“People Think It’s Easy Because I Smile, But It’s Not Easy”: The Lived Experiences of Six African American Single Mothers

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Abstract

Grounded in Resilience Theory (Masten et al., 1990; Walsh, 1996; Walsh, 2002; Walsh, 2003) with a specific focus on parental resilience (Gavidia-Payne et al., 2015), this qualitative phenomenological study explored the lived experiences of low-income *Female adult single parent (FASP)* families. Each family had at least one adolescent aged 11 through 21 enrolled in special education classes and engaging in risk behaviors. Two central research questions were addressed. The first focused on the lived experiences of *FASP* and the second focused on their perspectives on how schools can enhance their support. Data were collected through face-to-face, in-depth, semi-structured interviews. Three major themes emerged: *Life adjustment*, *The child is the priority*, and *Perseverance* revealing their experience to be one of *resilience*. Participants also shared and provided insight on their perspectives regarding how schools can better support families. Findings revealed limited parent-school collaboration and highlight the need for further research with this population in the context of resilience. Suggestions for schools and communities working with such families are discussed.

Keywords Single parents · Adolescents · Special education · Risk behaviors · Resilience

Introduction

There have been steady increases in single-parent families over the last 60 years in the USA (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019a; U.S. Census Bureau, 2019d). In fact, the number has continued to rise since 1960 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019a; U.S. Census

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Bureau, 2019d). As of 2019, over 25% of children (close to 19,000,000) under the age of 18 reside in a single-parent household (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019d). Of those children, the single mother–led household is the most common considering that over 80% of children residing in single-parent households live with only their mother (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019d). The percentage of children who are living with a single parent in the USA varies by race and ethnicity (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019c). In particular, in the USA, there are approximately 48% of Black children, 25% of Hispanic children, and less than 20% of White children under the age of 18 who are living with their mother only (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019b).

With steady increases in single-parent families, it is important to be cognizant of the challenges that they face. One such challenge is that of economics. Single-parent households are more likely to be low income compared to two parent households (National Center for Children in Poverty, 2019a). In the USA, over 50% of children living in poverty live in single-parent households (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019c). Black, American Indian, and Hispanic youth are disproportionately low income (National Center for Children in Poverty, 2019a) and have the highest child poverty rates (National Center for Children in Poverty, 2019b).

Often, single-parent families headed by a female are viewed as dysfunctional, and the women leading these families are often blamed for any misfortunes they encounter (Reid-Brinkley, 2012; Walsh, 1996). To compound these faulty viewpoints that have been etched into society, raising an adolescent enrolled in special education and engaging in risk behaviors is an added stressor to that parent. Though many single parents deal with stressors, the resilience possessed by *Female adult single parents (FASP)* is often overlooked and, in most cases, ignored (Brotsky & Vet, 2000; Gavidia-Payne et al., 2015). Thus, it is imperative to explore their experiences and resiliency, and such was the focus of this research study.

For the purposes of the current study, the terms *single parent or single mother* are used to refer to those individuals who are parenting and mothering the child whether they are the biological parent, adoptive parent, or the legal guardian of the child. This phenomenological study explored the lived experiences of low-income single-parent families who are led by a *FASP* who is raising an adolescent enrolled in special education and engaging in risk behaviors. Grounded in the Resilience Theory, the current research sought to better understand resilience in the context of the experiences of *FASP* and how those experiences lead to resilience.

Theoretical Framework

Resilience theory with regard to human development has expanded from initially just studying the resilience of children at risk (Masten et al., 1990) to studying resilience in families (Masten & Monn, 2015; Walsh, 2002), to resilience through a systems perspective (Masten et al., 2008; Walsh, 2016), and to the most current view of studying parental resilience (Gavidia-Payne et al., 2015). Resilience refers to the ability of a system to adjust, adapt, survive, and recover from a substantial life change, challenge, or disruption (Luthar et al., 2000; Masten, 2007; Walsh, 1996).

Although resilience theory acknowledges that problems and risk factors exist, it focuses on tapping into the positive stimuli (Walsh, 2016) that allow one to recover. An integral component to the concept of parental resilience is the ability of the parent to “struggle well” as termed by Walsh (2003) and to successfully adapt, survive, and persevere, despite considerable threatening life challenges (Gavidia-Payne et al., 2015). Parental resilience is then revealed by parents’ ability to tap into their inner strengths and abilities, locate and access beneficial resources, and ultimately find ways to adjust to the adverse situation so that they can successfully provide quality parenting and contribute to the optimal well-being of the child (Gavidia-Payne et al., 2015).

Parent-Adolescent Relationships

Adolescence is a unique developmental and transitional time where preparation for adulthood takes place (Steinberg & Morris, 2001). It also represents a major transition for parent–child relationships. Given all of the transitions that occur during the adolescent years, the role of a parent is critical to an adolescent’s development. For example, parental monitoring, parental supervision, parent-adolescent closeness, parental support, and parent adolescent communication all influence developmental outcomes (Smith et al., 2001). However, positive parenting practices can be hindered when they have a lower socioeconomic status (SES).

Socio-economic Status

Parents who have a lower SES often experience feelings of despair, which can in turn impede their parenting and lead to adolescent problem behaviors (Jocson & McLoyd, 2015). Poverty is one of the most harmful impacts to a youth’s well-being as it impedes education, contributes to poor health, and also is a factor in the development of social, emotional, and behavioral problems (National Center for Children in Poverty, 2019b). Furthermore, family financial status and parental education are highly correlated. When parents have lower levels of education, they are less likely to understand how to navigate the adolescents’ educational system, which leaves them less likely to advocate for their teen at school (Crosnoe & Huston, 2007). When such stressors are present, an adolescent’s risk of engaging in problem behavior and experiencing school failure increases (Crosnoe & Huston, 2007; Jocson & McLoyd, 2015).

School

The school environment drastically impacts an adolescent’s identity formation and overall development (Eccles & Roeser, 2011; Goldstein et al., 2015). Importantly, school success can be a protective factor against the potential perils of growing up in a low-income community. Positive school encounters help foster a youth’s positive and healthy development. Alternatively, if adolescents are struggling at school either

socially, academically, or both, the secondary school years can mark the beginning of a series of stressful social and academic experiences that begin a less than desirable trajectory. For those adolescents who have special education needs, school becomes even more critical to their development, as they have unique learning needs that require additional support and services.

Special Education

Schools are federally mandated under *IDEA* to provide all students with a disability a free and appropriate public education and deliver the appropriate and required special education and related services needed to assist that youth academically (U.S. Department of Education–Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, 2017). This said, research strongly suggests that schools have continued to fail to properly educate and provide the needed support services to students with disabilities over the years (Katsiyannis et al., 2012; Lake & Billingsley, 2000). Research has revealed that school systems have demonstrated behaviors of failing to see students with disabilities as individuals, viewing the youth from a deficits perspective, failing to communicate with parents, not offering parental education when students are initially classified by the school, attempting to and in many cases successfully overpowering parents by denying their requests, and devaluing parents and students (Lake & Billingsley, 2000). Consequently, a parent's encounter with barriers to accessing and navigating resources is a factor that negatively impacts adolescents in special education.

Additionally, discrimination against individuals with disabilities also continues to be a threat to functioning and development. In particular, minority students continue to be overrepresented in special education (Zhang et al., 2014). This is especially true for black males who reside in low-income families, receive free and/or reduced lunch, and who have been classified with emotional and/or behavioral disorders and/or attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (Bal et al., 2014). Thus, having special education needs puts the adolescent at risk educationally, socially, and emotionally since they are a more vulnerable population, and their adolescent transitions are impacted by their need for additional support services.

The Current Study

Research that examines parental resilience from the perspective of the *FASP* is necessary to understand how parental resilience is constructed in the face of significant adversity. Furthermore, it is necessary to examine what processes are necessary to embrace their resilience and contribute to their ability to continue functioning in a resilient manner. Thus, the current study examined these issues using a qualitative, phenomenological approach designed to learn more about the lived experience of *FASP* caring for their adolescent children who are enrolled in special education services and who are engaging in risk behaviors.

Methods

This phenomenological research study explored the lived experiences of low-income single-parent families with adolescents who are led by a female parent or guardian *FASP*. The study focused on families where at least one child aged 11 through 21 was enrolled in special education in school and was also engaging in risk behaviors. Data for this study were collected through face-to-face, in-depth, semi-structured interviews (in the months immediately prior to the COVID-19 pandemic). Open-ended questions were asked; these questions centered on the participants' experiences. The central research questions that guided the study were:

1. What are the lived experiences of low-income single female parents/guardians raising an adolescent who is enrolled in special education and engaging in risk behaviors?
2. From the perspective of low-income single female parents/guardians raising an adolescent who is enrolled in special education and engaging in risk behaviors, how can school better support these families?

Design

The current study used a phenomenological approach. Phenomenological research studies focus on a single phenomenon, gathering data from individuals who have experienced such phenomenon, while exploring the context in which these individuals create meaning (Creswell, 2016). Phenomenology seeks to understand the central phenomenon from the participant's perspective and thus seeks to give a voice to the participants being studied (Creswell, 2016; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Sample

The current sample of participants consisted of 6 African American single mothers. Participants were recruited from a large church in an urban community in the northeast section of the USA (see Tables 1 and 2 for additional demographic information). The first author met with the church's senior pastor to discuss the research study and obtained permission to use the church as a location to recruit participants. With the senior pastor's permission, the first author briefly addressed the congregation to discuss the study during the portion of a Sunday service that highlights pertinent church and community announcements. All congregants present in the service received the recruitment handout. The study was also advertised on the church's social media pages. *Snowball sampling*, which is a form of purposeful sampling (Creswell, 2016; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) was used as an additional recruitment tool. Snowball sampling allowed the participants in this study to refer other participants who have experience with the phenomenon being studied (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Table 1 Demographic profiles of recruitment site

Race/Ethnicity	Percentage
White	1%
Hispanic	0%
Black/African American	97%
Asian	0%
Two or more races	2%
Non-Resident Alien	0%
Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander	0%
American Indian/Alaska Native	0%
Total	100%

For the purposes of this study, *risk behaviors* were classified into three categories: academic risk, social risk, and emotional risk. For this study, *academic risk* was defined as school-based academic challenges or disciplinary conduct and included the following behaviors: low grades, cutting class, leaving class and not returning, disagreements with teachers, not completing homework or class work, not studying for quizzes and tests, noncompliance, and school-based disciplines such as detentions or suspensions. *Social risk* was defined as the peer-based behavioral challenges or substance use/misuse incidences. The following behaviors are examples of social risk as defined in [the current study](#): involvement with negative peer influences, involvement in peer issues such as bullying or harassment, misuse of social media, and substance abuse such as experimenting with alcohol, marijuana, cigarettes, vapes, or other substances. *Emotional risk* was operationalized as having conduct or impulses associated with mental health and included the behaviors of impulsivity, low self-esteem, issues with body image, lack of self-confidence, refusal to talk to anyone, feelings of despair, self-mutilation, and discussion of suicide. Participants’ adolescents had to engage in behavior in at least one of the three identified categories of risk.

Data Collection The first author conducted face-to-face semi-structured interviews with each participant. Each participant was contacted by the first author the day before their interview to confirm the originally scheduled appointment time and location. Interviews took place in a location chosen by the participant. Locations included public places in the community, such as a library and café, in the participant’s home, and at the researcher’s office. The first author asked each participant to create a pseudonym, which allowed for the detachment of the study information from the participant, thus maintaining participant confidentiality (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2018). To ensure and maintain confidentiality, the pseudonym that the participant created was used throughout the entire interview, as well as the interview transcripts. Interviews took approximately 45 to 60 min, and all participants received a \$20 gift certificate to a local grocery store as compensation for their time. Interviews took place in Fall 2019, the semester prior to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Table 2 Demographics of participants

Participant	Age	Hispanic/ Latina	Race	Highest degree or level of school completed	Highest level of education would like to achieve	Relationship Status	No. of years in that relationship status	Current employment status	Reason for not being employed	Area of residence
Loretta	70	No	Black/African American	Some college credit, no degree And Trade/technical/vocational training	Trade/technical/vocational training	Married but separated	19 years	Retired	Retired	Urban area
Blank	53	No	Black/African American	Some college credit, no degree	Master's degree	Divorced	10 years	Employed	N/A	Urban area
Sasha	70	No	Black/African American	HS Diploma or GED	No further education is desired	Single	Entire life	Employed	N/A	Urban area
Amber	33	No	Black/African American	Associate degree	Master's degree	Married but separated	2 years	Not employed	Student	Urban area
Ashley	54	No	Black/African American	Opted not to answer	Opted not to answer	Single	1 year	Opted not to answer	Opted not to answer	Urban area
Tasha	39	No	Black/African American	Some college credit, no degree	Bachelor's degree	Single	4 years	Employed	N/A	Urban area

Background/Demographic Information Prior to the open-ended response questions, the interview process began with a set of questions focusing on participant demographics, including age, race, ethnicity, and employment status (see Table 2). The first author then collected information about the participants' adolescent child, including their age, gender, race, ethnicity, grade in school, and special education classification (see Table 3).

Data Documentation and Ecomap Notetaking Interviews were recorded through the voice recorder app on the first author's laptop as well as a small handheld recording device, supplemented by occasional notetaking. In addition to the standard method of documenting notes on a piece of paper, the first author also utilized *ecomaps*. Ecomaps are a graphic tool used to highlight and draw attention to the associations and relations between a person and their surrounding environment. The ability of the ecomap to document and provide rich data through visual illustration is an advantageous method for a researcher to note the experiences of the participant (Hartman, 1978, 1995).

Analysis

After each interview, the recordings were transcribed through a secure password-protected transcription software. Each audio file was uploaded to the secure transcription software, which then transcribed the audio file into a written transcript. The written transcript was then converted into a Microsoft Word document. The *constant comparative method of data analysis* by Glaser and Strauss (1967) was used to analyze data for this study. This method of analysis allowed for the examination of each transcript and the ability to make comparisons across the experiences of all participants interviewed which ultimately led to identifying similarities and differences among participant responses.

Trustworthiness

To ensure that qualitative research is valid and reliable, and is conducted in an ethical manner, the researcher must employ specific rigorous methods (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). One such method is the concept of trustworthiness. Trustworthiness is the extent to which the study was conducted in a rigorous manner, and the findings can be trusted as accurate representations of the data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Urban & van Eeden-Moorefield, 2018). Ensuring reliability and validity by employing trustworthiness strategies allows the results to depict an accurate account of the phenomenon under investigation (Creswell, 2016; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). As such, *thick, rich descriptions*; *member checking*; use of *ecomaps*; *audit trail*; and *reflexivity* involving an assessment of *researcher positionality* were the five trustworthiness strategies employed for this study.

Table 3 Background information of participants' adolescent

Participant	Age	Gender	Race	Grade	Special Education Classification	Age initially classified	Diagnoses (mental health or physical)	Attending public or private school	Type of school: middle school (MS) or high school (HS)
Loretta	17	F	Black/African American	12	Multiply disabled (MD)	3 years old	Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), fetal alcohol syndrome (FAS), autism spectrum disorder (ASD), bipolar disorder, intermittent explosive disorder (IED)	Private school financed by public school district	HS
Blank	18	M	Black/African American	12	Other health impaired (OHI)	5 years old	ADHD	Public	HS
Sasha	11.5	M	Black/African American	6	Specific learning disability (SLD)	3rd grade	None	Public	MS
Amber	13	M	Black/African American	7	Autistic and emotionally disturbed (ED)	3 years old	ASD, oppositional defiant disorder (ODD)	Private financed by public school district	K-8
Ashley	21	M	Hispanic	12	Multiply disabled (MD)	Grade K	ADHD	Public separate school- financed by public school district	HS
Tasha	15	M	Black/African American	10	Other health impaired (OHI)	4th or 5th grade	ADHD	Public	HS

Findings

This phenomenological research study explored the lived experiences of low-income single-parent families with adolescents who are led by a female parent or guardian (FASP). The study focused on families where at least one child aged 11 through 21 was enrolled in special education classes in school and was also engaging in risk behaviors. Two central research questions were addressed.

Research Question 1: (*What are the lived experiences of low-income single female parents/guardians raising an adolescent who is enrolled in special education and engaging in risk behaviors?*) revealed three major themes and several sub-themes across participants' responses (see Table 4).

Life Adjustment All six participants in the study shared how their experience as a single parent/guardian resulted from some sort of life adjustment. Adjustment refers to the change(s) that participants experienced. One participant recalled the adjustment process: "This is not something that we signed up to do as a single mother... it just came about through life choices and changes." From this theme, two sub-themes also emerged from the data across participant responses. They included: *sole responsibility* and *struggle*. As part of their experiences and life adjustments, parents/guardians became solely responsible for the child.

Sole Responsibility All six participants became the sole parent/guardian for the child. That is, they became completely, entirely, and exclusively responsible for all aspects of parenting the child. Participants recalled how all child-rearing responsibilities were fully on them.

Loretta discussed how whether good or bad happened, she was solely responsible for it all: "As a single parent, all the responsibilities lies with you...everything falls back on you, whether that's good, or whether that's bad." Amber also discussed how it was hard to have to manage all of the responsibility alone. Her statement of: "It's definitely a hard thing when you are the only person doing" describes the overall feelings of participants in the study. As a result of this new role consisting of parenting with sole responsibility, the sub-theme of struggle also emerged.

Struggle All six participants identified some struggles through their experience. Participants reported feelings of stress, overwhelmingness, disappointment, worry, fear, and concern. The feeling of an initial struggle appeared to be a similar experience across five participants, as adjusting to this new role was not easy and did bring about a lot of changes and difficulties. Only one participant did not express the same initial struggles as the other participants. This could be attributed to the fact that she had been down this path before as she was a single parent/guardian when she raised the biological father of the child she was currently raising. Even with the struggle, participants all seemed to come to recognize that they had to fulfill their role. A participant termed it as: "At first it was a struggle but then I realized that I have to do what I have to do as a parent."

Table 4 Research question one themes and sub-themes

Participant	Theme 1: Life adjustment “This is not something that we signed up to do as a single mother...it just came about through life choices and changes.”	1a. Sole responsibility “As a single parent all the responsibilities lies with you... everything falls back on you, whether that's good, or whether that's bad.”	1b. Struggle “At first it was a struggle but then I realized that I have to do what I have to do as a parent.”	Theme 2: The child is the priority “I have no life. He is my life. You know, I'll be able to cruise when he's out and he's, you know, doing this, and that and I'm comfortable, where he would be at. Then I could say, you know if God gave me a life long enough, I can always start my life to do what I want to do...but right now, he's still a priority. 18, 19 doesn't matter.”	2a. Obligation “I do feel exhausted, but I got to be a parent, so I got to do what I got to do.”	2b. Sacrifice “There's a lot of growing, there's a lot of bending... there's a lot of sacrifice.”	Theme 3: Perseverance “Not knowing all of the outs and ins of what we were going through. But, you know, I figured it out.”
Loretta	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Blank	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Sasha	X	X		X	X	X	X
Amber	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Ashley	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Tasha	X	X	X	X	X	X	X

The Child is the Priority Even though there was a struggle, parents/guardians knew that the child was a priority. This was the second theme that emerged from the data. This theme best describes how the participants set aside aspects of their personal lives and put the needs of the child first, as it was the priority and of utmost importance. There was a consensus among the participants that regardless of what else happened or was happening, the child was the priority. From this theme, two sub-themes also emerged from the data across participant responses. They included *obligation* and *sacrifice*.

Obligation In making the child the priority, participants shared how they had an obligation to be there for the child. Participants' obligations did not come without some sacrifice.

Sacrifice Participants indicated that they had to sacrifice and give up some things for the sake of the child. Though there was a great level of sacrifice, the participants found strength and pushed their way through.

Perseverance The third and final theme that emerged from research question 1 was the theme of perseverance. Perseverance was a salient theme in all six participants' lived experiences. Ultimately, the participants learned to adjust to their newfound status, push their way through and persevere because they had to love, take care of, support, and raise the child.

Research Question 2: (*From the perspective of low-income single female parents/guardians raising an adolescent who is enrolled in special education and engaging in risk behaviors, how can school better support these families?*) revealed two major themes and multiple sub-themes across the participants' responses (see Table 5).

Schools Need to Better Collaborate with Parents Findings revealed that all six participants shared the opinion that schools need to better collaborate with parents. Participants shared how schools need to listen to parents and take into consideration what they are saying. All participants expressed some levels of frustration they encountered when dealing with their child's school system. Even with the degree of frustration, all participants discussed their experiences with attending meetings at school. Thus, participants revealed how they were active participants in their child's life and wanted to be collaborative partners with schools. In keeping with the theme of schools collaborating with parents, two sub-themes emerged from the data: *Be more transparent* and *incorporate parental feedback*.

Be More Transparent Of the six participants, five felt that schools need to be more transparent. Amber shared: "I feel like if they're more transparent, and if they were honest about how that process goes, then a lot of things would make more sense to parents."

Table 5 Research question two themes and sub-themes

Participant	Theme 1: Schools need to better collaborate with parents	1a. Be more transparent “I feel like if they’re more transparent, and if they were honest about how that process goes, then a lot of things would make more sense to parents.”	1b. Incorporate parental feedback “I could tell you right now...this isn’t going to work for him... and it didn’t work. And now, it’s like now you wasted all of our time... Everybody’s time is wasted. So we’re back to square one.”	Theme 2: Schools need to improve their programs so that they are effectively meeting the child’s needs “If you don’t have the resources for them...I don’t feel like it’s an excuse for being a sucky program...it’s like, do something and make other ways not to be a sucky program...don’t be a sucky program.”	2a. Supportive services and programs “I think that they should be able to offer programs, so like enrichment programs...things that enrich their lives.”	2b. School personnel “Teachers...I’m not saying on paper, you know, didn’t have that degree to do that type of work. They did not relate. And that made a big barrier between me and my child and them.”	2c. Offer more resources “I think it should be more workshops on IEPs...informational, informational work-shops.”
Loretta	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Blank	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Sasha	X	X	X	X	X		X
Amber	X	X	X	X	X		X
Ashley	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Tasha	X			X	X	X	

Incorporate Parental Feedback In addition to being transparent, participants overwhelmingly felt that schools need to incorporate parental feedback when making decisions regarding their child. The majority of the participants discussed great frustration surrounding the fact that schools were not listening to them and were not integrating their perspectives into the decision-making process. Data revealed that all six participants in the study were actively involved in all aspects of their child's life. As such, they should be considered the experts on their child, and thus, their input is critical and essential to the child's overall educational progress and success. Moreover, data revealed that participants felt that a big part of the child's educational progress and success lied within the programs that the school offered.

Schools Need to Improve Their Programs so that They are Effectively Meeting the Child's Needs Another resounding theme was schools need to improve their programs so that they are effectively meeting the child's needs. All participants felt that schools could enhance their programs. One participant shared her frustration with the programs and how her son was pushed through the school system: "Nothing was going right. EVER! And so he was still not learning anything. He was just sliding through. And, you know, I was getting very frustrated."

Three sub-themes emerged from this theme: *supportive services and programs*, *school personnel*, and *offer more resources*.

Supportive Services and Programs To begin improving school programs, one method participants shared was to increase supportive services. One participant discussed how a program allowing children to interact with pets would be beneficial.

School Personnel Another method discussed by the participants was the necessity for school systems to consider the personnel they have working with the children. Participants shared their opinions on whether school personnel actually related to their children. Tasha discussed how the person assigned to facilitate anger management counseling was not the best fit: "He tried to beat the anger management lady up and she said she's never taking him back...she was the only person that they have anger management at the school. And she will not meet with him anymore. Ms. S., I remember, she's an old white lady. She was so nice. I think the wrong person to be teaching anger management, but she was really nice but..."

Another suggestion regarding school personnel included adding an additional staff member into classrooms to assist the teacher. Blank expressed: "But you cannot teach these kids without a second teacher or you will be frustrated." Loretta shared: "I know that in a lot of times, classroom might be have a lot of kids, which they should give them an aide. It should automatically be it should be an aide in the classroom to help because of the individuals. And they got a lot of issues. Not just their learning, but the behavior as well. And yes, the teacher she's only one person... And even if you only have five kids, you know five kids could have so many issues or whatever...can wear one person out."

A final recommendation was for the hiring of mental health professionals. Ashley expressed how schools need to have someone regularly on staff that can deal with crisis situations: “I think they should see if they could have somebody to come like have something in the school while they in there. Because like say that kid is having a bad day. I think they should have somebody always in there on hand...Counselor, a therapists, a psychiatrists, yeah.

Offer More Resources Additionally, there was a consensus that schools should offer more resources to parents including workshops, seminars, referrals for services, etc. All six participants expressed that opportunities for childcare, especially during the breaks from school, would be very helpful.

Discussion

Guided by Resilience Theory (Masten et al., 1990; Walsh, 1996, 2002, 2003), with a specific focus on *parental resilience* (Gavidia-Payne et al., 2015), the present phenomenological study explored the lived experiences of low-income *FASP* with at least one adolescent child aged 11 through 21 who was enrolled in special education in school and engaging in risk behaviors.

The first research question explored the lived experiences of low-income single female parents/guardians raising an adolescent who is enrolled in special education and engaging in risk behaviors. To best understand their experiences, participants were asked to share their stories. Three major themes emerged from their experiences: *Life adjustment, the child is the priority*, and *perseverance*. These themes revealed that there was some sort of life adjustment that resulted in single parenthood. Through facing this life adjustment and dealing with all of the struggles and challenges, participants declared that regardless of their circumstances, the child was the priority. Thus, they found strength and learned to figure things out and persevere because they had to for the sake of the adolescent. One aspect of resilience research has focused on how individuals find strength and are able to survive on the basis of an important person or relationship (Walsh, 2003). In line with this, participants in the study found strength and were driven to survive for the sake of the child they were raising. Additionally, consistent with previous research, this study revealed that perseverance is found in parents who are raising youth with disabilities (Gardner & Harmon, 2002; Jones & Passey, 2004).

Accordingly, these themes pointed to *resilience*, which is the answer to this first research question. Resilience refers to the adaptations and survival processes that occur, despite serious threats that can be disruptive and detrimental to life functioning (Luthar et al., 2000; Masten, 2007; Walsh, 1996). *Parental resilience* is the study of this resilience through the context of the parents (Gavidia-Payne et al., 2015). Even when faced with challenges and difficult circumstances, single parents have shown to be resilient and continue to raise their children, regardless of their circumstances (Brodsky & Vet, 2000; Masten, 2018). The lived experience of these *FASP* is one of resilience. Their story is one of resilience, as it tells how they dealt with and bounced back from some major life challenges.

Another criterion for participation in this study was that the single parents/guardian was raising an adolescent, ages 11–21 who was enrolled in special education in school and engaging in risk behaviors. Since the school system is a major component of an adolescent's daily life (Eccles & Roeser, 2011), the study was further propelled to explore how schools can better support these families. The second research question explored the single female parents/guardians perspectives on how they felt schools could better support such families. The single parents/guardians described their experiences with the school systems, which often included participants expressing their frustration with the school system. Participants were able to share and provide insight on how schools can better support families such as theirs. The two major themes that emerged were: *Schools need to better collaborate with parents* and *Schools need to improve their programs so that they are effectively meeting the child's needs*. The themes revealed that school systems are not collaborating with parents as they should. Participants expressed feeling that school systems are not forthright and disregard parental input. Additionally, participants expressed the need for schools to improve their programs to effectively meet the needs of the students. Participants described a number of ways that schools could do this, including changes to existing services, increasing services and programs that are offered within the school, and implementing changes with regard to school personnel. Participants also noted that schools could provide additional resources to parents.

Accordingly, these themes helped to answer the second research question. The first part of the answer indicates that schools need to work in partnership with parents. That is, schools need to listen to parents and take into account what they are saying and work together as a team with parents. The second part of the answer focuses on the need for schools to offer supportive services and programs for both students and parents. Schools need to develop and establish services and programs that are geared toward supporting students and parents and that are beneficial and actually meeting the needs of students.

Significance of Research

Research with marginalized populations can pose many challenges. As a result of major and deplorable ethical violations imposed on African Americans during the Tuskegee Syphilis Study, many African American individuals believe that they will be mistreated by researchers (Corbie-Smith et al., 1999; Gamble, 1993; Scharff et al., 2010; Shavers et al., 2002) and are less likely to participate in research, compared to their white counterparts (Corbie-Smith et al., 2002; Shavers et al., 2002). Researcher mistrust is a major factor in lack of participation (Corbie-Smith et al., 1999, 2002; Gamble, 1993; Scharff et al., 2010; Shavers et al., 2002). Disbelief that the researcher will fully explain the research project and the informed consent process is another major concern (Freimuth et al., 2001). Additionally, the belief that the researcher's underlying motive is simply for prestige, power, and monetary gains (Corbie-Smith et al., 1999) can also impact participation. This can cause many individuals to avoid participating in research for fear of exploitation or just being seen as a number.

In light of these influences on research participation, the researcher having a connection with the participant population is advantageous. Similar to previous studies, the first author's insider status with the participant population (Mohebbi et al., 2018) was beneficial. Being able to identify with the participants with regard to gender, race, and ethnicity was definitely a positive factor.

In line with this, an added strength was the demographics of the participants. Though the study did not seek to only recruit participants of a specific demographic, all six participants identified their race as Black/African American. This is a strength, as the study's findings contribute to the body of research focused on Black/African American single mothers. Additionally, this study was consistent with previous findings that African American single mothers are resilient and have been able to successfully parent, despite adverse circumstances (Brodsky & Vet, 2000).

Additionally, the first author's professional experience working in school systems that are located in urban communities with a high population of low-income families was valuable. The first author had experience working directly with adolescents enrolled in special education who are engaging in risk behaviors. Additionally, the first author also has direct practice experience working with the *FASP*. As a result of the first author's professional training and background, the first author was easily able to establish rapport which fostered participants' ability to trust the researcher, which was indeed advantageous to the data collection process.

Limitations

As with any study, there are also limitations that should be noted. One limitation was that there was only one recruitment site. Additional recruitment sites could have helped to expand the findings. Secondly, this study's findings are limited to Black/African American participants. Though the study did not seek to only recruit participants of a specific demographic, all six participants identified their race as Black/African American. While this is noted above as a strength of the study, it can also be seen as a limitation as the make-up of low-income communities do include individuals from demographics other than Black/African American.

Future Directions

Although this study helped to uncover experiences of low-income *FASP*, future research is needed to further develop these findings. Understanding their experiences would be an asset and can assist with informing the practice of schools, teachers, counselors, therapists, and other direct service professionals in developing effective interventions, services, and programs (Masten, 2018; Masten et al., 2008). Future studies using a sample of participants with diverse demographics can possibly expand the study and its findings, as noted above. Additionally, having a varied set of recruitment sites should be considered for future studies. Finally, future research should consider the perceptions of the adolescent and those working within the school system. Studying these perspectives may offer additional insight and provide a more comprehensive understanding of the population and potential intervention efforts.

The results of the study did reveal that there are other theoretical lenses that can be used as a framework to guide similar studies and further expand the results of this study. Particularly, the participants in this study identified systems in their environment that they constantly interacted with which played a role in their resiliency. It is important to recognize that people are embedded within their families, communities, schools, places of employment, and the larger environment (Masten, 2018; Wandersman & Nation, 1998). As such, the current research highlighted that resilience can be studied from a systems perspective that incorporates multiple levels of influence (Masten & Monn, 2015; Walsh, 1996, 2016).

An intersectional perspective can also be used for studying *FASP* families. Taking an intersectional perspective involves casting aside a single-dimensional lens that is focused on the experiences of the dominant culture and instead taking on a multidimensional intersectional perspective (Crenshaw, 1989). When studying families, it is essential to study the processes that impact family functioning (Smith et al., 2001), and to study them beyond the often socially constructed one-size-fits-all definition of family (Walsh, 1996). In fact, studying key family processes will allow clinicians to better support families through their intervention efforts (Walsh, 1996). It is crucial to keep in mind that interventions that are based on the experiences of the dominant culture will not be of benefit to those who have experienced institutional and systematic forms of inequality and oppression (Crenshaw, 1991). Additionally, it is important to consider parenting practices based on family structure and residential context, and to view it from a power and intersectionality perspective (Few-Demo, 2014). This is especially important because historically measures have been designed to meet the needs of the white, middle class, heterosexual, and patriarchal family (Walsh, 2002).

Conclusion

The current study is among the first that focuses on the experiences of low-income *FASP* with an adolescent who is enrolled in a special education in school and engaging in risky behaviors. Future research should identify factors and processes that reduce the negative effects of living in low-income communities (Jocson & McLoyd, 2015) for those adolescents enrolled in special education programs, engaging in risky behaviors, and living in *FASP* families. It is necessary to take a holistic approach when trying to help parents and adolescents specifically because they are interconnected with many different systems that all play a role in their overall functioning and development. It is the hope that this study will generate increased examination of this population that can serve to add to the body of research, while also making successful connections from theory to practice that will ultimately be used by professionals working directly with this unique population.

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Declarations

Competing Interests The authors have no competing interests to declare that are relevant to the content of this article.

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