researchers are instructed to organize the data into themes that depict the essence of the individual and collective experiences. In Vivo coding was organized in columns with relevant quotes on one side and phrases or abbreviations on the other that indicated co-researchers' values, attitudes, or practices that are guided by the research question. Second Cycle coding, or pattern coding, included categorizing initial codes into themes (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). For instance, I determined that "future orientation" was a major theme in co-researchers' attitudes toward parenting their high achieving students. I labeled quotes that reflected this theme with "FO." Thematic categories were then organized using a narrative description, which incorporated field note data and pattern codes and provided a type of story that illustrated the lived experience (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014).

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness is achieved where there is "integrity of the data" (Williams & Morrow, 2009, p. 578). It is the means through which the researcher demonstrates credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability of the study. Trustworthiness is also achieved when reflexivity and subjectivity have been addressed equitably and when the findings are clearly and comprehensively communicated (Williams & Morrow, 2009).

Credibility

Credibility is demonstrated when research findings accurately depict co-researchers' reality and present a valid representation of what is being studied (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña,

2014). Credibility is measured by the degree to which research decisions align with the purpose of the research (Moon, Brewer, Januchowksi-Hartley, Adams, & Blackman, 2016). I demonstrated credibility through data triangulation, member checking, and thick description of data that are meaningful and contextualized. Areas of uncertainty were reported, as well as incongruities of triangulated data (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014).

In order to strengthen the credibility of the present study, I converged the data gathered from photographs, interviews, and academic records. By providing a historical context (photographs and school records) and a current depiction of one's reality through interviews, the likelihood that the lived experience is common among cases was increased (Stavros & Westberg, 2009). It was important to describe the co-researchers' reality truthfully. The interviews, photographs, and academic records reflect co-researchers' reality and voice in ways that lend credibility to the parents' experiences within the context of blended/stepfamily dynamics.

To ensure further credibility, participants had the opportunity to assess my preliminary findings (Creswell, 2013). They also had access to my interpretations of themes in order to safeguard against my reporting inaccurate, misleading, or incomplete information (Creswell, 2013). Member checking was based on Doyle's (2007) methodology. Doyle emphasized that member checking "is considered one of the most significant methods within qualitative research for establishing or strengthening the credibility of a study" (p. 889). Doyle used member checking to examine the degree to which her interpretations and analysis were acknowledged by the co-researchers as accurate representations of their lived experiences. Doyle's (2007) method allowed research participants two weeks to review their choice of interview recordings or transcripts of the interview prior to conducting the member checking interviews. This time allotment gave participants time to consider the information. Member checking interviews

included discussions with participants on the theoretical rationale behind some of the final

interpretations and concepts. Doyle used plain language with participants and discussed overall

themes from interviews, selected narratives, and theoretical concepts meaningful to analysis.

Following Doyle's (2007) methodology, I sent either an encrypted email to co-

researchers with a written transcript of their individual interview or I delivered a copy in person,

depending on their preference. Co-researchers had two weeks to review their interview. I

scheduled a member checking interview with co-researchers at their convenience. Co-

researchers had the opportunity to discuss selected narratives or request additional narratives. I

incorporated their responses in my findings in Chapter Four. Co-researchers who were

unavailable for member checking sessions were documented in Chapter Four, as well. During

the interview, I discussed identification of themes and my analysis as it related to DST and

educational resilience theory and co-researchers were asked to provide feedback on such

interpretations.

Dependability and Confirmability

Dependability and confirmability ask the question of whether findings are consistent and

reliable should the study be replicated under the same or similar context (Miles, Huberman, &

Saldaña, 2014; Moon et. al., 2016). Confirmability also depends on explicitly reporting my

ontological and epistemological predispositions in order to acknowledge any biases that may

present themselves in the study (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). Moustakas's (1990)

explanation of timeless immersion and incubation is compatible with Moon et al.'s (2016)

suggestion of using field notes, memos, and reflexivity journals to achieve dependability and

confirmability. Such methods of data collection and description include a detailed and

comprehensive presentation of methods, research design, and implementation. Timeless

immersion was spent listening to recorded interviews and reading transcripts, notes, and analytic memos (Moustakas, 1990).

Providing a detailed record of methodology that lends itself to an external audit was key to establishing confirmability. I conducted a peer review to ensure dependability and confimability (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). An outside, objective individual served to challenge the methods and question the interpretations of this study. This person was a trained school psychologist with whom I have a professional relationship. The peer review process increased this study's dependability by forcing me to back up the rationale used when drawing conclusions. Moreover, this process helped ensure that the findings are stable and consistent should the study be replicated (Creswell, 2013). Thuckett's (2005) research on strategies to apply rigor to qualitative research showed that having an "objective other" was key in critiquing data and interpretations and providing feedback on the process and content of the research study (p. 39).

Transferability

Transferability refers to the extent to which research findings in one study may be applied to theory, future research, or other contexts (Moon et. al., 2016). Using Moustakas's (1990) method for heuristic study, it was critical that I immerse myself into a review of all data collected in order to formulate individual illustrations of the lived experiences and analyze whether each depiction contains "the essential dimensions of the experience" (p. 51). Moustakas suggested that, once each co-researcher's essential experience has been thoroughly analyzed, the researcher is to determine common themes and structure a compound representation of the lived experience. I considered the transferability of this heuristic study by examining the degree to which my findings are aligned and transferable to my theoretical framework. That is, dynamic systems

theory and educational resilience theory was discussed as an explanation for why or how the experiences examined in this study may or may not be relevant to other individuals, settings, or contexts (Moon et. al., 2016).

My findings also discussed gaps that have not been adequately addressed or clarified in the literature or by my theoretical framework. As a result, transferability has come from suggesting more appropriate theoretical explanations of the lived experiences of biological parents with high achieving adolescents. Morse (2015) stated, "In qualitative inquiry, the application of the findings to another situation or population is achieved through decontextualization and abstraction of emerging concepts and theory" (p. 1213). Transferability of this heuristic inquiry was achieved through my findings showing applicability to different types of individuals (e.g., children in blended/stepfamilies) or phenomena (e.g., educational experiences).

Ethical Considerations

This study was conducted with the full acknowledgement and respect for the fact that family ties are paradoxically fragile and permanent. In addition to obtaining informed consent (see Appendix B) at the beginning of the data collection process, pseudonyms were used for the names of participants in order to protect their identity. Participants were made aware that some information may strain or damage parenting relationships, specifically between residential and non-custodial parent. Issues of confidentiality were discussed, including instances in which confidentiality must be broken. As a mandated reporter, I am bound to disclose information indicating imminent risk of harm to oneself or others. There was also the chance that information shared by participants may be disconcerting or uncomfortable for other family members. Therefore, member checking reflected only the contributions of the participant

involved in the process. Due to the complexity of the blended and stepfamily construct, co-researchers were considered a vulnerable population whose stories may be stressful and disturbing. James and Platzer (1999) warned, "Emotionally charged interviews that raise painful memories and feelings can propel…researchers, if they are not careful, into a counseling situation" and place researchers in a role outside the scope of their expertise (p. 76). James and Platzer advised researchers to address this issue before beginning fieldwork. None of the co-researchers expressed a desire for additional support or advice. However, in the event additional support and advice was warranted, I was prepared to provide co-researchers with contacts for at least three marriage and family therapists who were equipped to meet their need.

Summary

Using dynamic systems theory (DST) and educational resilience theory as my theoretical underpinnings, this heuristic phenomenological study examined the factors that contribute to positive educational outcomes of adolescents of blended and stepfamilies. Through the analysis of family photographs, individual interviews, and available school records, this study aimed to depict the lived experiences of biological parents in blended and stepfamilies who have taken identified measures that foster academic achievement at the middle school and high school level. This study organized, analyzed, and described findings based on Moustakas's (1990) heuristic inquiry methodology, which included initial engagement, immersion, incubation, illumination, explication, and creative synthesis. I established trustworthiness by data triangulation, thick description of the data, member checking, and peer review.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

The purpose of this heuristic study is to understand the lived experiences of 10 biological parents of blended or stepfamilies in which at least one child experienced high academic achievement at the middle school or high school level. The central research question for this study was: What are the values, practices, and attitudes experienced by biological parents in blended and stepfamily units that contribute to high academic achievement for adolescents in these families? The findings for this study are presented through a narrative of the co-researchers' responses to semi-structured interviews aimed at answering the following subquestions:

1. What perceptions do biological parents in blended or stepfamilies have regarding the impact of family status on students' academic learning experiences during the adolescent years?

2. In what ways are biological parents in blended and stepfamilies deliberate in promoting academic achievement?

3. What do biological parents in blended and stepfamilies perceive as challenges in facilitating academic performance?

4. How do biological parents in blended and stepfamilies address limited resource and social capital as it relates to school/academic performance?

In addition to face-to-face semi-structured interviews, co-researchers also allowed me access to their family photographs and their students' school records. The findings presented in this chapter are based on an analysis of interviews, photographs, and relevant school documents. Co-researchers are introduced and narratives of their experiences are followed by a description of the

themes that emerged from data analysis. Finally, the research questions are answered through the themes generated in this study.

Participants

The 10 participants in this study, primarily referred to as co-researchers (Moustakas, 1990, 1994), were selected based on their responses to my posts on social media requesting participants and via snowball sampling. There were a total of 14 individuals who responded to recruitment efforts but 4 were disqualified from the study based on their students' academic records. Co-researchers' experience as parents in blended or stepfamilies ranged from 4 months to 15 years, which resulted in an array of insight into what "works" in their families with regard to educational outcomes. All co-researchers readily agreed to have their face-to-face interviews recorded with the understanding that pseudonyms would be used to protect their identity. Meetings with co-researchers were time and date stamped on the recording device. Prior to recording, each co-researcher was asked to identify his/her ethnicity and length of time married, which I noted in my field notes. One co-researcher identified herself as Mexican, four co-researchers identified themselves as Black, and five co-researchers identified themselves as White. It should be noted, however, that the racial/ethnic identity of the co-researchers does not necessarily reflect the racial/ethnic identity of their children, as several unions were interracial. Table 1 provides a summary of co-researchers' demographic information.

Table 1

Co-researcher Demographics

Years married	
0-5	4
6-10	3
11-15	3
Family structure	
Blended	3
Step	7
Custodial Parent	
Mother	8
Father	2
Ethnicity	
Black	4
White	5
Mexican	1
Total children in home (full-time)	
1-2	7
3-4	2
5+	1

Participants were delighted to speak about what they had learned about their children, their reconstructed families, and how their own attitudes, values, and practices influenced their students' academic achievement. While each co-researcher was proud to discuss his/her child's achievement, each described certain frustrations and challenges that had to be addressed in order to keep their child on track. Participants shared these frustrations with candor and they serve to add to the depth of the understanding of the phenomenon.

Sasha

Sasha is the biological parent of two children living in a stepfamily construct. Her children reside in the home with her and her husband, who also has biological children living outside the home. She and her husband serve in the military and have been married for six years. I included Sasha in this study because she offered a perspective on transitions and residential relocation that was valuable apart from those existing in civilian families.

Like many of the co-researchers, Sasha admitted that she approached parenting with a no-nonsense attitude and, sometimes, with an iron fist. While Sasha acknowledges how her rigid mindset can sometimes interfere with her daughter's comfort in confiding in her, she also believes that the structure put in place for her daughter serves her well academically.

> From the beginning…I would make sure I knew what the assignments were. I would always go to the school. I would check on things. If there was a ceremony for honor roll, I would make sure I'm always there. It's hard to do that sometimes with the military, but I would let my bosses know, "Look, this is important to me." If my child works hard, they need to realize that I'm there to support them so that way they'll be motivated to continue.

Justin

A full-time student in pharmacy school, Justin is one of only two biological fathers included in this study. I chose Justin to be a part of this research because his experience gives a voice that cannot be captured by the biological mothers who are represented in this study. Justin's experience is also interesting because he did not become the custodial parent until shortly after he and his current wife married seven years ago. His son was 11 at that time and a senior in high school at the time of this interview. The change in custody escalated from what was already a difficult co-parenting relationship into a non-existent co-parenting arrangement.

> It's a zero on a one to ten. We do not speak. We do not communicate. As bad as it is to say, about three years ago I found that was the best way to help me and him. I guess you can't diagnose someone this way, but she's narcissistic. So regardless of what I said, if I told her the grass is green she's gonna tell him it's red, blue, whatever else. And that the issue we would have his whole life. Even if she knew it was better for him if it didn't

make her shine or didn't have anything to do with her, or if it was something to make her

look bad, that's what was gonna be said and done.

Justin admitted that his son's educational development has been hard fought, largely due to what

he believes was the inappropriate academic influence of the biological mother. At the time of the

interview, Justin's son was a participant in a high school program that offered free college credits

during his senior year. However, his son's biological mother chose courses for him that were not

aligned with graduation requirements. Justin worked intensely with his son's school counselor to

get his community college courses to count toward high school graduation. Justin accepts that,

while his son has done well in his high school courses, he does not have the motivation or

confidence to pursue college upon graduation. Justin credits his wife with providing direction for

pursuing a military career after high school.

[College] isn't for him. And he told me, "Daddy," he said, "I don't think I can do the

work." My wife sat down with him, said here. Here's the five branches. You do your

homework on every one of them. You give me three pros and three cons for all five of

them. Then you give me three jobs for each that you may be interested in, if you choose

that. And he come up the navy. When it come down to it, he wanted to be in the navy.

Justin is the only parent among the co-researchers whose child had no plans to pursue college

after graduating from high school. Justin's experience guiding his son in the direction of a

military career added a distinctive layer to this heuristic study.

David

David is a freelance photographer and the other custodial biological father in this

research. I selected David because he was the only co-researcher in the study who lived in a

stepfamily in which the spouse also had biological children from a previous union living in the

home full-time. Like myself, David's stepfamily construct consists of seven children in all, three of whom are biologically his. David's experience with his high-achieving daughter is similar to other co-researchers, in that he never felt the need to push her to perform. David shared that he has remained involved in her academic pursuits but he was able to trust her to take the lead in what she wanted out of her high school career.

> Well, she's pretty straightforward, as far as confident in herself, already. So that definitely helped. She's definitely outside the mold, than a couple of my other children. Not that…the other ones have good grades, too. But she's more focused. And she's always been more focused. She's changed a few times on what she wants to be when she grows up, but it's still been maintained that she wants to be successful in school. Go to college. Now, being an early graduate was not thought of before I was remarried, and after the divorce. But she has decided that's what she wanted to do. So she started taking extra credits, and started tracking how she wanted to be able to finish a little sooner, so she will start college a year earlier. And she's already done her homework, and got accepted to a couple colleges. She already decided on one.

David also expressed the lengths to which he, his ex-spouse, his wife, and other family members have committed to go to ensure a family presence at his daughter's band performances, parent/teacher conferences, and other involvements.

> My wife…and my ex-wife and her husband, we all invite each other to each others' calendar. All the events that are happening with the [her], we make sure we all know about it. And we do invites. So we've all got…we make sure we let them know everything. And on the other team, they do the same thing. They let us know what's going on, because even though there're no school changes, or anything like that,

sometimes [she'll] go to the other parent's home, and the stuff will go over to that home,
as well. So instead of relying on the student to give us the information, each set of parents
is actually doing the information, and giving it.

Allison

Allison is a physician and has been remarried for 10 years and has two biological
daughters from her first marriage. Her younger daughter, age 14 at the time of this interview, is
the only child living in the home. Allison's story was unique because it added a dimension to this
inquiry that brought up the issue of role conflict in a stepfamily, as indicated in the following
story:

> So, as [she] got older, well one of the things that happened when [she] went to visit her
> dad after [my] wedding and she was talking about daddy, meaning [my husband], that
> didn't go over too well. So daddy said something to her to make sure she knew the
> distinction and she should not be calling [my husband] daddy. So daddy stopped. So he
> sent me an email. He let me know that he talked to [our daughter] and he did not agree
> with her calling [my husband] dad. He wasn't comfortable with it…So the next few years
> she kind of struggled with that.

Despite her daughter's struggle in this area, Allison described working hard to maintain
stability in home and school. She carefully timed her wedding so that it took place a week before
the new school year began and she and her husband agreed to live in her family home so there
would be no school changes.

Nicole

Nicole is a commercial mortgage broker. Nicole's experience was unique to this study
because she was transitioning from being a mother in a stepfamily with two biological daughters

to being a mother in a blended family. She revealed during the interview that she and her husband were expecting their first child together. Nicole has also been remarried for four months at the time of her interview, the least amount of time out of all the co-researchers. Nicole's daughter is 14 years old and has been diagnosed with high functioning autism. Nicole explained that, while her daughter had always done well academically, she struggled socially at school.

> She was in [a different middle school], and prior to that, I was in the middle of a divorce, and her grades were okay. They were As and Bs, but she was suspended. She got into fights. She got kicked off the bus. She was having a lot of issues. We moved in together eight months before we got married, so we moved into this house in April of last year, so she switched schools at that point. So, in seventh grade. We're not actually sure if was the school, or that we had gotten engaged, and it was more of a settling, like it was more of a family unit, and that made her calm down some, 'cause she was very much against us, up until that point. Once we got engaged, she kind of settled.

Nicole's experience with her daughter intrigued me because she had to navigate several major transitions all at once with a daughter who, historically, struggled with change as a function of her disability. While Nicole credited her daughter's social functioning at school to providing a more stable family and home life, she acknowledged that her parenting style has likely been what kept her daughter focused on academic performance.

> Her grades have been fairly consistent since probably fourth grade…it's consistently all As. Every once in a while, there'll be a B that falls in there, but it's like an 89. It's barely a B. And I never follow her homework, I never follow her projects, I don't keep track of her schoolwork.

Barbara

Barbara is a stay-at-home mother and has been remarried for 13 years and has one biological son from her previous marriage. Her husband, who is viewed as "Dad" by her son, has been in her son's life since he was three years old. Barbara's experience with her son's academic achievement was interesting because she witnessed how residential and school changes adversely impacted his performance. Barbara is a military wife and recognizes the academic toll military life has taken on her son.

> In the beginning, he did nothing but straight As. He did straight As until his dad deployed. Then his grades went down. Then when he came back, they were back up. Then I think as soon as he hit, I want to say, the seventh grade is when it started dropping off and he didn't care as much and that kind of thing. I think it was a hard transition for him because not only was he leaving Washington and we had been there for several years, he was coming to a new school. He was coming to a new type of routine because it went from one or two classes to seven classes in a day.

Barbara acknowledged that working with her husband on parenting her son has been difficult because communicating as husband and wife has been challenging. A self-professed "planner," Barbara admitted that she has been the primary influence and decision-maker when it comes to her son's educational and emotional development, especially when her husband is deployed.

> I've noticed that the more we come together as a couple, the more give there is on each side and more support…So I never realized that it was our relationship that was affecting our decisions as parents…I feel that being that I had that moment in between marriages

as a single mom that when [my husband] is gone, it's not really like picking up the slack. It's like doing what I've always done.

Darcie

As most of the co-researchers are members of stepfamilies, I intentionally selected Darcie because she is a mother in a blended family. Darcie has been married for 15 years and has 3 children, 2 of whom are the biologically related to her and her husband. Darcie's 16-year-old son is from a previous relationship. It should be noted that Darcie is the only co-researcher in this inquiry who has been married only once. She is also the only participant who homeschools, which added a different dynamic to her experience with her high-achieving student.

Darcie considers herself a "serious" and "strict" parent. Like David and Justin, Darcie encouraged her teenager to participate in the school system's partnership with the local community college that affords high performing students the opportunity to gain free college credits during their junior and senior years in high school. Darcie's decision to afford her son this challenge was two-fold. First, she stated that she's "always looking towards the future" for him. Second, she believed he would rise to the occasion.

> This is our sixth year homeschooling. We started in the sixth grade. He's currently dual-enrolled at [the community college]. He takes a full load, four to five classes a semester. He's been going to community college since he was 14. I knew he could handle it. He needs challenge and it's free. He wants to be a scientist…I tell [him] that if you wanna be in a certain level in life, you have to do certain things. That's just how it is.

I was amazed by Darcie's resourcefulness and intensity toward her son's educational pursuits. She possessed a single-mindedness about her son's educational opportunities that differentiated her from the other co-researchers.

I'm part of a cooperative called Faith. We go there on Mondays, and that's been a big help, too, because he takes zoology, anatomy, bio…stuff that I would never teach. He's going to his fourth year of French. I mean, I could never teach…He's in institute programs…They're going to Johnson C. Smith, doing touring…then he's going to Wake Forest for bio-science camp. I have researched every single school that he wants to go to. We pretty much visited every school that he wants to go to already, got a few left to go to. So I have looked up what it takes. Certain scores for their full ride scholarships. And that's why I told him, "Without certain grades, you can hang this school up. So you look into schools that I know you can get into for free."

Darcie made it abundantly clear during the interview that she had no intentions of paying for her son to go to college because his grades, community service, and extracurricular activities were strong enough to carry him to any state school of his choosing. She was unapologetic about being "hard on" her son and pushing him to do what it took to get him to the places he said he wanted to go educationally and vocationally.

Patricia

Patricia is the senior manager of clinical operations at a healthcare agency. She has been remarried for 10 years and has 1 biological daughter (age 14) from her previous marriage. She also has 1 stepdaughter from her husband's previous marriage (age 17) and a son (age 7) from her current marriage. I selected Patricia for the study because, like Darcie, she is the mother in a blended family. In her case, however, there is a complex dynamic of custody, visitation, and child support issues that can make educating her daughter challenging. Patricia offered the following scenario:

I guess probably one of the biggest challenges is just schedules is complicated. It's not like every day she's coming home. It might be a day she's going over [to her father's house], and so she has to remember when she's going over there, she might have to pack differently…when you're between two households it's a challenge. I think it was harder for her in middle school because she was adjusting from elementary to middle school, and A-day, B-day, A-classes, switching classes as opposed to being in one classroom. Now she has more stuff. She's got a clarinet. Monday she might be in Math, but Tuesday she might be in English, but her stuff for English is at home so she's got to remember that this night she's going to his house, so she has to kind of plan a day ahead where most kids could just go to school that day and go home, and think about Tuesday tomorrow. They don't have to think about it the day before.

A high school freshman, Patricia's daughter excels at her magnet school and is enrolled in the International Baccalaureate program. I heard relief and satisfaction in Patricia's voice as she described her daughter as "responsible and independent," as a result of how hard they all worked to keep her organized over the years. This is something that did not always come easily for Patricia.

I was probably more of the heavy, as far as making her study, making her get tutoring, making sure she did additional work on the weekends. And even when she would go to his house, I might send a message to him to remind him that she had studies to do, or that she had something extra to read. I always made him aware of what she had to do because when she was younger, she wouldn't always remember to tell him.

Teresa

Teresa is a personal fitness trainer and has been married one year. She has two children from her previous marriage. Her stepchildren live with their biological mother. She explained that she never accepted anything lower than a B from either of her children but that she was harder on her 17-year-old son than she was on her 14-year-old daughter. When asked why, she stated flatly, "Probably because he was just a smarter kid. I hate to say it like that. Not that [she's] not smart. She's more average. But he was just smarter." Although her daughter performs at a high level academically, Teresa admitted that her daughter is "too laid back" about her grades and does not seem as concerned as them as Teresa.

I assumed that, because Teresa had only been married a short time, she had insight on some recent experience with shifts in her attention and involvement with her children's academic lives.

> I would say I'm sure it did. It had to…Because then I had this third person that I've got to give attention to who also demanded a lot of attention…just this year may have been why [her] grades in math were so up and down. Let me think if there's any…I would say probably, because if I'm going to work, going to the gym with my husband, coming home, making dinner, and then by the time we do all of that it's already 8:00 at night, and doing dishes, and then it's time for [her] to go upstairs, get her shower, go to bed. I probably neglected in saying, "Hey, is your homework done? How was your day at school today?" Although, we would talk about it at dinner, she's not real open, so it's probably better to talk to her one-on-one. I'm sure me wanting them to go and also get ready for bed I failed to pay as close attention.

Sadly, I have learned since this interview that Teresa and her husband have decided to separate. Her daughter has had a difficult time with this transition.

Heather

I met Heather through a co-worker at a professional development training. Heather is a quality control analyst and has been remarried four years and has two children (ages 8 and 12) from her previous marriage. She described her 12-year-old (7th grade) as a "rule follower" who was always focused and intent on being the best. In my conversation with Heather, she reminded me of Darcie and Patricia in that she handled her daughter's visitation, curricular, and extracurricular activities with intensity, precision, and almost overwhelming meticulousness.

> When [we] went to mediation, I made the decision…as far as splitting everything down the middle. He doesn't get them 50%, it's like 40%, that as long as he paid 50% of her school, whether it be…if the field trip's $8, I just send him at the end of the month any expenses that I've paid for, for that month, he'll pay $4 of it. Or sports. Sports, most of the time, he registers [her] for sports, so he'll go ahead and pay say, the $20 to register her, and then just kind of deduct it from what he already owes me. Her biological dad and I decided when I left, that I split all of [her] clothes equally, and we just kept those clothes at the house. We bought our own clothes. Typically, what happens is, if it's my outfit and [she] wears it to school and she goes to her dad's house, he will send that outfit back on her, say the next week, clean, or he will send it to her dirty in the book bag. Which, now that she has more books…we usually do that trade on the weekends when there's a soccer game or a soccer practice.

I wanted to include Heather's story because she also has a teenage stepdaughter with special needs. I believed that dynamic was important in uncovering her experiences with her

high-achieving biological daughter in relation to the demands placed on her with her stepdaughter.

> Well, she is 13. She functions probably at a 5 or 6-year-old level, socially and academically. She's nonverbal, has a cochlear implant…She was not potty trained at 9, when we met. And so, within a couple of months of us dating, I had her watch and go in with the bathroom and in a weekend, I had her potty trained. And I knew that it would take a lot of attention, maybe away from my other 2 children, but they fell into the mother hen role and they model what I do…Now that she has developed and has started her cycle, I do take the responsibility of helping her bathe and changing her sanitary napkins…I feel like [my daughter's] excited to see [my stepdaughter] make accomplishments because she has come so far that [she has] never shown resentment, at all

Results

Data was collected through transcribed semi-structured interviews, photographs, and a review of relevant school records. During semi-structured interviews, co-researchers were encouraged to share their experiences as biological parents of high achieving students in blended or stepfamilies. Family photographs were viewed and discussed within the context of these interviews. Co-researchers also either provided me hard copies of their students' most recent grade reports or granted me access to their online parent portal to view grades, GPAs, attendance history, standardized test history, and teacher comments. Co-researchers' responses to interview questions were analyzed to identify emerging themes through their values, attitudes, and practices. Co-researchers' experiences were compatible with dynamic systems theory and educational resilience theory, as indicated through recurring themes.

Theme Development

After a period of timeless immersion (Moustakas, 1990), during which I engaged in First Cycle and Second Cycle coding (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014), I developed a creative synthesis depicting the lived experience of the co-researchers. First Cycle coding was In Vivo coding, which involved attributing codes to portions of the data using the co-researchers' own experiences, processes, and emotions. This method allowed me to maintain the co-researchers' voice in depicting their lived experiences (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). This method is also compatible with Moustakas's (1990) procedures for data analysis, in that researchers are instructed to organize the data into themes that depict the essence of the individual and collective experiences. In Vivo coding was done on each co-researchers' transcription and organized in two columns, with relevant quotes or phrases highlighted next to their responses. Table 2 illustrates an example of In Vivo coding as it appears on co-researchers' transcripts.

Table 2

Example of In Vivo Coding

He feels that I should because I am looking towards the future. I'm always looking towards the future, and he wants to be a scientist. He wants to do all these things. And, "You're not gonna be a scientist half doin' it. You tellin' me all the things you wanna do." So when he's jerkin' off and playing, I'm like, "Listen, did you do this? Are you doing this?"	"ALWAYS LOOKING TOWARD THE FUTURE" "ARE YOU DOING THIS?"
The expectation is not are you going to college, it's where are you going, and what are you going to major in? [She's] around people that believe in education, so it's a value for our family. So it's kind of like a given that you're going to go.	"THE EXPECTATION IS…COLLEGE" "AROUND PEOPLE THAT BELIEVE IN EDUCATION"

Table 3 details the consolidation of data chunks gathered from In Vivo coding and researcher-generated codes. Researcher-generated codes are I devised that indicated co-researchers' values, attitudes, or practices that are guided by the research question. For instance,

I determined that "future orientation" was a recurring notion in co-researchers' attitudes toward

parenting their high achieving students (see Table 2). I labeled phrases that reflected this attitude

with "FO." Thematic categories were then organized using a narrative description, which

incorporated field note data from interviews and photographs and provided a type of story that

illustrated the lived experience (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014).

Table 3

First Cycle Coding

Co-researcher	Experience/Process	Code
Teresa	High expectations; struggle with divided attention	A, T, L, Inv, SS
Sasha	Values hard work; planning for college early; facilitates relationship between daughter and father; handles discipline; family respects couple's relationship; discuss importance of success; husband as role model and father fig.	A, PS, N/CInv, FO Inv, Coh
Allison	Stay in same school; effort over grades; husband follows her lead; cordial contract w/ex; life easier with husband	Stab, Inv, SS, N/CInv, A, L, T
Heather	Daughter always met expectation set by mom; allowed daughter to weigh options and live with her choices; bitter co-parenting relationship but demanded father follow her lead	A, C/C, N/CInv, L, Coh
Patricia	"I've always been the heavy"; "over the top"; groomed daughter to be independent; daughter has adapted well (mom waited to move); mom struggles with guilt; not IF but WHICH college; will spend $$ on expensive experiences if it aligns with educational values; shared financial resources	Stab, Inv, SS, A, I, C/C, Coh, FO
Justin	Minimal support from bio mom; united front with wife; pushing him on next stage in life even though not college (research military);	L, C/C, Stab, Inv, I, S/D, FO
Nicole	Made schoolwork daughter's complete responsibility; intentional about making daughter understand connection between grades and career goals; mom views good grades separately from achievement; mom treasures husband's desire to attend extracurricular events; difficult transition-mom nervous about high school	T, Stab, A, I, C/C, Inv, N/CInv, SS, FO
Darcie	Confident in son's ability; determined not to pay	T, I, A, Inv, C/C,

	for undergrad; bio father's lack of involvement is seen as a blessing; stays one step ahead of son's interests; stepfather is "Dad" and has always been in life; "hard on him"—put info in front of him	Stab, N/CInv, SS, FO
David	New family structure didn't change daughter's consistency and confidence; seamless communication with ex and extended family; supports idea of early graduation; joined financial capital; emotional support and guidance over discipline; stability was choice of daughter	Stab, A, I, Inv, N/CInv, SS, FO
Barbara	better marriage=better parenting; teaching intrinsic value of school; supportive parenting;	C/C, I, A, Inv, SS, FO

Second Cycle coding, or pattern coding, included categorizing initial codes into themes (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). Second Cycle coding involved taking these portions of data and organizing them into emergent themes, which corresponded to the attitudes, values, and practices of the co-researchers (see Table 4). Three predominant themes emerged: fostering independence (I), future orientation (FO), and strong support system (SS). Seven subthemes were identified as depicting the overarching themes: strictness (T), high expectations (A), custodial parent as "head coach" (L), giving choices and consequences (C/C), strides toward stability (Stab), family cohesion (Coh), and high parental involvement (Inv). An unexpected code for non-custodial parent involvement emerged from the data (N/CInv). I concluded that the value co-researchers placed on imparting a sense of independence was expressed through their role as "head coach" and through giving their children choices and consequences. Co-researchers' future orientation was expressed through their strict parenting style and high expectations and their strong support system buttressed their commitment to maintain stability, create a strong sense of belonging, and remain highly involved in their children's academic careers.

Table 4

Second Cycle Coding

Values-guiding principles	Attitudes-response to values	Practices-behaviors/habits
Independence • *Giving choices and consequences* • *Custodial parent as the "head coach"*	Future Orientation • *"Strict" parenting* • *High expectations*	Strong Support System • *Strides toward stability* • *Good role definition and family cohesion* • *High parental involvement*

Research Questions

Supported by the existing theoretical and empirical research, the central research question for this study was: What are the values, practices, and attitudes experienced by biological parents in blended and stepfamily units that contribute to high academic achievement for adolescents in these families? To answer this question, four research subquestions are initially presented, which are resolved by the themes and subthemes inferred from the semi-structured interviews, photographs, and relevant school documents. The central research question is answered as a final creative synthesis (Moustakas, 1990).

Research subquestion 1: What perceptions do biological parents in blended or stepfamilies have regarding the impact of family status on students' academic learning experiences during the adolescent years?

The primary theme that emerged was independence. Co-researchers believed that, regardless of family structure, fostering their students' sense of independence was critical in academic success. Each of the 10 co-researchers offered examples of how they pushed their students to advocate for themselves, take responsibility for their academic and extra-curricular pursuits, and to live with the consequences of those choices. As custodial parents, co-researchers

explained that they were typically the ones who set the pace for how independence was accomplished. This was coded to reflect co-researchers' "head coaching" leadership style. Like Heather, Sasha, and Patricia, Allison and Darcie noted it was they who provided the primary leadership regarding their students' endeavors. As the head coaches, they took on the responsibility of rallying non-custodial parents to get on board with attending teacher conferences, reinforcing rules and consequences, and maintaining cooperation with students' schedules.

Theme 1: Independence. Co-researchers consistently emphasized the value they placed on their student's level of independence. They believed that independence was marked by being self-driven and grooming their student to believe in the intrinsic value of personal accountability. Regarding her daughter's challenges in a particular subject, Patricia provided this scenario:

> If I see she's not getting extra help when she needs it, then I'm encouraging her, "Well, have you asked your teacher to help you? Have you told your teacher you don't understand this? What are you doing? It's not her responsibility to make sure you get what you need. What are you doing to contribute to you getting what you need?" It's like I'm giving her the ownership now. It's not my responsibility to call your teacher and say you need extra help. "You need to tell your teacher you need extra help." Now, the two classes she struggles with the most…she stays after school for help in those two classes.

> ***Subtheme 1: giving choices and consequences.*** Nicole and Justin, each of whom have high achieving students on the Autism Spectrum, described their experiences in using choices and consequences to foster independence. Nicole described a situation in which she decided to allow her daughter to make a decision with which she did not initially agree:

We were telling her she should take an honors class her freshman year, and she was

pushing against that, and I explained why she should take an honors class or an AG class,

and she pushed against it and I said, "Fine." She said, "I'm gonna do that my sophomore

year." I said, Okay. That's your decision. I don't agree with it. You are able to do this.

You love history. You can recite facts like nobody I've ever seen or known, and I think

that this would be the smart thing for you to do…[as far as college]…but it's your

decision. I can't make your decisions for you." She thought about it and ended signing up

for the AG, so then, the challenge is gonna be getting her to maintain her focus.

Because Justin's son was apprehensive about going to college, Justin and his wife

encouraged him to initiate his own research into military options. Justin reminded his son,

"That's your choice. It's your life." His son decided the Navy was the right fit for him and Justin

beamed with pride during the interview, stating, "I actually got to see his personality. I get to see

him grow as his own young man into a man." Nicole, while no less proud than Justin, was still in

the position to impose consequences on her daughter rather than let them unfold naturally as they

would in young adulthood. She knows that her daughter is one who will become nonchalant

about her grades if given the opportunity.

She got a C on her last report card, which is not acceptable to me, which means her

electronics are taken away during the week. Once she can focus again on her own, show

me that she can get her As and Bs, then she can have her electronics back during the

week. The minute it slips again, the minute those electronics go away. So I'm trying to

teach [her] self-reliance and responsibility for [her] own actions, and I'm trying to teach

it early.

Nicole and Justin's experiences in providing choices and consequences appeared to be driven by their children's need to be redirected and to have an external push. Heather's experience was somewhat different in that her child has it "in her personality to be rule follower." Heather believed that her daughter's ability to do well in school was a function of her innate desire and was only facilitated by opportunities to see options.

> Well, I think that it is in her …to want to be the best, but I've always been real open with [her]. You know, given her scenarios of different things that can happen, good or bad, if she chooses this route versus that route.

Barbara echoed Heather's sentiment, indicating that promoting her son's internal locus of control was a deliberate parenting strategy designed to foster future competence.

> I choose the, "Let's treat you like an adult because I want you to learn how to be an adult," versus, "I'm the authoritarian, you're the child. You have no say." Which, it's important to have structure and boundaries. I'm all about that, but I feel that once they're young men or young adults, they need to learn how to make decisions for themselves in order to really transition into the real world successfully.

Barbara acknowledged that having a different parenting style than her husband has been a struggle, which has impacted her marriage and the relationship between her son and his stepfather. Subsequently, she has seen that working on her marriage has been the key to improving the father-son dynamic. Barbara expressed that the time she functioned as a single mother had a profound impact on how she functioned in her stepfamily. She admitted that she was the one who set the pace for her child's education and development. This became a recurring theme among the other co-researchers.

Subtheme 2: Custodial parent as head coaches. When discussing how she believes the co-parenting relationship(s) between her and her current and former spouses affect her children's academic performance, Teresa explained that most issues were deferred to her.

> I do all the punishing. [My husband] will come to me and say, "[My son] didn't do this," or "[my daughter] needs to change the cat litter." Or things like that. And then I'd have to go. I mean, sometimes he will address but mostly he would come to me first and then I would go to them.

Teresa denied having a co-parenting relationship with her ex-husband, largely because he lives in a different state and his involvement is limited primarily to providing child support. When asked about his involvement, Teresa stated:

> There used to be years ago, but he's not really involved as far as…He probably couldn't tell you what teachers she has, or what classes she's taking, or probably…I don't think he knows the name of her school to be honest with you. So there's not really…

Sasha went so far as to consider the absence of a co-parenting relationship with her son's biological father a fortunate situation. "I'm blessed that we don't have a co-parenting. He lets me do all the parenting." She explained that the door has always been open to him to be a consistent presence in their son's life but he has never wanted that relationship. As a result, Sasha has been able to mold, guide, and direct her son's educational career without the influence and disruption of a parent who might not agree or understand her goals. Likewise, she has been able to enjoy the support of her husband, who she describes as the "superintendent" of their homeschool, while she is the "principal."

Allison summed up the head coach leadership dynamic present in the stepfamily construct among the co-researchers. When compared to her daughter's biological father, Allison stated:

> So…I think at this point in her teen years and over the years, she was probably more frustrated with me than anybody because I have more rules and I have more expectations from her. Growing up, I am the primary one to kind of set the ground rules. [My husband] supports me. So we're a united front. So he just follows my lead.

Throughout the interview, Allison indicated that her daughter's biological father also followed her lead to a great extent because she has always had primary custody. Having primary custody appeared to leverage a degree of authority over the students' access to certain privileges and freedoms. Heather recounted a situation in which she had to exercise limits on her daughter's phone while communicating with her biological father.

> When [my daughter] is at my house, I don't mind [her father] texting her and stuff, but excessive texting pictures…and not paying for anything and the data being doubled, I brought that up and there didn't seem to be…improvement the next month. So I said, "You know, I'm gonna block your number and your current wife's number, until you choose to help me pay for it. And you can contact her through my phone as you did before she got a phone." He chose to go that route, but tried to contact her through her iPad but it did not have WiFi all the time. So, he saw that it was a struggle…So from May to November, I paid the bill and in December, he said, "I'm ready to start paying half."

Research subquestion 2: In what ways are biological parents in blended and stepfamilies deliberate in promoting academic achievement?

The most significant theme generated was the future-oriented attitude of the biological parents. Co-researchers consistently described themselves as "strict" and as having high expectations of their adolescents. They indicated that they had set standards and there were predictable consequences for failing to meet those standards. Furthermore, co-researchers' high expectations did not shift or falter during family restructuring. Co-researchers also voiced that their high expectations and strictness extended beyond the classroom setting into their adolescents' extracurricular activities. Strictness and high expectations were described as a means to an end. Parents believed their approach toward their children's educational development was geared toward self-determination and achievement beyond the high school level and they were vigilant about keeping their children's attention focused in that direction.

Theme 2: Future orientation. Future orientation refers to how people perceive their future within the context of their "interests, hopes, expectations, and concerns" (Farmer, 2002, p. 2). It became apparent that co-researchers embodied a future-oriented attitude with regard to their children's academic performance, as each of them believed their scholastic success would open doors to college scholarship opportunities, fulfilling careers, and broader options overall. Darcie, who wholly supports her son's dream to become a scientist, put it plainly, "I'm always looking towards the future…He wants to do all these things. I'm like, 'Listen, did you do this? Are you doing this?' And he laughs, he's like, 'You're always planning for the future.' I have to." Darcie maintains the idea that she always has to look towards the future because she believes there is a connection between professional outcomes and academic discipline. Likewise, Barbara indicated that her son's performance on the ACT demonstrated his aptitude for mathematics, something that she had not observed in his regular coursework. Convinced that his test scores

would speak more highly of his abilities than his classwork, she began to consider ways in which to promote his skills.

He took the ACT yesterday and he said that the calculus was easy and he's never taken a calculus class. So he didn't understand why people would complain about calculus. I was like, "Okay, brainchild of mine, we need to get you in honors courses already and let's stop messing around." So I'm looking into maybe online classes for him with math and stuff.

Attending college was a goal nearly all co-researchers had for their children and earning scholarships was considered the primary means to that end. Therefore, the focus rested squarely on students' academic achievement.

Subtheme 1: High expectations. Patricia's high expectations for her daughter were rooted in her own experiences as a member of a high achieving family.

We're praying and hoping for scholarships. That's the number one goal, and that's been the goal since she was in my uterus is that she would get a scholarship…The expectation is not are you going to college, it's where are you going, and what are you going to major in? The good thing is my ex, his mom, went to college, she got her Master's. His sister went to college. She got her Master's, and his second sister got her college degree…and he has a college degree…and my dad has a college degree. I have a college degree. I have four college degrees. My brother has a college degree. My sister has a college degree and her Master's.

Patricia believes that being surrounded by people who have attained high levels of formal education beyond high school is an asset and provides a valuable amount of social capital for her daughter. Her decision to enroll her daughter in a magnet IB program was made based on the

idea that scholars in this program are more likely to enroll at top universities and compete for more coveted scholarships.

Allison, who happens to be a former co-worker of Patricia, indicated that her thoughts on achievement extend to the classroom and beyond. As a high achiever herself, Allison runs a tight ship that she believes sets the tone for how her daughter approaches school and her extracurricular activities.

So…they've always known me to work. So I've run the house like a team…that's where the starting point is. We have a set time in the morning that we get up. [She knows] it's like a 10-minute window…There was no excuses for sleeping in and running late. In school, I never had a problem with [her being late]. So that was easy. [She] enjoyed school.

The overwhelming attitude of the co-researchers was that good grades lead to scholarships, which improve your chances of finishing school and opening up doors to good paying jobs. Barbara articulated this very thought in the following:

Of course, we're strongly like, "Hey, the grades, scholarships, if you want to do lacrosse and school, you got to keep on your grades here so that you're able to get on lacrosse [in college]. I don't want to waste money on maybes. You like math and science. Engineering, if you're going to do engineering, go for the highest paying engineer. Whether you like that position or not, it's going to provide for you and it's going to give you financial stability and you're going to be able to put money away and you're not going to be hurting."

The co-researchers' attitude toward high achievement and its role in future success plays itself out in the extracurricular opportunities they provide for their children. For example, Darcie

relies on her community resources to keep her son motivated and encouraged. "I know he wants to be a vet, so I found him a program where he volunteers once a week at an animal sanctuary. It's exotic animals." Likewise, Nicole has worked to find academic and sports resources that promote her daughter's educational and athletic ambitions.

> [She] wants to be a marine biologist…she's applying for the Academy of Natural Sciences, which will allow her to specialize in the sciences, but you have to be accepted in the program, so she's writing an essay. [She also] does high levels of extracurricular activities. She's at a karate tournament this weekend. She was the state champion for the forensics [team] a couple weeks ago.

Nicole also shared a video with me of her daughter competing—and winning—on a swim relay team. Her feeling is that her daughter can excel in every area of interest, not just academics, and pushing her to do so will make her a contender for the best scholarships at the university of her daughter's choice.

Subtheme 2: Strict parenting. Teresa, Allison, Patricia, and Darcie each described themselves as "strict" parents. The literature appears to define strict as either harsh or authoritarian parenting (e.g., Wood & Kinnison, 2017) or controlling parenting (e.g., Cheung, Pomerantz, Wang, & Qu, 2016). However, interviews with the co-researchers indicated that their parenting style actually was, according to Cheung et al., autonomy-supportive parenting, which is characterized by giving choices and consequences regarding academic expectations.

Darcie admitted, "I am strict. I'm a pretty serious person most of the time, and [my husband] is the total opposite. The kids think I go overboard because I plan so far ahead that [my son] has to work on stuff that he's gonna do 20 years from now." While the other co-researchers never specified that they had the next 20 years in mind, they each understood that staying on top

of their children's performance was for the purpose of ensuring future success. Teresa discussed how her reasons for being strict were driven by her knowledge of her children's potential and how hard things could be when life threw unexpected or unfortunate curveballs.

> I was pretty tough on the kids as a single parent. I've only been remarried for a year, so although my husband now is very supportive of grades, I think [their academic success] is because I was tough on them. I just kind of stayed on it and didn't accept Cs. Bs were okay, but I preferred…I think my son probably got it worse and I'm not as tough on my 14-year-old. Probably because he was just a smarter kid. I hate to say it like that. Not that [she's] not smart…but he was just smarter.

As an officer in the military, Sasha describes herself as a "strict" parent who has had to work at being more flexible in her parenting.

> I'm strict. But there are a bunch of strict parents, but there are people who are willing to bend their rules a little bit. I just had this set way of how I was gonna do things, and nothing was gonna change that. It made it very difficult to talk to me, very difficult for me to understand certain things. If I had a mindset about something, it was hard for me to change that mindset. I'd seen a lot of change with that with talking to my husband and seeing that the things that he told me actually works. Yeah. Seeing the way that [my daughter] used to go to him, and now she's able to come to me that way, I know that what he's saying is really true.

> Co-researchers' high expectations and strict parenting styles were inextricable, as they were a result of and in response to the value they placed on their children's need to become independent and successful adults. They each took deliberate, and sometimes painstaking,

measures to reinforce their values and attitudes regarding their children's achievement within the context of a blended or stepfamily construct.

Research subquestion 3: What do biological parents in blended and stepfamilies perceive as challenges in facilitating academic performance?

One of the challenges co-researchers experienced was the need to reorganize and resituate their own social support system. Furthermore, parents viewed themselves as an integral part of their children's support system. They knew that restructuring their family ties would be an adjustment for everyone but the greatest impact would be on their children if they allowed undue disruption. Co-researchers generally viewed developing—and being—a strong support system as an intentional act rather than as an obstacle to be overcome.

Theme 3: Strong support system. Each co-researcher acknowledged, to varying degrees, how important it was for them to have the support of his/her spouse and extended family members as they navigated the terrain of parenting their children, not only through their high level activities and academics, but through their teenage years overall. Three subthemes emerged from the data that indicated the presence of strong support systems for each of the co-researchers, which were high parental involvement, strides toward stability, and family cohesion.

Subtheme 1: High parental involvement. All the co-researchers, with the exception of Teresa, believed they had maintained the same level of involvement with their children after becoming a blended or stepfamily as they had before restructuring. Teresa admitted that repartnering likely took some attention away from her children and she may have missed some opportunities to check homework, ask how their day had gone, and keep up with an interactive nighttime routine. The overwhelming sentiment among the co-researchers, however, was that they had maintained their level of involvement through the changes in family structure and the

adolescent years. I was struck by how Allison's approach toward consistency translated into her parental involvement.

> I think it stayed the same because my husband and I had those conversations even while we were dating. It wasn't a matter of kind of adding him on. He had to be part of…I had to have someone who felt comfortable around kids and also valued family because kids need me. They didn't need anyone or anything to pull me away from what they need from me…I explained to them at an early age…I will block off my work schedule or take a PTO day for those things that are important to you…On the other hand, when I couldn't be there, either [my husband] was always there or my mother. So we always make sure that someone was there to support them *whether they wanted us there or not* (italics added). The basketball games, the swimming, the recitals, someone was there at everything. There was never no one not there.

The parents in this study echoed Allison's approach to parental involvement: "There was never no one not there." For instance, when Justin's son was in the custody of his biological mother, Justin made ways to be involved in his son's activities.

> At that time, he was in the middle of middle school. So as far as me being involved with him it was no different. I coached him as a kid with T-ball and baseball and all that. From the get, you know. See, if we knew about it, we were there.

Each co-researcher talked about how they never wanted their children to feel that their position in the family was less valued because the family structure changed. When discussing the possible obstacles presented in becoming a stepfamily, Sasha stated:

> I actually don't think that we had any obstacles with her. Because like I said, I didn't really change from before the marriage because I still want her to be successful. I still

want her to know that she's important even though we have an addition to the family. I didn't really change anything, so I think we really just stayed on track. Maybe the work is getting a little harder, but other than that, no.

Several co-researchers credited their healthy co-parenting relationships with their ex-spouse and current spouse as helping to maintain high levels of involvement with their children's academic progress. For instance, David said the following about his ex-wife:

Actually, we have a very good co-parenting relationship. We communicate pretty good together. Outside of that, we really don't have hardly any communication, because it's just simpler that way. We both remarried, but as far as both of the girls we still have at home, we communicate very well. Whether it be doctor's appointments, education…We both go to parent/teacher conferences if needed. And a lot of times we'll divide and conquer and do it that way.

David was one of several co-researchers who emphasized the importance of putting his daughter's needs ahead of any personal differences he may have with his ex-wife and working together to help his daughter reach her highest potential. Patricia, who had divorced when her daughter was still a toddler, discussed the importance of having her daughter's biological father remain highly involved in her life.

Oh they have a good relationship, but I think because how we were when we first slit up, just making sure they had time together and that they had that relationship fostered as a young child, it made it easier. It's not like we split up and she didn't see him. [When she was little and] he didn't feel as comfortable with her spending the night, he would come pick her up so that they would do fun things together. They started their relationship right out the gate when we split up. They still had their time together.

Because high parental involvement was not limited to custodial parent involvement, many co-researchers made concerted efforts to create opportunities for the non-custodial parent to engage in their children's academic and extracurricular pursuits. One of the unexpected codes that emerged during this inquiry was non-custodial parental involvement. Regarding her former spouse, Sasha admitted, "For a while there I was a little concerned about how he was relating to [her]. About 2008, I sat him down and had a conversation with him …about how little girls and their relationship with their father…what I think it does for them as grownups." Sasha went on to say that her co-parenting relationship and her daughter's relationship with her father forever changed after that conversation. She smiled and beamed with pride as she continued to describe the ways in which her ex-husband remains involved in her daughter's life.

Nicole was never able to get her ex-husband on board with being involved in her daughter's academic and extracurricular activities. Because her ex-husband "never went to anything" and "didn't want any part of carting around," it took her several months to get used to the fact that "it has never crossed [her current husband's] mind not to go to something." For Nicole, it has made supporting her daughter easier because there is always someone available to drop off, cheer for, or advocate on behalf of her daughter. Darcie and Barbara also made unsuccessful attempts to involve their sons' biological fathers in their lives and each one indicated that their husbands have been the ones to fulfill the father role. As teenagers, Darcie and Barbara's sons have expressed that they have reached a place of resignation regarding their absent parent. Darcie stated, "[My son] told me, to my face, 'I only deal with him because you make me deal with him.'" Similarly, Barbara told me, "My son, he'll call his dad, his biological father by his first name unless he's speaking to him. Then he'll call him dad."

The lack of involvement on the part of some non-custodial parents did not appear to impact students' academic performance. Interestingly, co-researchers who experienced a non-existent co-parenting relationship with non-custodial parents reported feeling disappointed that their children missed out on that aspect of family. However, they also acknowledged feeling rather relieved that the lack of involvement also included the lack of negative influence, chaos, and undue distraction. Regarding her children's biological father, Teresa stated, "My son will call him out on his shenanigans and lies…So he deals with [my daughter]…My 17-year-old has just washed his hands." Even more profound what Justin's account of how he believed his son's socialization and academic progress was stunted before he gained full custody.

> I wanted better for him, and where he was at with his biological mother, it was not being done. Schoolwork was not being done. Discipline was not being done. He took more of a liking to being with me, to being with [my wife]. And he pretty much did fall right into routine. Because for the longest time he was always set to the side…So he had next to no social skills…He couldn't hold a conversation for more than three sentences…So the more he was around my wife and I, the more he actually, I guess, socially evolved.

Barbara, Nicole, and Teresa each indicated that their greatest challenge to facilitating academic achievement in their adolescents was pushing them through laziness and apathy. While Teresa refused to accept anything lower than a B from either of her children, she admitted that her daughter was "too laid back" and "not as concerned" about her grades as she. She joked that her daughter's grade reports are "like a magic trick." Likewise, Nicole has found herself "pushing against" her daughter's occasional laissez faire attitude when it comes to grades. Interestingly, Nicole has found that, within the past year, her daughter has been consistent in her high performance even if she has not been consistent in her attitude. Barbara's experience varied

slightly, in that she did not have to push her son through apathy or laziness. Rather, she had to encourage her son through a sense of defeat and resignation after being told by school officials that earlier underachievement may not serve him well when applying for college. Learning that remaining academically eligible to play lacrosse motivated him to defy his guidance counselor's naysaying helped Barbara keep his dreams and passions before him. In turn, she watched her son excel in academic areas that surprised her.

Research subquestion 4: How do biological parents in blended and stepfamilies address limited resource and social capital as it relates to school/academic performance?

Co-researchers' decision to remain highly involved was intermingled with their deliberate efforts to foster cohesive family units and maintain a sense of stability, residentially and academically, for their children. The remaining subthemes emerging from having a strong support system address co-researchers' perceptions on resource and social capital. The quest to maintain residential, financial, and social stability in their adolescents' lives was premeditated and gauged according to their adolescents' age and social and academic needs.

Subtheme 2: Strides toward stability. All of the co-researchers readily acknowledged that the idea of forming a new family and a new home life was a delicate endeavor. Concerns such as where to live, where to educate their children, and how best to provide financial resources were deliberately addressed when co-researchers made plans to become a restructured family. When asked about effects of residential and school changes on her daughter's achievement, Heather said, "We moved and we used [her] father's address to be able to keep her at the same school." She explained that, while she had primary custody and their daughter would be leaving the school district once she remarried, it was important for her that he daughter keep her same teachers and classmates to ensure minimal changes in her social circle.

David's daughter, being much older, made decisions on her own behalf to eliminate the stress of transitions during family restructuring. David supported her decision to move in with him and his new wife rather than split her time 50/50 with both biological parents. "With her final year of school…after school activities were happening. She didn't want to have to drive another ten, fifteen minutes to get to the other house." Like Heather's daughter, David's daughter has maintained her same school and circle of friends. David has also watched his daughter grow spiritually through the stability forged in his new family construct.

> In fact, she's very involved at the church. She's more involved in church now than she was before. And she had a good youth group then, but then she got involved with the current church and has just full out blossomed from there. And she don't even go to the other youth [group] anymore…because she started figuring out she doesn't have the friends there that she thought she did.

> Several co-researchers indicated that any residential and/or school changes occurring in their families were due to occupational obligations or the age/grade of their students, not because of shifts in their family status. Patricia even wanted her daughter to remain at the same preschool after she remarried.

> I waited to move after she finished preschool. In fact, we waited to move the summer before she started Kindergarten so that she would start school and not have to...so she wouldn't start at one school and then have to move like the next year. We quickly looked for a residence that was bit enough for our whole family.

> Patricia's "whole family" includes her husband's daughter from a previous marriage, who has her own room at Patricia's house and is viewed by Patricia as her oldest daughter. When discussing financial obligations, Patricia said, "All our money's in the same pot and we look at it

all as one. So whatever the kids need, we talk about it and see what we're able to do. It's not really that's your child, that my child. It's just what do we need to do for the kids?"

The way in which co-researchers handled finances in their blended/stepfamilies varied, as child support arrangements, current expectations of marriage, and previous experiences with money and marriage colored their decisions with money. Four co-researchers decided to keep their finances separate. Allison believed it was better that way, since her husband had children and grandchildren living outside the home and she had a specific arrangement with her ex-husband regarding her daughter's education.

So in our divorce, [her] father is responsible for private school. So he pays for tuition for her. Once [she] goes to college, he pays 75 and I pay 25%. All extracurriculars and anything that goes on outside of that, those are my costs, which are fine with me. The school is excellent. Its' definitely worth it, because I think between her parents one of the best gifts we can give her is a solid foundation academically. So she would not be at that school without her father because I wouldn't be able to swing it.

Besides Patricia, five other co-researchers have adopted a "one pot" approach to providing for their blended/stepfamily. Nicole receives child support, but it "doesn't get designated specifically to one area. It's all one pot," and helps augment what she and her current husband earn from their careers.

Darcie, who has been married only once and for the longest amount of time, does not receive child support nor does she earn an income. Her husband is the financial provider of the home and covers all expenses related to her son's education, including his photography, robotics, and dance classes. However, her son works for his grandmother and he is expected to pay for his martial arts classes with the money he earns from his job. The "one pot" approach to finances

was a topic discussed before co-researchers (re)married and it was considered a decision critical

to establishment their union. When asked the reason for adopting a "one pot" approach, Barbara

had this to say about finances:

> After you go through a divorce and everything that I went through, everybody and their
>
> dog is telling me, "Have your own account. Have your own money. Don't trust him.
>
> Have something laying on the side in case you have to get up and go," but [my husband]
>
> is like, "You're not just the woman I live with. I knew that came with the financial extras
>
> and you and [my son]. That's not my stepkid." So it took time and convincing, but yeah.
>
> So it's our money.

Co-researchers expressed making the decision to combine finances as a way to

demonstrate trust and cooperation, to help identify family roles, and to create greater family

cohesion.

Subtheme 3: Good role definition and family cohesion. While not all co-researchers

combined all financial resources with their spouses, each of them described the concerted efforts

they made to ensure solidarity and unity in their blended or stepfamily structure. Co-researchers

granted me access to their family photos, which demonstrated a desire to have all family

members included in both the momentous and the mundane processes of family life. My

interview with Allison took place on her veranda facing her backyard. She pointed out a

particular tree and described her wedding: "We had it in our backyard. We had our parents and a

few of our close friends. So it was probably less than 20 people. We had a blended family

program. We planted a tree back here to represent our union. It was short. It was sweet. It was

simple." The 10-year-old tree flourished, as had Allison's restructured family. She stated,

"Getting married has made everything easier for me." David, a photographer, eagerly showed

several family pictures with his and his wife's children engaged in various fun-loving antics at the beach, during family game night, at birthday parties, and at church. He described his family unit as one in which extended family members accepted all the children as their own.

> Whenever we're combined, my wife's parents…I mean, right from the get-go, they were my daughter's grandparents as well. And with my parents, my wife's daughters, they were instantly in love with my parents. And they like [my ex-wife's husband]. And we chit chat with him. Shoot, I took him and picked him up from work a couple weeks ago.

Similarly, Patricia, whose family attends the same church as her ex-husband's family, experienced a seamless transition in growing her blended family into a cohesive unit. She allowed her daughter to decide how she wanted to address her stepfather and his family and, because they were receptive to her and her daughter, there were no barriers to bonding as a family.

> She says it differently. Like she'll say, "My dad," and I know she's talking about her dad. If she says, "Daddy," I know she's talking about my husband. Because she started calling him daddy, his mom, she started calling her grandma. We don't really use step terms. It's just another grandma, whether it's blood or by marriage. She calls his dad grandpa. She calls his sister auntie. She uses the word step-dad only for explaining to others.

Patricia added that, although her daughter's stepmother "offers herself as a parent," she came into the family's life when her daughter was much older and is largely viewed (and accepted) as a stepparent. Patricia regarded the term "stepparent" as being affectively and functionally different than "parent" and stated, "I think she cares about her. I see them occasionally at church together, but she's mostly under her dad. Like, [she and her stepmother] are close. But because that's her time with her dad, she's usually more under him than I see her under her."

Sasha had an entire living room wall dedicated to family photos, some formal portraits and some snapshots. She explained that the joining of two families had been pleasant and "very lucky." Most importantly, she made the following point: "I think everybody likes the other person because they see the way [my husband and I] get along." I inferred from Sasha's statement that it was the quality of her relationship with her husband that drove the quality of family members' relationship. In turn, children learned to respect and get along with each other.

> I think us as adults is what is making it that way for them. Because I believe that if I
> didn't get along with their mom, it wouldn't be the same way. I believe if my ex-husband
> and my husband didn't get along, it wouldn't be the same way. It's like we put all
> differences aside…and we're just getting along as grownups. We're not bickering for any
> reason. We sit down and they actually see us have conversations with each other,
> especially when it comes to dealing with their well-being.

Harmony and camaraderie did not come as easily for every co-researcher and, for Barbara, it has remained an unrealized ideal. She revealed neither she nor her son is close to her husband's side of the family because "[my son's] seen [my husband's] mom mistreat me." Barbara provided several examples of the family barriers that prevented cohesion with her husband's family. With sadness and disappointment, she recalled one particular exchange between her son and a cousin:

> Even when they came to visit, J was probably 12 or 13 and he got mad at [my son]. He
> was like, "It doesn't matter. You're not my cousin anyway." [My son] was like, "What
> are you talking about? Yes I am." He's like, "No, you're not. You're my tio's (uncle's)
> stepkid. You're not his son, so we're not family."

She expressed greater family cohesion on her side of the family, indicating that, "He's my husband, [my son's] dad. The entire family sees him that way." Fostering family cohesion was also challenging for Heather, who recalled asking her husband to confront her mother-in-law for showing favoritism toward her husband's biological daughter and marginalizing her own biological daughters. Heather was somewhat forgiving of favoritism because of her stepdaughter's profound special needs but, as a self-proclaimed "mother bear," she felt the need to expose the unfairness.

> And my youngest has called my mother-in-law out in front of her and directly to me, like, "When she wants you to go jump on the trampoline, you do it, but when I ask you, you say you're playing with her and you'll have to do it later," because she requires a lot of attention from the grandmother. And so [my husband] has talked to his mom about, "You know, you have to be careful. I know for nine years she was the only one and you were with her every day and because of her special needs she gets a lot of focus, but…"
>
> (*Heather gestures to signify the presence of others*).

Whether family cohesion happened smoothly or it was hard-fought, each co-researcher expressed a deliberate attempt to restructure their families in a manner that minimized gulfs between their children and non-biological family members. Several co-researchers experienced a lack of emotional support from non-custodial parents, regardless of whether the non-custodial parent provided financial support. Half of the co-researchers expressed experiencing frustration or sadness for their children because the non-custodial parent chose to be absent from his/her child's educational development. Justin voiced that his son's relationship with his mother had always been poor because "she's never been around." This made it initially challenging for Justin and his wife to establish an academic routine with his son when he came to live with them.

Justin did give his son's mother credit for enrolling him in extracurricular activities when he was younger but he contended that keeping him on the right track academically has fallen squarely on his shoulders.

While Darcie, Teresa, Nicole, and Barbara believed the non-custodial parents' absence impacted their children's emotional well-being, they did not explicitly express their absence had an overt impact on their children's academic performance. Nicole stated that she and her ex-husband did not speak and only emailed occasionally when necessary. They do not cooperate and work together regarding her daughter's academic pursuits, including preparing for college: "When we were married, he said he would never pay for any college, that it was up to them to pay their own way through school." Nicole has decided that she would rely on her current husband's emotional support to reinforce the encouragement she provided her daughter. Darcie explained that her son's father did not play a remarkable role in his academic success nor did she find that experience a regrettable one. She believed that the lack of a co-parenting relationship was a "blessing" and her son found all the support he needed in her husband. She and Barbara commented on the moment their sons told them they were no longer interested in pursuing a relationship with their biological fathers. With that realization, both co-researchers left the subject alone.

Central research question: What are the values, practices, and attitudes experienced by biological parents in blended and stepfamily units that contribute to high academic achievement for adolescents in these families?

Co-researchers believed their family structure impacted their adolescent's academic learning only in the sense that it provided additional family support. They shared a common notion that their parenting practices and their students' outlook on school and education

remained steady into and through their teenage years. More specifically, all 10 co-researchers indicated that their adolescent children had always been highly capable and highly motivated students. In other words, co-researchers commonly attributed their students' academic achievement to a combination of their children's personalities/temperament and their own approach to parenting. Co-researchers' experiences indicated that their blended/stepfamily structure served to provide additional encouragement toward helping their already high achieving adolescents succeed academically.

Each co-researcher anticipated potential pitfalls in becoming a blended or stepfamily. All 10 of them voiced similar concerns regarding the effect of school transitions and residential relocations once becoming a blended or stepfamily unit. The need to maintain stability in their children's lives to the greatest extent possible was revealed in the interviews. While Barbara and Sasha described having several residential transitions after becoming a stepfamily, their moves were primarily due to being military families and not directly to family reconstitution. The remaining 8 co-researchers took great strides to ensure their students' transitions were minimal. Examples included waiting until a transition academic year before blending, remaining in the same school district, and keeping children's current residence as the new family home. Nicole and Teresa were the only two co-researchers who had both residential and school changes as a result of familial restructuring. However, Nicole believed the transition was beneficial to her daughter's social development and Teresa felt relieved that her son was able to stay in his early college program and her daughter still had friends nearby from her previous school.

Co-researchers consistently shared that the value they placed on education, and academic achievement was paramount. Consequently, they worked hard to sustain the same degree of parental involvement through the process of familial restructuring. Each co-researcher had access

to their adolescent's online grade platform and they reported checking it often to stay in the loop of their student's academic progress. Darcie's degree of involvement was, perhaps, the most intense, as she was a homeschooling parent of a teenager who was dually enrolled in college and high school. With the exception of Teresa, every co-researcher focused a great deal of energy supporting his/her student in extracurricular pursuits. Additionally, those nine parents frequently organized and welcomed the involvement of other family members, including that of their spouse and the non-custodial parent.

Issues related to family cohesion and financial obligations were in the forefront of co-researchers' minds as they navigated family restructuring. Co-researchers' experience of social capital was depicted through the interviews and in their family photographs. Family photographs provided a rich illustration of the people co-researchers perceived as belonging to the family unit. Photographs provided a visual depiction of co-researchers' accounts of the effort that went into putting the needs of their children first. Whether it was a snapshot of a student proudly displaying her honor roll certificate or a formal family portrait for a Christmas card, co-researchers commonly felt it was important to include their adolescent's family of origin while fully legitimizing the bonds created in the blended or stepfamily union. In situations in which co-researchers described having no co-parenting relationship with the non-custodial parent, they described having support from other family members who provided encouragement and reinforcement for the new family unit. Co-researchers spoke of their intentionality in not using the word "step" to describe their family relationships and promoting a sense of respect for the parenting role partners played in their children's lives. These tactics served to solidify the social support experienced by the co-researchers.

Regarding financial obligations, none of the co-researchers expressed limited resource or social capital as being a barrier to facilitating academic performance although David and Teresa described having to make financial choices based on family structure and size. For example, David provided the following picture:

We do have to prioritize, sometimes, and make a choice of which child gets to have their trip or have whatever it is that will be outside the box that we normally would be budgeted for. Because her girls…she brought three girls that still live at home to the table. Two of them teenagers, close in age to my daughter, with all different activities that they're involved in. So it's a happy medium, but sometimes we sacrifice, saying, "It's your turn." They're teenage girls. Sometimes they don't understand, but we make them understand.

Just as David described having to "prioritize" financial obligations in his stepfamily, Teresa stated she had to restrict the amount of money given for school activities.

I probably just give the minimum. Like, there's parents who pay the school dues and pay for the team t-shirt and the field trips and give them money to go on field trips. But as far as extra, there's families and parents that'll bring in stuff and I, unfortunately, am no one of those parents. I struggle just to make it as it is, and especially before I got married. It was a struggle.

Half of the co-researchers adopted a "one pot" approach to money, meaning they decided that they would combine all their financial resources to run the affairs of their blended or stepfamily home. Teresa was the only co-researcher who viewed herself as financially unprepared to support her children through their collegiate years. Yet, while Patricia, Nicole, Darcie, Sasha, and Heather all started setting aside a college fund early for their adolescents, they admitted

pushing their children hard to compete for scholarships in the hopes of lessening the toll college would invariably take on those funds. Apart from Teresa, all the other co-researchers expressed feeling financially capable of meeting their students' academic and extracurricular needs. Patricia, who has a one pot approach in her marriage, commented that budgetary restrictions just meant she and her husband had to be creative in how they presented opportunities.

> We take advantage of a lot of complimentary activities, like the free honor student tutoring after school. But if it's a camp…like she's doing a performing arts camp that she's done for years, it's kind of an expensive camp. But it's something that's really important that we value and we know she loves it so we just plan ahead. If it's something that's going to help them, then we try to make a way.

Other ways in which co-researchers were deliberate in promoting academic achievement included concentrating on the perceived relationship between good grades and scholastic/vocational opportunities post high school. Although Justin was the only co-researcher whose adolescent did not have plans to attend college directly after high school, he did experience many conversations with his son regarding the need to prepare for gainful, independent living upon graduation. To that end, Justin and his wife helped prepare him to enter the Navy. The other nine co-researchers shared the common goal of following-up with their students' course selection to ensure they were taking high level, college preparatory classes. Each parent voiced the ambition of having their children compete for scholarship opportunities and they believed enrolling their children in various forms of extracurricular activities would increase their competitive edge.

Summary

Data analysis revealed three predominant themes that depict biological parents' lived experiences with their high achieving adolescent students. The theme of future orientation was immediately apparent, as co-researchers collectively shared their desire for their children's success beyond high school. They each drew on the connection they perceived between academic success and occupational success. Within the theme of independence emerged the two subthemes of strict parenting and high expectations. Strict parenting and high expectations of co-researchers were coded as attitudes, which were viewed as a response to their value of independence.

The theme of independence emerged as interviews with co-researchers revealed their sense that they were preparing their students to advocate for themselves and predict the consequences of their academic choices. Co-researchers commonly viewed themselves at the head coaches in facilitating independence and valued their leadership role to that end. As leaders and role models in their children's education, biological parents illuminated the third theme of strong support system as being critical to how they deliberately operationalized fostering academic achievement. The three subthemes that emerged from strong support system were (a) strides toward stability, (b) role definition and family cohesion, and (c) high parental involvement. Through their voices co-researchers experienced deliberate efforts to minimize residential and school mobility, foster a sense of family harmony and unity, and remain intensely involved in their students' academic careers.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Overview

The purpose of this heuristic study is to understand and depict the lived experiences of biological parents in blended and stepfamilies with adolescents who demonstrate high academic achievement. The following components will be discussed in this chapter: (a) summary of findings, (b) discussion of the findings as they relate to the literature, (c) theoretical, empirical, and practical implications, (d) delimitations and limitation of this study, and (e) recommendations for future research. The summary of the findings answers the central research question by providing a composite depiction of the co-researchers' lived experience, which results in a creative synthesis that illustrates the essence of their lived experience (Moustakas, 1990). This chapter addresses the theoretical, empirical, and practical implications of this study, including particular recommendations for parents and educators. This chapter concludes with recommendations for future research.

Summary of Findings

The central research question to be answered in this study was: What are the values, practices, and attitudes experienced by biological parents in blended and stepfamily units that contribute to high academic achievement for adolescents in these families? Co-researchers shared meaningful family photos, provided their children's grade reports (including test scores and teacher comments), and spoke at length about their efforts to support their students' academic achievement. Based on information gathered from data collection methods, co-researchers value independence in their children, they maintain a future-oriented attitude, and they exercise the resources found within their support system. Through an examination of the themes and subthemes that emerged from the research, co-researchers promptly, readily, and

consistently established themselves as leaders and head coaches in their children's education. Van Bockern (2011) describes coaching leadership style as being marked by building the capabilities of another in order to help that person reach his/her personal goals and experience the highest level of competence. Co-researchers' primary goal was to teach their high achieving adolescents to become independent advocates for their own education, so they were positioned to actualize their potential as adults.

Biological parents believed there was a strong link between academic achievement and occupational success. To that end, parents expressed making calculated choices, such as prioritizing financial resources as a tool to expose children to extracurricular opportunities and being physically present for scholastic and extracurricular events. Referring to themselves as "strict" and maintaining high expectations served to keep their students focused on the grander picture of preparing for life beyond high school, namely college. Despite adopting a strict approach to parenting, co-researchers understood that fostering independence meant giving their adolescents the opportunity to make their own educational choices and live with the consequences. Co-researchers took deliberate steps to maintain a sense of stability in the midst of the destabilizations that occurred when their families restructured. Furthermore, they explicitly stated they worked to avoid using words that signaled division, like "step" and "real (mother, father, etc.)." Rather, they desired to promote harmony, cohesion, and respect for the roles each family member played in the blended or stepfamily unit.

Discussion

The purpose of this heuristic inquiry was to study the lived experiences of 10 biological parents in blended and stepfamilies as they pertain to their adolescents' high academic achievement. The relevant literature indicates that children in blended and stepfamilies may be

expected to underperform academically as compared to children in traditional, two-biological parent households. Therefore, my aim was to examine biological parents' perspectives on the dynamics that contributed to their students' high performance. My study's theoretical underpinnings were dynamic systems theory and educational resilience theory. Using these theories as my theoretical framework, I expected that the lived experiences of the co-researchers would demonstrate efforts to maintain steadiness through structural destabilization within the family. I also expected co-researchers to be the primary role models in their adolescents' education. The following discussion will address how my research findings relate to the theoretical and empirical literature.

Theoretical Literature

Dynamic systems theory views human development as a nonlinear interaction within an organism's ecological experiences. Thelen (2005) proposed that human development is uninterrupted (second by second) and given to trajectories, not stages. Dynamic systems theory assumes irregularity, diverse courses, and the timing of internal processes and environmental factors on individual development (Keenan, 2010a). It is an extension of chaos theory, which postulates that certain thermodynamic conditions cause organisms to self-organize and create ordered patterns from its parts (Thelen, 2005). Essentially, human development occurs based on what happens, when that event happens, and what internal and external resources are in place at the time of that event. These factors, working in concert, provide the response that creates new (adaptive or maladaptive) patterns and trajectories (Palambo, 2016). Educational resilience theory must be understood through two primary concepts: risk factors and protective factors. More specifically, it asserts that students met with substantial hardship also have the capacity to adjust via specific protective factors in ways that foster scholastic accomplishment (Downey,

2014). While the presence of risk factors may increase the chances of academic struggles, it cannot be assumed that they invariably predict them (Williams & Portman, 2014).

While internal resources are critical to academic achievement, a student's ability to manage destabilizing events (i.e., changes in family structure and adolescence) is also contingent upon available external resources (Sanders, Munford, Boden, 2017). Dynamic systems theory would suggest that the physiological, emotional, and cognitive shifts that occur during adolescence, combined with the external social, financial, familial shifts occurring within a blended or stepfamily dynamic, have the potential to create either an adaptive or maladaptive response to students' academic achievement. Similarly, educational resilience theory would suggest that, despite factors that put students at risk for poor educational outcomes (i.e., blended or stepfamily status), "protective factors actually promote positive school-related and developmental outcomes for youth who are more rooted in…family, community, and school" (Williams & Portman, 2014).

The findings of this heuristic study are consistent with dynamic systems theory and educational resilience theory. The cooperative lived experience of the co-researchers is depicted as one in which they approached parenting their high achieving adolescents, not as if they were not members of a blended or stepfamily, but as being fully aware of their family status and educating their children boldly within that context. In particular, co-researchers identified the destabilizing nature of familial restructuring and its potential accompanying risk factors. In so doing, they strategized ways to create and maximize their students' internal and external resources in order to foster continued academic achievement. One of the protective factors associated with educational resilience is self-efficacy (Bandura, 1982). A common experience shared by the co-researchers was observing their adolescents' internal and enduring desire to be

academically successful. While co-researchers occasionally found themselves reminding their adolescents to advocate for themselves and imposing consequences when they performed below expectations, co-researchers perceived their children as competent self-starters. Co-researchers readily positioned themselves as their students' predominant external resource, lending them as another protective factor against the potential pitfalls of blended or stepfamily status. According to educational resilience theory, a student's drive and motivation to succeed and the parent's high but reasonable expectation for the student to succeed neutralize barriers to educational excellence (Downey, 2014; Paat, 2005; Wiliams & Bryan, 2013).

Dynamic systems theory asserts that a person's ability to cope with increasingly complex tasks depends on how that person self-organizes internal and external experiences. According to Palombo (2016), self-organization occurs across physiological, psychological, and socio-economic systems. In looking at academic achievement as an expression of self-organization, the themes identified in this heuristic study represent the various systems at work in forming the co-researchers' lived experiences in fostering their adolescents' academic achievement. Perhaps the most profound example of this self-organization was the following account provided by Nicole:

> I think because her father and I didn't work out, that she, especially with her autism, change is bad. Change is very uncomfortable for her. So I think that once we had gotten engaged in February, and almost immediately, we saw change. Almost immediately, she calmed down. So, she had liked [my husband] before we officially started dating. She liked [him] as a person, but once we started dating she was like, "No, I don't want any part of this. I don't like him. I hate him." So I think just the engagement, once it became official, it became, "Okay, this is happening." And I think it actually got even better once we actually got married. It's almost like the more solidified my relationship is with him,

the more comfortable she gets. And so, come to this new school, I think this new school

is a better school…so I think that helped a lot too…but she's done very well.

Empirical Literature

According to extant literature, students in blended and stepfamilies may be reasonably

expected to underperform academically as compared to their peers in traditional, two-biological

parent households (e.g., Cavanagh & Fomby, 2012; Fomby, 2013). The results of this heuristic

study suggest there may be key factors that contribute to the academic success of students in

blended and stepfamilies. In examining the lived experiences of biological parents in these

family structures, three predominant themes emerged as contributing factors to academic

achievement: (1) independence, (2) future orientation, and (3) strong support system. Seven

subthemes were extrapolated from the data: (a) giving choices and consequences, (b) custodial

parent as "head coach," (c) strict parenting, (d) high expectations, (e) strides toward stability, (f)

good role definition and family cohesion, and (g) high parental involvement.

Frey and Tatum (2016) assert that parents' failure to foster a sense of independence

protracts adolescence and maintains an unhealthy emotional, academic, and financial reliance on

parents well beyond the post-secondary years of schooling. Independence was perceived as

critical to academic achievement among this study's co-researchers. Research on academic

achievement for children in blended and stepfamilies does not explicitly address independence as

a factor in educational outcomes, nor is there notable discussion on how parents may promote a

sense of independence within that family construct. However, there is a general understanding

that there is a positive correlation between students' self-directed learning and academic

competence (Saeid & Eslaminejad, 2017). Co-researchers valued independence in their children

and viewed it as a quality that reflected personal responsibility and ownership of their work. By

fulfilling the role of "head coach," parents believed they effectively guided their children's choices and used consequences as teaching tools for independence.

Future orientation was a recurring theme in this heuristic study. Co-researchers placed a premium on college and career readiness, which was expressed by their "strict" parenting style and high expectations. This finding is commensurate with research indicating that supportive, or authoritarian, parenting is marked by high demandingness and high responsiveness (Majumder, 2016), which is positively correlated to academic achievement (Bui & Rushi, 2016; Swanson, Valients, Lemery-Chalfant, & O'Brien, 2011). Co-researchers' experiences with their support systems were also a predominant theme in this heuristic study. Parental involvement is marked by parents' decision to assign either human or material resources to a particular area of children's lives (Bui & Rushi, 2016). In the case of this heuristic study, that area is education. Co-researchers made financial, residential, and familial decisions designed to promote family cohesion, a wide array of extracurricular opportunities, and academic enrichment. This corroborates research indicating a positive relationship between parental involvement and the presence of social and resource capital (Otter, 2014).

While some research on blended and stepfamilies suggests couples are more likely to keep their finances separate (e.g., Raijas, 2011), it is interesting to note that half the couples in this heuristic study opted to combine their financial resources and adopt a "one pot" approach to income and expenditures. For these five couples, doing so appeared to reinforce their deliberate efforts to create a harmonious and unified family unit. Such efforts are compatible with research demonstrating a positive correlation between family cohesion and academic achievement, particularly among students considered at-risk for poorer educational outcomes (Stanard, Belgrave, Corneille, Wilson, & Owens, 2010). Similarly, the findings of this heuristic study

revealed that co-researchers proactively addressed role definition by creating a secure sense of belonging for new and existing family members. Co-researchers agreed that it was they who ultimately set the tone for how family members related to one another. Overall adaptation to a restructured family and educational outcomes rely largely on the quality of the couple relationship (Anderson, 1999; Deater-Deckard, Dunn, & Lussier, 2002; Orthner et al., 2009). Sasha expressed this notion completely when she stated, "I think everybody likes [and respects] the other person because they see the way [my husband and I] get along."

Researchers have asserted that family restructuring yields higher rates of residential and school mobility, which may be partially responsible for poorer educational outcomes for children in blended and stepfamilies (Dupere, Archambault, Leventhal, Dion, & Anderson, 2015; Sandstrom & Huerta, 2013). Therefore, it may be reasonably assumed that, for high achieving children in these family structures, there would be minimal residential and school changes resulting from parental recoupling. The findings in this heuristic study corroborate that postulation. David, Darcie, Patricia, Heather, Allison, Justin, and Teresa each went to great lengths to keep their children in the same school or school district to avoid undue disruptions to their community network. Sasha and Barbara each experienced remarkable residential and school changes but those changes were due primarily to their military status, not family restructuring. Nicole was the only co-researcher whose residential and school mobility was strictly due to remarriage and she perceived those changes were profitable to her daughter rather than detrimental. Because research is limited in examining what works in blended and stepfamilies from an educational standpoint, the findings of this heuristic inquiry may further inform the study of educational outcomes for students in these family structures.

Implications

As the number of blended and stepfamily households continues to increase in the United States (Dupuis, 2010), it should be expected that the majority of children will live in a blended or stepfamily structure at some point in their lifetime (Cavanagh & Fomby, 2012). Given the research indicating poorer educational outcomes for children in these family structures, the findings from this heuristic study have long-term implications for students, family members, and educators.

Theoretical Implications

As a developmental theory, DST has historically focused largely on the physiological acquisition of skills (Thelen, 2005) and psychodynamic processes (e.g., Palombo, 2016). The findings of this heuristic inquiry expand the concept of dynamic systems in human development to address the impact of family structure on students' learning experiences. A key concept in dynamic systems theory is that of stabilizing and destabilizing events in human development. Understanding that, within the context of DST, stability does not imply adaptability and destabilization does not imply dysfunction (Granic & Patterson, 2006), applying the theory to academic achievement may expand our understanding of the relationship between adolescence, family structure, and school engagement. Because "as a process model, DST does not specify specific variables, levels, or areas of focus" (Keenan, 2010b, p. 1040), it can be accurately stated that the theory grows this area of study to explore how family members support their children through the turbulent middle and high school years.

Werner and Smith's (1982) seminal work on risk and resilience in youth opened the door to the specific study of educational resilience. Co-researchers commonly expressed their children's desires to "be the best" and do well in school. This study adds to the study of

educational resilience in that it underscores the intersection between students' desires for academic success and parents' educational aspirations for their children. Because resilience is a process and not a personality trait (Werner, 2012), this study demonstrates the necessary presence of long-term social support on students' abilities to flourish academically. Long-term social support is related to influential role models or, in the case of this study, custodial parents as "head coaches." When these "head coaches" expect their children to do well, remain involved in their academic development, and provide educational enrichment (e.g., extracurricular activities), resilience is applied and students excel (Cunningham & Swanson, 2010).

Empirical Implications

Research indicates that children in blended and stepfamilies have poorer educational outcomes than children in biological two-parent households. There is some qualitative research examining the perceptions of successful students (e.g., Downey, 2014; Williams & Portman, 2014) and the perceptions of remarried couples (martin-Uzzi, & Duval-Tsioles, 2013). However, this heuristic study offers insight into what 10 parents of successful students in restructured families believe accounts for their students' academic success. The results of this study support previous assertions that high parental involvement, equitable and ample distribution of financial resources, and residential and school stability contribute to high academic achievement. More specifically, parents of blended and stepfamilies have a lot to teach scholars on how to navigate family role definition and differing parenting styles between households, particularly as it relates to schoolwork, extracurricular activities, and aspirations at the post-secondary level.

Practical Implications

This heuristic study examined factors that contribute to high academic achievement of children in blended and stepfamilies by giving voice to the lived experiences of 10 biological

parents in these family structures. Their experiences offer insight into the ways in which family status impacts the academic involvement of students, family members, and educators.

Implications for students and their families. Cutili et al. (2013) and Skogrand, Davis, and Higginbotham (2011) are among the sundry researchers who suggest that children of blended and stepfamilies lack the financial, social, and emotional resources to experience the same level of educational outcomes as their peers in biological two-parent households. However, the lived experiences of the 10 co-researchers in this study lend support to dynamic systems and educational resilience theories, which argue students are able to develop new and adaptive pathways that allow them to thrive academically, despite risk factors. When certain protective factors are present and at work during critical tipping points in students' development, adolescents appear to thrive academically. The results of this study may help inform the conversations couples have prior to family restructuring to include how their new family status may impact their children's academic performance and overall well-being (Cartwright, 2010). Likewise, students in blended and stepfamilies may benefit from their parents' premarital discussion of finances and their allocation toward educational experiences, especially at the postsecondary level (Henretta, Wolf, Van Voohis, & Soldo, 2012). Parents in blended and stepfamilies who are both socially and financially prepared to navigate restructuring appear to be the best protections against poorer educational outcomes for adolescents (Wen, 2008).

This heuristic study illustrates the critical role biological parents in 10 blended and stepfamilies play on adolescent academic achievement. Parents' involvement beliefs and practices, as pointed out by von Otter (2014), serve to influence children's academic performance at the secondary level and beyond. This study's co-researchers expressed intentionality, not only to remain intimately involved in their children's educational pursuits, but

to rally residential and non-residential stepfamily members and non-custodial family members around their growing interests. Because children in blended and stepfamilies are inclined to perceive family membership more broadly than their parents (Castrén & Widmer, 2015), this has enduring implications for the adults in reconstituted families. Sasha's, Patricia's, Allison's, Heather's, and David's stories may serve as lessons on how to work with all members of a child's family network to provide the best possible educational outcome. Likewise, Teresa's, Barbara's, Darcie's, Nicole's and Justin's experiences may help students and families learn how to adapt and flourish academically despite a lack of non-custodial parental involvement.

Implications for educators. Educators must take into account how family structure impacts students' learning experiences. As an educator and psychologist, I am keenly aware of how issues such as ideology, power, socioeconomic status, and family structure affect schooling. As a biological and stepmother in a stepfamily household, I am also mindful of the commitment necessary to bring stability out of loss and bonding out of brokenness. These roles I fill bring to the fore the challenging position classroom teachers, school counselors, school psychologists, and school administrators play in the lives of students in blended and stepfamilies. As school personnel promote the home-school connection, it must be considered that students in these family structures may consider up to four adults as parents and up to eight adults as grandparents. The experiences of eight of this study's co-researchers suggest some students may not always use language that differentiates the biological from the non-biological family member, as some blended or stepfamilies revile the use of "step" and "real" when discussing family relationships. Clarifying roles with schoolteachers may be a frustrating and repetitive task for family members. For elementary age students, schoolteachers can help by being sensitive to the needs of their students by working with family members in providing homework consistency

between households. Student information sheets given to children at the beginning of the school year may offer a space for caregivers to indicate the names and numbers of both sets of parents and a basic custody explanation of which days a student may be at which house.

This becomes important when educators correspond with family members, coordinate family programming, and solicit support from the important people in students' lives. For example, because Sasha and Barbara live in an area with a large military base, their children have access to school programming geared toward that demographic. Several schools in surrounding districts have a military tutoring program, which gives students in eligible military families access to live experts offering free online tutoring and homework help in over 16 subjects. Classroom teachers, school psychologists, guidance counselors, and school social workers may advocate for a similar program for students identified as at-risk due to family status. School psychologists, guidance counselors, and social workers are specially trained and licensed to provide consultation and counseling, facilitate the link between home, school, and community, and address students' cognitive, socio-emotional, and academic needs through assessments and testing. Understanding the impact of blended or stepfamily status on students' learning experiences is critical in carrying out their responsibilities.

Delimitations and Limitations

A delimitation of this study was each co-researcher must be a biological parent in a blended or stepfamily household and have at least one child born of a previous relationship living in the home on at least a half-time basis. The rationale for this was that questions pertaining to parental involvement could not be sufficiently explored unless there was ample opportunity for the biological parent to exercise involvement. Another delimitation was co-researchers must be the biological parent to a child who demonstrated high academic

achievement during the adolescent years (middle or high school). Using dynamic systems theory as a theoretical underpinning for this research, this study seeks to understand parents' experiences that foster adolescents' academic achievement. Furthermore, educational resilience theory frames this study by examining specific experiences of parents that promote stronger educational outcomes during the adolescent years.

Another delimitation was what is considered academic achievement. For the purpose of this study academic achievement criterion was met if a student's GPA was 3.0 or better or one has made A/B honor roll at least 75% of one's time in middle school. The final delimitation was that interviews must be conducted with the custodial biological parents. Interviews were pursued with both the custodial and non-custodial biological parents. However, whereas a non-custodial parent's refusal to grant an interview would not necessarily disqualify the family from the study, a custodial parent's refusal would automatically disqualify the family. The rationale was that adequate historical data could not be gathered to lead to saturation without contribution from the parent who was the primary caregiver.

With regard to limitations of this study, there was risk that, during the interview process, co-researchers would cast themselves and children in a more optimistic or ambitious light than was accurate. Also, the relatively small sample size precludes findings of this research from being generalized to large populations. Lastly, all 10 co-researchers in this study were middle-to high-income homeowners who had some degree of formal education or specialized training beyond the high school level. The possibility that the findings may have been different had co-researchers been of a lower socioeconomic status must be considered.

Recommendations for Future Research

Research on the factors that contribute to high academic achievement in children of blended and stepfamilies is scarce. This field of study would be more robust if quantitative research examined the relationship between cohesion in these family structures and educational resilience. Furthermore, because blended and stepfamilies are considered subject to diminished resource capital and cumulative transitions (Ginther & Pollack, 2002), quantitative examinations on what accounts for academic underachievement in stable, well-resourced blended or stepfamilies is warranted. As this heuristic inquiry examined the experiences of 10 biological parents in blended and stepfamilies with high achieving adolescents, it is equally important to study the lived experiences of parents of high achieving students at the primary school level. Factors such as parental involvement, perceptions of student independence, and family role definition may be experienced differently for biological parents of high achieving elementary students. Finally, as this study examined the lived experiences of parents of high achieving students in blended and stepfamilies, a qualitative study examining the lived experiences of parents of underachieving students is valuable and opens the door to comparative research.

Summary

The purpose of this heuristic study was to explore the values, attitudes, and practices of 10 biological parents of adolescents in blended or stepfamilies. The findings demonstrate that, with the help of a strong support system, co-researchers intentionally and strategically fostered independence and academic competence in their children. Co-researchers' high expectations and "strict" parenting style were expressions of their academic and occupational aspirations for their children, which intersected with students' own desire to enjoy academic success. As children embark on the turbulent years of adolescence and as the increasing number of reconstituted

families navigate the choppy waters of defining and redefining what it means to be family,

schools and communities may expect to see more challenges for our nation's youth. However,

there is hope that this study may be a springboard to providing potential strategies for educators

and families to nurture positive educational outcomes for children in blended and stepfamilies.

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Appendix A IRB Approval Letter

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY.
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

February 1, 2017

Vernette Gilbreath
IRB Approval 2760.020117: High Academic Achievement for Adolescents in Blended and
Stepfamilies: A Heuristic Inquiry

Dear Vernette Gilbreath,

We are pleased to inform you that your study has been approved by the Liberty University
IRB. This approval is extended to you for one year from the date provided above with your
protocol number. If data collection proceeds past one year, or if you make changes in the
methodology as it pertains to human subjects, you must submit an appropriate update form to
the IRB. The forms for these cases were attached to your approval email.

Thank you for your cooperation with the IRB, and we wish you well with your research project.

Sincerely,

G. Michele Baker, MA, CIP
Administrative Chair of Institutional Research
The Graduate School

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Appendix B Consent Form

Informed Consent to Participate in Research

You are being asked to take part in a research study. Research studies include only people who choose to take part. This document is called an informed consent form. Please read this information carefully and take your time making your decision. Ask the researcher to discuss this consent form with you. Please ask her to explain any words or information you do not clearly understand. You are encouraged to talk with your family before you decide to take part in this research study. The nature of the study, risks, inconveniences, discomforts, and other important information about the study are listed below.

You are being asked to take part in a research study called: High Academic Achievement for Adolescents in Blended and Stepfamilies: A Heuristic Inquiry

The person who is in charge of this research study is Vernette Gilbreath, Doctoral Degree Candidate, Liberty University. This person is called the Principal Investigator. However, because this person is a student, other research staff are involved to guide the research. The research will be conducted at a location mutually agreed upon between you and the Principal Investigator.

The purpose of this study is to examine the lived experiences of biological parents in blended and stepfamilies with high achieving adolescents. You are being asked to take part in this study because of your blended or stepfamily status and the academic achievement of your child.

You will be asked to spend between 60-90 minutes participating in an interview and sharing documents such as family photographs or other personal documents with the Principal Investigator. It may be necessary to conduct a follow-up interview, which should take no more than an hour. You will also have the opportunity to review some of the data with the Principal Investigator during the report writing process. This information may be shared electronically, such as through encrypted e-mail.

You do not have to participate in this research study.

It cannot be certain that you will receive any benefits by taking part in this research study. You will receive no payment or other compensation for taking part in this study.

This research is considered to be minimal risk. That means that the risks associated with this study are the same as what you face everyday. However, information shared with the Principal Investigator will be treated as sensitive and confidential. Confidential information will not be shared with anyone else unless immediate risk to self or others is indicated.

Because the information discussed in this research study is sensitive, some feelings or experiences may be troubling or uncomfortable to discuss. Should you wish to address those feelings or experiences at the conclusion of this study, the Principal Investigator will provide you with professional resources.

There will be no additional costs to you as a result of being in this study.

You should only take part in the study if you want to volunteer. You should not feel that there is any pressure to take part in the study. You are free to participate in this research or withdraw at any time. There will be no penalty or losses if you stop taking part in the study.

If you have any question, concerns or complaints about this study, call Vernette Gilbreath at 910-723-2814. You may also contact the Institutional Review Board at irb@liberty.edu

_____

Date   Signature of Person Taking Part in Study

Appendix C Parent Interview Questions

1. What do you believe contributed to your child's educational resilience and academic achievement after becoming a blended/stepfamily?

2. How would you describe your coparenting relationship with your current spouse?

3. How would you describe your coparenting relationship with the other parent?

4. What is your perspective on your child's relationship with the noncustodial (or custodial) parent?

5. What changes in residency and school attendance resulted from your family restructuring?

6. What were some of the academic and non-academic effects of these residential changes?

7. How did your involvement with your child change upon reconstitution?

8. What new obligations did you have once becoming a blended/stepfamily?

9. How did your student respond to those changes?

10. What sort of financial decisions have you and your spouse (or you and other parent) made regarding your students' education after high school?

11. What sorts of coparenting decisions were made regarding extracurricular activities?

12. How has everyone decided which parent will pay for which educational opportunities?

13. Describe how your family handled the challenge of role definition and what you did/did not do to overcome them.

14. Tell me about some of the challenges facing the family now that your child is an adolescent in a blended/stepfamily and how the family worked/is working through them.

Appendix D Excerpt Sample Transcript

(First Cycle Coding Highlighted)

Interviewer: She stayed pretty consistent?

Participant: Mm-hmm (affirmative). But she had friends.

Interviewer: Which is fortunate?

Participant: I think it may be different if she didn't already know people and have

==friends established already== at ---.

Interviewer: Now that she's getting ready to go to high school, what are some of the

plans that she might have for college or working right after high school?

What kind of conversations have you all had about that?

Participant: She is interested in working in high school, but also, ==she has looked into==

==schools in Charlotte for graphic design==.

Interviewer: For college?

Participant: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Interviewer: Okay. Is she looking hard for scholarships, or do you all have finances set

aside for tuition to help pay for that? How is that?

Participant: ==No to both of those==.

Interviewer: It's scary.

Participant: Parent fail, parent fail. Yeah.

Interviewer: No, I'm serious. It is so scary when you think about how quickly that time passes and you're like, "Oh my God. I've completely left you unprepared."

Participant: "Dropped the ball on that one." Yeah.

Interviewer: Yeah. I'm going through that similarly now with the one I have in college.

Participant: Well that's why, yeah, ==I kind of pressure my oldest to, "Get good grades. We need a scholarship here."== And even when he got accepted into that school I was like, single parent at the time, and I was like, "Do not screw this up for us." And he's like, "For us?" And I was like, "Yeah. This is for us. This is a free college education." So I probably pressure him more than --- ==to get the scholarship and get the good grades.==

Interviewer: Because he can?

Participant: Because he's probably closer to it. But I really need to focus on --- because she's in high school and this is when it starts.

Interviewer: Yeah, and it goes like that. You know?

Participant: Yeah.

Interviewer: So she wants to be a graphic designer. Has she looked into any ... You mentioned she likes drawing. Has she looked into ... Which school specifically?

Participant: There is one she mentioned in Charlotte. I do not remember it.

Interviewer: How would you describe her in terms of how she approaches her

        academics?

Participant: Oh, yeah, she's not too concerned. She's not as concerned as I am about it.

        She's a very laid back person. I was shocked to even hear she found a

        school in Charlotte. So that surprised me. But as far as her grades, I think

        she does get anxious about it. She has a lot of anxiety. She doesn't like

        public speaking. So she will take an F versus getting up and giving a

        speech in front of the class.

Interviewer: Oh, wow. She's just that shy about it?

Participant: She's that shy.

Interviewer: How does she feel about her academic this past year in 8th grade?

Participant: It's been really up and down. Math especially has been really up and

        down. I'll keep an eye on PowerSchools, and then once I start saying

        something to her then she's like, "Well, I didn't turn that in." So she's kind

        of laid back about it. She's too laid back.

Interviewer: How do you feel about how she finished out? Would you say she finished

        strong?

Participant: She pulled it out somehow, because a few weeks before school I was like, "What is going on with this math grade?" And how she pulled out As and Bs, I don't know. It was like a magic trick. I'm serious. I was pretty impressed with it. When I looked at her report card the other day I was like, "Wow." Yeah, I was shocked.

Interviewer: Yeah, this year, I think was challenging for T too, especially in math. The first nine weeks? Sailing. The second nine weeks? I was like, "What is wrong with you?"

Participant: Yeah. And I try to stress that it builds upon itself, so you can't just get by at this right here. You need to learn it because it builds up [crosstalk 00:14:57]-

Interviewer: Right. It's cumulative. You have to take these skills to the next nine weeks, and the nine weeks, and it's going to affect what classes you're able to take once you get to ---.