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A Comparison of the Academic Achievement of High School Senior Students from One-Parent and Two-Parent Families

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**A COMPARISON OF THE ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT
OF HIGH SCHOOL SENIOR STUDENTS FROM ONE-
PARENT AND TWO-PARENT FAMILIES**

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by

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CHAPTER ONE

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The effect of family structure on student achievement has been a topic of great interest to researchers, dating back to the 1930s. Arguments, both negative and negligible, concerning the presence of only one parent within the home, and the academic achievement of a student can be found, but neither side of the argument has been completely accepted by researchers. The number of variables taken into account varies from study to study, thus the conclusions surrounding each study are different. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to determine which students are academically stronger achievers, those living in one-parent families or two-parent families. The research was performed in the absence of knowing any outside variables, such as socioeconomic status, race, and gender. The research looked at the family make-up of strong academic achieving high school seniors, to discover if they are from one-parent or two-parent families.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

It was reported in 1992, by the U.S. Bureau of the Census, that 32% of all births today are to unmarried women. This number was up from just 5.3% in 1960. Women in today's society are deciding to raise children on their own. There are also over 1 million children involved in new divorces each year. In 1998, 19.8 million, or 27.7 percent of all children under the age of 18, lived with one parent, up from 12 percent in 1970 (Lugaila, 1998). The changes that are occurring in the structure of the modern family are important for present and future educators, because these students are currently, or will soon be, within our classrooms.

The family has traditionally been responsible for serving as an economic unit and promoting the socialization, development, and education of its children. The modern family, however, with the absence of one parent from the child's life, has to call upon the school to help in the areas that have traditionally been thought of as solely a family function. With this added responsibility, school administrators and educators need to examine what, if any, special attention they may need to pay to this rising populace of students.

Many school districts nationwide are being faced with a rising number of one-parent family students. They are being overwhelmed with problems faced by this rising, diverse group. An effective school district might look at a variety of programs, strategies, and interventions, to help those students coming from one-parent households. The goal of most school districts is to educate the entire student body within their district. Therefore, strategies, programs, and recommendations for parents and students, as well as educators and administrators, of how to effectively teach one-parent family students should be welcomed. This study attempted to discover if high school senior students from two-parent families are stronger academic achievers than students from one-parent families.

QUESTION TO BE INVESTIGATED

Are high school senior students from two-parent families stronger academic achievers than students from one-parent families?

DEFINITION OF TERMS

- One-parent families - families in which one parent/guardian lives at home. This may be a result of death, divorce, separation, or unwed mothers.
- Two-parent families - families in which both parents/guardians live at home.
- Strong Academic Achiever - those students who rank in the top 25% of the senior class, as determined by grade point average.

ASSUMPTIONS

1. A student in the top 25% of his/her class is a strong academic achiever.
2. The family data given by the students was correct.

LIMITATIONS

1. The length of time spent in a one-parent or two-parent household is unknown.
2. There also remain many other unaccounted for variables that may make contributions to or distract from the student's academic achievement.

DELIMITATIONS

1. The number of students used in this study was small.

2. The study came from only two urban high schools in Springfield, Ohio, and therefore cannot be extended to other populations.

CHAPTER TWO

RELATED RESEARCH AND LITERATURE

There has been an abundance of research in the area of family structure and its effect on the educational achievement of students. For almost every study finding a negative correlation, there is another study demonstrating an opposite, or no correlation. Some research (e.g., Bankston & Stephens, 1998; Battle, 1997; Krein, 1986) had shown that one-parent families have a negative effect on the educational achievement of students, whereas other research (e.g., Vosa, 1984; Myers, 1983; Chalker & Horns, 1986; Taylor, 1986) has shown that living in a one-parent home has no significant effect on academic achievement.

Judith Vosa was one of the first to do a study that results did not conclude in showing a negative effect of living in a one-parent home on academic achievement. In her 1984 study, she compared the reading scores of one-parent and two-parent children in grades two through four, using the 1983 California Achievement Tests. Her findings

revealed that the children from one-parent homes achieved significantly higher scores on the California Achievement Tests than those from two-parent homes (Vosa, 1984).

One parent homes and academic achievement were the focus of David Myers 1983 study of secondary school aged children. His study concluded that, the total effect of number of parents in the home, on student's achievement tended to be not significant (Myers, 1983). The same was true of Chalker & Horns 1986 study of children grades 2 through 5. Their study concluded that there is no significant difference in reading achievement, as a result of comparing the Stanford Achievement Test given to 119 students in an Alabama city suburban school system (Chalker & Horns, 1986).

According to a study conducted by Dollie Taylor in 1986, no significant difference appears between the academic performance scores of eighth grade students from one-parent homes and those from two-parent homes. The specific academic areas studied were reading, mathematics, science, social studies, and English (Taylor, 1986).

In the 1960s and 1970s, standardized achievement test scores of elementary students were used to examine the effects of family structure on academic achievement. The theme of those studies (e.g., Brown, 1980) were that one-parent elementary students, in most cases father-absent students, scored significantly lower on standardized achievement tests than the two-parent children in the same group.

Although some of these earlier studies were performed on elementary to middle school children, the results were similar when the examined group of students were older. For example, the Sutton-Smith and Rosenberg study of 1968, used the American College Entrance Examination (ACE) of 1968, on college freshman. They compared father-absent family students with father-present family students. Their results found that regardless of the length of time the father was away, the ACE scores were lower for father-absent students. What their study also revealed was that the age-period when the father was absent did have an effect on the scores within the father-absent student group (Sutton-Smith & Rosenberg, 1968).

The majority of the research done recently uses a number of variables, such as socioeconomic status (SES), race, and gender, and their effect, if any, on the achievement of single-parent versus two-parent family students. For example, the 1998 study done by Bankston and Caldas of the University of Southwestern Louisiana State, used the Louisiana Exit Examination to examine the influence of family structure, racial concentration, and socioeconomic status on the academic achievement of individual African American and White students. They were successful in showing that coming from a one-parent family has a significant negative relationship upon school achievement. They also concluded that, "the prevalence of students from single-parent families in schools is a better predictor of academic outcomes than the racial composition of schools" (Bankston & Stephens, 720). They believed that family structure was the most important school-level predictor of academic achievement. Their study concluded that the percentage of students from single parent families in schools has a strong negative relation to standardized test scores (Bankston & Stephens, 1998).

In 1997 the Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Sciences used the National Education Longitudinal Study of

1988 to survey the effect of coming from a one-parent family on Hispanic students. They concluded, from their survey of approximately 24,600 Hispanic eighth graders, that those from two-parent families had significantly higher academic achievement on standardized test scores than students from one-parent families. However, this difference disappeared when analyses were controlled for socioeconomic status, which includes their parents' education, occupations, and income (Battle, 1997).

Sheila Fitzgerald Krein (1986) did a study of African American males to examine the effects of living in a one-parent household, in this case a female-headed household only, and how it affected the educational attainment and earnings of young men. Her findings revealed that living in a single parent family clearly has a negative effect on the educational attainment of young men. Krein's research also revealed that the educational attainment is about a half-year less for young men, who lived in one-parent families than for men who did not (Krein, 1986).

The National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP) and the Institute for Development of

Educational Activities (/I/D/E/A/) conducted a study of one-parent families in 1982. The NAESP-/I/D/E/A/ study was limited to data readily available in school files, such as family status and achievement. In their study, one-parent students were found, on the whole, to show lower achievement in school than their two-parent classmates. Disregarding other variables, a simple comparison showed that two-parent children achieved significantly higher on the average than one-parent children (Zakariya, 1982).

In 1986, Ann Miline presented new research on the effects of mothers' employment and living in a one-parent family, on children's achievement. Results showed that the mother's employment and living in a one-parent family can have negative effects on school achievement, but that these effects differ by age, race, and family structure. She found that, in general, students from two-parent families have higher scores on reading and math achievement tests than students from one-parent families (Miline, 1986).

The reason for this study is to attempt to discover if high school senior students from two-parent families are stronger academic achievers than students from one-parent families. This research is not designed to

stigmatize any group of students, but rather to be used as a springboard for further research and as an aid in responding to the needs of single parents and their children. This society continues to undergo family changes and will do so in the future. Educators need to be aware of these changes and adapt to them.

CHAPTER THREE**PROCEDURES FOR THE STUDY****Subjects**

The top 25% of the senior high school classes of both Springfield North and Springfield South High Schools were used as subjects for this study. The top 25% of the class was determined by the students' grade point average as of January 2001, or at the end of the first semester. The make up of these two are as follows: Springfield South High School has a total student body of 1,181 students; 43% of the students are identified as African American and 54% of the students are identified as white; 51% of the student population are female and 49% are male. There are a total of 196 seniors and 49 students make up the top 25%. Springfield North High School has a total student body of 1,355 students; 25% of the students are identified as African American and 73% of the students are identified as white; 51% of the student population are female and 49% are male. There are a total of 275 seniors and 68 students make up the top 25%.

The total number of subjects used for this study was 102 of a possible 117 seniors, 43 top 25% senior students from Springfield South High School and 59 top 25% senior students from Springfield North High School.

Instrumentation

The chi square distribution was used to test the significance of the frequencies of either one-parent or two-parent families, as well as, length of time spent in current family situation. Normal curve statistics could not be used, due to the use of the top 25% of the senior class, instead of a normal population. Hypothetical, or expected frequencies (E) were compared to observed frequencies (O) of the top quartile.

Procedures

The class rankings of the senior classes of both Springfield South and Springfield North High Schools were obtained from the schools' counselor. The top 25% of the students on both of those lists were selected to participate. A questionnaire was distributed to each of the students. The students completed the questionnaire, which consisted of two questions. The first question: Are you currently living in a single/one parent household or are

you currently living in a dual/two parent household? The second question asked the student: How long have you been living in your current family situation? And finally, there was a place for any comments the students wanted to make about their current or past living situation. The student survey can be found in Appendix A.

CHAPTER FOUR

ANALYSIS OF THE DATA

A comparison was made between students in the top 25% of the senior classes from one-parent families and those from two-parent families. A total of 102 students were used from the top 25% of the senior classes at North and South High Schools. The top 25% were separated by family configuration. The total number of students, in the sample, from two-parent households, outnumbered the total number of students from one-parent households. Out of the 102 total responding seniors, 71, or 69.6% of them, indicated that they were currently living in a dual/two parent household and 31, or 30.4% of them, indicated they were currently living in a single/one parent household. Furthermore, of the 71 two-parent household senior respondents, 61, or 85.9% of them, indicated that they had been in a two-parent household for 10 or more years, which is the majority of their adolescent life. Of the 31 seniors from single-parent households, 15, or 48.4% of them, recorded that they had been in that situation for between 0

to 4 years of their adolescent lives. The results of the questionnaires were compiled and are shown in Table I and Table II.

Table I

Summary of the Duration of Time Spent in the One-Parent and Two-Parent Household

Students ($\underline{n} = 102$)			
	# of Years		
	0 - 4	5 - 9	10 +
One-Parent Family	15	7	9
Two-Parent Family	7	3	61

Table II

Distribution of Senior Students in One-Parent and Two-Parent Households

Students ($\underline{n} = 102$)	
Family Make-up	# of Students
One-Parent Family	31
Two-Parent Family	71

The chi square distribution was used to test the significance of the frequencies described above. Normal curve statistics could not be used, due to the use of the

top 25% of the senior class, instead of a normal population. Hypothetical, or expected frequencies (E) were compared to observed frequencies (O) of the top quartile. A significance was found some where between the .05 to .001 levels, with the degrees of freedom being 1.

CHAPTER FOUR

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Summary of Findings

After reviewing the results of this study, it can be concluded that students from two-parent homes are more likely to be strong academic achievers, than those students from one-parent homes. Disregarding other variables, a simple comparison showed that two-parent students achieved significantly higher than their one-parent student peers.

Conclusions

This study does strongly suggest that there is a correlation between family status and school performance. It does not prove, or disprove, a cause-and-effect relationship between living in a one-parent household and being an underachieving student.

Implications

The implications that this study gives are that being in a two-parent family has a positive affect on academic achievement. It does not in any way indicate that if you are from a one-parent family, that you will not

experience academic achievement, but it does indicate that the majority of high academic achievers, among the seniors in the Springfield City School District's class of 2001, are from two-parent households.

Recommendations of Future Research

Further study should include a larger number of students, and the sample should be studied over a longer period of time. In spite of the limited numbers, the study does seem to have some merit. The results, indicating that living in a two-parent household has a positive affect on a student's overall academic achievement, might be subject to change in time and given other contributing variables or factors. Among those factors are socioeconomic status of the family; the age, sex, and race of the student; the number of siblings; the structure of the student's environment in both the home and the school; the amount of nurturing the student receives; and the circumstances surrounding the separation of the parents. Further research is needed to determine the impact of these variables.

Future research should focus on the rapidly changing society our young people are growing up in. The experiences of the average student today differs in

relationship to the experiences of a generation ago. Therefore, the question is can results, such as presented in this research be generalized? Or, do students from one-parent households show long-term underachievement, compared to their two-parent household peers? These are questions for future research. The findings of this study should not be used to stigmatize one-parent household students, but rather as a springboard for further research.

APPENDIX A

STUDENT SURVEY QUESTIONS

- Are you currently living in a single/one parent household or are you currently living in a dual/two parent household?

- How long have you been living in your current family situation?

• Comments _____

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