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Parental educational support to adolescents: Exploring the role of emotional capital in low-income single-mother families in South Africa

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In this article I explore the emotional resources activated by single mothers to support their adolescent children's educational journeys. Mothers' emotional work is often regarded as something that mothers must do (Gillies, 2006). However, this view does not recognise the power and influence that mothers exert to create opportunities for educational success. By centring the mother as the head of her family and drawing on the concept of emotional capital as a legitimate and valuable resource within single-mother families, it becomes possible to show how mothers in a low socio-economic community invest in their children's schooling. This article is based on a qualitative case study of single-mother families from a South African community. The findings show that the single mothers maintained strong bonds with their children, which enhanced perceived support and contributed positively to their education. Maintaining open communication channels, demonstrating authoritative parenting, and communicating pride in non-academic qualities were significant emotional practices that served to maintain these strong bonds. By engaging in these practices, these single mothers from low-income contexts activated their emotions strategically to support their adolescent child's education.

Keywords: adolescent; educational support; emotional capital; mother-adolescent bond; single mother

Introduction

Parental involvement in education plays a crucial role in the academic achievements of children (Epstein, 2018; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997; Jaynes, 2011; Kaplan Toren, 2013; Seginer, 2006). However, in South Africa a common perception exists that parents, especially those from low socio-economic contexts, are uninvolved and uncaring (Lemmer, 2007; Mncube, 2009; Munje & Mncube, 2018; Okeke, 2014). One of the main reasons for this seems to be that school communities often do not take families' contexts into consideration (Munje & Mncube, 2018; Sibanda, 2021; Smit & Liebenberg, 2003). However, an alternative narrative is emerging both nationally and internationally, showing that low-income parents do engage in informal, home-based forms of support that are often invisible to schools (Daniels, 2017; Jacobs, 2019; López, Scribner & Mahitivanichcha, 2001; Newlin, 2017; Sibanda, 2021; Williams & Sánchez, 2012). Developing this alternative narrative is imperative, as the family-school partnership is a key component for educational success, which is directly related to the economic growth of a country (Sibanda, 2021).

In South Africa, almost 70% of families are headed by women, most of whom live in low-income communities (Budlender & Lund, 2011; Shung-King, Lake, Sanders & Hendricks, 2019). Several researchers have identified trends in literature that appear to portray single-mother families as broken, deficient, and as leading to an educational disadvantage (Gagnon, 2018; Hampden-Thompson, 2009, 2013; Hampden-Thompson & Galindo, 2015; Knowles & Holmström, 2013; Murry & Brody, 1999; Musick & Meier, 2010). Some of the reasons offered for this lack of involvement is that single-mother families are said to be at a higher risk of coming under financial and social pressures and are thus less involved in their children's schooling (Hampden-Thompson, 2009; Knowles & Holmström, 2013; Murry & Brody, 1999; Musick & Meier, 2010).

As a woman who comes from a single-mother household, I seek to challenge the limited perspective and depart from the conventional research approach by highlighting the mother's pivotal role within the family. She serves as both the strategic decision-maker and the head of the household, possessing considerable agency and a diverse range of unrecognised resources. In this article I challenge the assumption that parents from low-income contexts are uninvolved in schooling (Lemmer, 2007; Mncube, 2009; Munje & Mncube, 2018). To do this I draw on the construct of emotional capital to demonstrate that single mothers from low-income contexts activate their emotions strategically to support their child's educational trajectory.

Parental Educational Support, Adolescence and Emotional Capital

Key developmental tasks during the adolescent phase, which generally occurs between the ages of 12 and 18 years of age, includes seeking independence and loosening ties with parents (Gouws, Ebersöhn, Lewis & Theron, 2015). However, even though parents become less directly involved with their child's education the older they become, adolescents still need and want educational support (Hill & Tyson, 2009; Wang & Sheikh-Khalil, 2014). During the adolescent phase, three distinct forms of support have been identified: school-based involvement, home-based involvement, and academic socialisation involvement (Hill & Tyson, 2009). School-based involvement includes parents attending meetings, volunteering at the school, and engaging in discussions with teachers regarding their child's progress or behaviour. Home-based involvement entails parents supervising homework and providing educational resources such as books and learning materials. Academic socialisation, on the other hand, is often more subtle and involves parents communicating their expectations and aspirations

for their child. Extensive empirical evidence demonstrates that all three forms of parental involvement are associated with positive academic outcomes during adolescence, with home-based support particularly noteworthy (Hill & Tyson, 2009; Wang, Hill & Hofkens, 2014; Wang & Sheikh-Khalil, 2014).

This conceptualisation of parental educational support is partly problematic for low-income single-mother families in South Africa, especially for the participants in this study. Most of the participant mothers had their formal schooling interrupted and faced many financial and emotional difficulties related to unemployment and poor housing. Therefore, if one were to measure the mothers' involvement solely based on the above model, it would be evident that they could not assist with homework on an intellectual level, they could not attend school meetings due to transport difficulties and they often had very little information to share with their children that would further career opportunities. Gillies (2006) argues that models of parent involvement often make more sense to middle class families with privilege and status in society, and that those models which seek to accommodate low-income families should include a framework of emotional capital.

In society, power dynamics are often intertwined with individuals' financial wealth or capital. Bourdieu (2007) proposes the concept of capital as a form of knowledge, skills, and learning that individuals possess. This capital provides them with opportunities to advance in society and attain higher status. There are various types of capital, including economic, social, symbolic, and cultural capital. These forms of capital, when valued by society, function as a kind of currency through which people accumulate more economic, social, and cultural capital based on their experiences and opportunities (Bourdieu, 2007).

However, Bourdieu's theory has faced criticism for primarily attributing valuable capital to the middle and upper classes (Gillies, 2006; Reay, 2004; Yosso, 2005). This perspective becomes problematic for children raised in single-mother families who may lack access to the types of capital esteemed by society and the social networks traditionally associated with supporting academic achievement. Ferguson (2017), drawing from an interview with Dianne Reay, highlights that middle-class parents have more resources and activities at their disposal, enabling them to provide greater educational support for their children. On the other hand, low-income parents often make the most of their limited resources to secure educational opportunities for their children. Expanding on Reay's argument, I concur that parental support can hold value regardless of parents' marital status or income, a point often overlooked in the existing literature on this subject.

Unfortunately, discourse on educational support tend to be grounded in privilege that is inaccessible to all families (Gillies, 2006). For example, a child from a middle-class family might have access to educational resources such as private tutors, extracurricular activities, and cultural experiences that enrich their learning. These resources provide them with an advantage in terms of academic achievement. In contrast, a child from a low-income single-mother family may face financial constraints that limit their access to such resources. This disparity in available support can perpetuate inequalities in education, reinforcing the privilege of certain social groups.

Bourdieu's concept of capital was therefore expanded by feminist researchers (see Gillies, 2006; Hutchison, 2012; Reay, 2004) who seek to acknowledge the undervalued and often invisible acts of parents. Emotional work for example, such as caring and offering words of encouragement, is often seen as a natural part of parents' engagement with their children (Gillies, 2006). However, this view does not recognise the power and influence that those emotional investments can have as educational support. Scholars argue that emotions and the labour involved in managing emotions should be recognised as valuable forms of capital within society (Gillies, 2006; Hutchison, 2012; Reay, 2004; Velazquez, 2017). They emphasise the significance of emotions in shaping social and cultural dynamics (Hutchison, 2012:196). This is supported by Gendron's (2017) argument that emotions, when managed and used strategically, can have significant impacts and even economical returns. Emotional capital is theorised as an embodied form of capital (Cottingham, 2016; Manion, 2007). In other words, emotional work can be seen as "eligible for investment and return" and thus has "exchange value" (Manion, 2007:93) in society.

Research indicates that it is maternal input specifically, more so than paternal input that is linked to a child's success in schooling (Hutchison, 2012; Reay, 2004; Velazquez, 2017). For the purpose of this article, when I refer to parental emotional support, this is to be understood as synonymous with maternal emotional support as it is mothers, rather than fathers, that form the empirical basis of this paper. Researchers have demonstrated how mothers create multiple opportunities for educational success by managing, applying and investing emotional capital (Hutchison, 2012; Reay, 2004; Velazquez, 2017). Emotional capital emerges or becomes active through expressions of affection, attention, care, patience, support, and commitment. It primarily exists within the context of intimate relationships with family and friends, encompassing the emotional resources that individuals transmit to those they hold dear (Reay, 2004). The quality of

the parent-child relationship is therefore an important conduit through which emotional capital is activated and is highly related to perceived parental educational support during the adolescent phase (Gouws et al., 2015).

Research shows that a secure parent-child attachment is equally important across developmental phases, and that a strong parent-child bond facilitates a healthier development of autonomy, competence, self-esteem, and well-being in adolescents (Khalid, Qadir, Chan & Schwannauer, 2018; Moretti & Peled, 2004). Therefore, when parents actively work on the quality of this bond, it can have significant outcomes for their adolescents' overall well-being and education. Warmth, protectiveness, and authoritarianism are key features of this bond (Khalid et al., 2018). Furthermore, positive educational outcomes have been linked to the quality of parenting behaviour, including displays of warmth, affection, consistent monitoring, and disciplinary measures (Kotchick, Dorsey & Heller, 2005).

Parents engage in many practices to support their children's education and a traditional view of the emotional labour that contributes to a strong parent-child bond would state that it is a natural form of parenting and that it is not related to educational support. However, as is evident in Gillies' (2006) research, parents from low-income communities may draw on an alternative value system when supporting their child's schooling. In other words, their benchmarks for educational success may not be reflected in traditional models of educational achievement such as high scores and awards (Firmin, Younkin, Sackett, Fletcher, Jones & Parrish, 2019), likewise the emotional resources that they strategically activate to shape their interactions with their children and to shape how their child interacts with their education may also be based on an alternative value system.

In this article I argue that when parents, in this case single mothers, strategically apply their emotional resources to build a strong bond with their adolescent, they indirectly engage in educational support practices. I use the concept "emotional capital" as an analytical tool to articulate the emotional investments the participants engage in, and I attempt to illustrate the ways in which their emotional work acts as educational support.

Research Context and Methods

This study was conducted within the framework of social constructivism, which acknowledges that reality is shaped through social and personal constructions, and that individuals actively participate in the process of creating meaning (Delport, Fouché & Schurink, 2011; Terre Blanche, Durrheim & Painter, 2006). Therefore, the

objective was to gain insight into the participants' perceptions of meaningful educational support. The research was conducted in a low socio-economic status (SES) community characterised by informal housing and socio-economic challenges. Historically, during the apartheid era, this community was designated as a traditionally "coloured" township. According to Pernegger and Godehart (2007:2), the term "township" lacks a formal definition but generally refers to underdeveloped residential areas, primarily (but not exclusively) urban, which were segregated for non-white populations (Africans, Coloureds, and Indians) during apartheid. It is important to note that despite sharing the same ethnicity and gender as the participant community, I did not assume that my experiences mirrored those of the participants.

A multiple case study design was employed, and six families were purposefully chosen based on specific criteria: (a) the family was led by a single mother, (b) an adolescent between the ages of 14 and 18 resided in the family, (c) the adolescent was attending high school, and (d) the adolescent had been primarily raised by a single mother throughout their life. The selection of participants was driven by their possession of distinctive insights on the research subject and the expectation that they would serve as valuable sources of information (Patton, 2002).

The main method of data collection was semi-structured individual interviews with the single mothers and their adolescent children. Six families were purposively selected, therefore, 12 interviews were conducted. Interviews were approximately 1 hour each and were held in locations that were most convenient to the participants, for example their homes. Following the interviews, a focus-group discussion was held with the adolescent participants. Ethical clearance to conduct the research was obtained from the research ethics committee of Stellenbosch University (SU-HSD-001887).

Following participants' consent, interviews were conducted and recorded in audio format, serving as the primary data for the study. These recorded interviews were later transcribed. Thematic content analysis (Rule & John, 2011) was employed as the method of data analysis. This analytical approach involved immersing myself in the data, identifying meaningful units within the data, assigning codes to these units, and subsequently identifying patterns, connections, and themes within the data (Marshall & Rossman, 2011; Rule & John, 2011).

The mothers in the study fell within the age range of 34 to 50. While all of them had completed their primary school education, their average level of high school education was only 1 year. During the interviews, it was found that only two of the mothers were employed: one worked as a cashier at

a grocery store, and the other worked as a tea-lady, responsible for cleaning and serving beverages and food. The remaining mothers were unemployed, and their families were classified as economically disadvantaged, relying on state welfare grants for survival. The two employed mothers earned minimal wages. Except for one mother, none of them received financial support from the fathers of their children. The table below provides detailed

information about the single-mother and adolescent participants. Pseudonyms were used for all participants, and notably, the adolescents themselves chose their pseudonyms. It is important to note that most of the interviews were conducted in Afrikaans, as it was the preferred language of the participants. However, the responses were translated into English for use in this article.

Table 1 Single-mother families who participated in the study

Family	Single mother participant	Age	Employment status	Adolescent participant	Age	Grade
1	Ntombi	45	Tea-lady	Calvin	17	11
2	Evelyn	49	Unemployed	Therren	15	9
3	Ulin	34	Cashier	Tommy	15	9
4	Beth	50	Unemployed	Mikyle	14	9
5	Mandy	41	Unemployed	Nelly	15	9
6	Barbara	36	Unemployed	Palesa	16	10

Findings: Narratives of a Strong Mother-adolescent Bond

I set my analytic focus on transcending the deficit view of marginalised families, such as the single-mother family, as being deficient of capital that is valued by society. I found that single mothers were agentic in their emotional practices with their adolescent children. In contrast to the image of the single-mother family being an educational disadvantage, the findings show how mothers strategically actuate their emotions to support their child's education.

Based on my analysis of the data, it became apparent that all the parent-child pairs expressed a strong bond and described their relationships in terms of feeling loved and supported. This strong bond between the mother and adolescent served as a strong basis for the perceived support. In the focus-group discussion, all the adolescent participants conveyed that their mothers fulfilled both parental responsibilities and played the role of a "best friend." One specific adolescent participant, Calvin, who was 17 years old, shared the following during the focus-group discussion:

My mother is everything to me. She is my mother and my father. She did everything for me and I appreciate her hard work. When I was still young my mother worked as a maid in people's houses ... for 10 years until she got a proper job. She sacrificed everything for me and everything I asked her, she will make sure that I get it. (Calvin, age 17)

The strong bond shared by mother and child played an important role in perceived support, which is a significant factor in parental educational support to adolescents (Kerpelman, Eryigit & Stephens, 2008; You & Nguyen, 2011). In other words, parental educational support is most affective with adolescents when they perceive their parents as supportive. The findings show that the mothers performed specific practices to maintain and develop this strong bond with their adolescents.

These actions were interpreted as agentic emotional practices that shaped the mother-adolescent bond, and indirectly supported the adolescents' schooling.

Maintaining Open Communication Channels

One of the prominent practices highlighted by most of the mothers for fostering a positive relationship with their children was effective communication. They stressed the importance of openness between mothers and children. This emphasis on openness was perceived as the key element contributing to perceived support. As one single mother, Mandy, pointed out, being open and communicative allows her daughter to "see and feel the support." Similarly, Ulin expressed her belief that communication is the pivotal factor distinguishing involved parents from those who are less engaged in their children's lives. According to her, parents need to attentively listen to their child, as even subtle forms of communication or a few words can provide crucial insight into their children's needs. She described this aspect in the following manner:

I am very honest with them, and they are honest with me. Communication is very important. Listen to what the child says ... allow the child to finish. Maybe you think it is not necessary, but maybe there is one little word that is a trigger for you, that it is something important. (Ulin, single mother)

Showing your child that you are interested and that you care was highlighted as a valuable emotional practice.

The importance of honesty was also emphasised by all the mothers. Not only did the mothers encourage their children to be honest, the mothers also demonstrated honesty in many ways. For example, all the mothers spoke openly to their children about the family's financial situation. The following quotes by Mandy and Evelyn demonstrate the mothers' openness with their adolescent child:

I teach them, when we don't have then we don't have, and we get by without it, and they understand (Mandy).

She will always understand, or I just say I don't have, just remember that you need to wait until I have again ... she will always understand (Evelyn).

These mothers cultivated a culture of shared honesty, where the honesty itself became a valuable currency used to nurture the relationship and maintain open lines of communication. From Mandy's perspective, it is the parent's responsibility to initiate support. Mandy emphasised that parents should proactively reach out and help, since adolescents may not always explicitly seek help. She mentioned that despite challenging work schedules, parents should make an effort to allocate time for attending to their children's needs. Showing interest by inquiring about homework and determining if their child requires support were also highlighted by Mandy as essential actions that parents should take:

It doesn't matter how hard we work. We must try to give a lot of attention to our children. Ask 'Do you have homework? Is there anything I can help you with?' The child might answer, 'No, but Mommy, it's finished, or I must still do this or that', but it is important to communicate with the child in order to know what type of help the child needs. (Mandy, single mother)

All of the participant mothers had had their schooling interrupted. Therefore, many of them often could not assist their child in completing his/her homework. However, Mandy's statement above illustrates how the mothers saw asking about homework and showing interest as equally important towards supporting their child's education. Maintaining open communication channels involved initiating the conversation, gently probing their child for information, and encouraging their child to come to them with issues. In this way the mothers intentionally activated their emotional resources towards supporting their children's education.

Gillies (2006) noted that middle-class parents possibly rely on communication via report cards and teachers to remain updated on their child's progress, however the findings show that the single mothers in this study relied on their children for accurate and truthful information. This is related to research with immigrant families, where the children often become the interpreters for their family, and similarly parents need to rely on their children to maintain the family-school communication channels (Daniels, 2017).

The findings thus show that communication with the school was not deemed as important as communication with one's child. This is consistent with research that has indicated that most adolescents resist direct forms of parent involvement such as parents visiting them at school or communicating with the school (Kroger, 2007). It is further in line with the negative perception that

many parents in South Africa have about communication from the school, which is often related to negative reports about their children, such as disruptive behaviour or poor scholastic progress, therefore no communication from the school is often perceived as a positive sign (Makgopa & Mokhele, 2013; Okeke, 2014). For example, Ulin proudly stated that she never receives phone calls from teachers, and they even told her that she did not have to attend the parent meeting because they had no problems with Tommy at school. The mothers depended on truthful information from their children about their progress and their needs for support, so that they could respond accordingly.

Engaging in Authoritative Parenting

The mothers also upheld a strong bond with their children by employing authoritative parenting practices. The findings reveal that these mothers established themselves as the leaders of their households. They often communicated with their children in a firm or admonishing tone and placed significant emphasis on the importance of rules within the home. Evelyn expressed her experience, stating, "*She [my daughter] will always listen. Even if I scold them a lot and they keep saying, 'Mommy keeps scolding, Mommy keeps scolding us.' I do scold them a lot, but they will never oppose me.*"

The mothers portrayed themselves as firm and strict, associating these attributes with effective parenting. Mandy underscored the significance of not excessively indulging one's children with excessive freedom or material possessions. She believed that children should be obedient and respectful. Mandy's perspective, along with Ntombi's, exemplified the collective stance of all the mothers regarding effective parenting:

If I am able to give to my children, then I give, but I don't want to spoil them. So that they don't feel tomorrow or the day after tomorrow that they can walk all over me. There is a line. (Mandy, single mother)

I'm not saying that he must be an angel. He is still a child because he must grow up né, but at least he knows the rules of the house ... If he is out, not later than 7 in the evening. Like [taking] turns [to make] food. I cook the weekends and during the week he cooks. (Ntombi, single mother)

Based on my data analysis, it is evident that the mothers considered respect and obedience to be crucial aspects of their relationships with their children. Alongside creating an environment that promotes open communication, where adolescents feel comfortable discussing any topic, the mothers also recognised the significance of respect and establishing boundaries within the relationship. They believed that these elements played a vital role in fostering strong family bonds. By employing such strategies, the mothers effectively tapped into their emotional resources to support

their children in developing social capital, which is highly valued by society.

The mothers' adoption of authoritative parenting aligns with the research conducted by Reay (2004), which suggests that emotions can have both positive and negative effects on children, and that negative emotions can also serve as motivators for academic success. Reay highlighted the absence of a straightforward pattern in the influence of emotions on children. Nonetheless, the findings in my study illustrate how strictness, along with the enforcement of respect and obedience, can be considered as an emotional investment in an adolescent's education.

The narratives provided by the adolescents confirmed the claims made by their mothers regarding their strict and authoritative parenting styles. The adolescents emphasised how their mothers instilled in them the value of always showing respect. Tommy (adolescent, age 15) stated: "*children are not allowed to backchat or swear at grown-ups. That is what my mother taught me.*" Similarly, Palesa (adolescent, age 16) stated: "*Respect comes first. My mom always tells me that. It's true. She talks to me a lot.*" These examples demonstrate how some of the adolescents internalised their mothers' use of authoritative parenting, and how many of them shared their mothers' beliefs about respect and obedience as important components of healthy family units. These qualities are valued in society and are in line with social norms. Therefore, by instilling these values in their children through authoritative parenting, these mothers built capital that has exchange value for their adolescents within the broader society, especially the education context.

These findings suggest that the mothers possibly draw on an alternative value system when it comes to their child's schooling. Respect was valued much higher than educational awards or high scores. Instead, the mothers prized staying in school, being safe and being respectful towards teachers. Therefore, the mothers strategically actuated their emotions, in this case their authoritative parenting styles, to develop emotional capital within their children which they believed essential for their educational success. These findings also support previous research in confirming that parental authoritarianism, free of psychological and behavioural control, is a significant element of the parent-child bond (Khalid et al., 2018; Musick & Meier, 2010).

Communicating Pride in Non-academic Qualities

The mothers expressed pride when discussing their children, highlighting their good behaviour and respectful nature. Ntombi, a single mother, made a comparison between her son Calvin (age 17) and other children in their neighbourhood, stating: "*they [other children] don't go to school ... they are*

on drugs ... they break into people's houses." She shared her concerns about these negative influences and admitted to contemplating selling their house to escape them. However, Ntombi proudly declared that Calvin reassured her and made a promise that he would not be swayed by the actions of others in the neighbourhood, stating, "*I won't do these things that other kids are doing.*"

When discussing their children, the mothers: Ntombi, Evelyn, Ulin and Beth used phrases such as "*no problems with him*"; "*nice child*"; "*never disappointed me*"; "*doing well*" and "*dependable and going to achieve in life.*" The mothers depicted their children as having positive attributes and as individuals with strong characters. The findings thus show that the mothers placed emphasis on non-academic qualities when describing their children's strengths, even when their child was achieving academically. For example, Tommy (adolescent, age 15) was performing well academically at the time of the study. This was evident in his academic reports and awards received. However, Ulin (Tommy's mother) placed emphasis on the fact that she felt he "*had never disappointed [her]*", referring primarily to aspects of respect, good behaviour, attending school and not becoming involved with friends that would influence him towards drug abuse and gangsterism, which are the common concerns for most mothers in the South African context, especially those living in low-income communities.

The mothers also took pride in their adolescent children's understanding of the family's financial situation. When faced with financial difficulties, the adolescents demonstrated a sense of understanding and patience, waiting for their mother to find a solution. Barbara provided an example:

Palesa is very understanding. When we go to the shops to buy something for her, and I see something for her little sister, then she will say: 'Mommy, it's ok, buy it for her and leave my item. That's how she is, very understanding, and respectable. I can send her anywhere.'

Similarly, Ulin narrated how she often tried to give Tommy money to use public transport to school. However, he would tell her to save the money and then insisted that he would walk to school.

The data provided by the adolescents support the narratives of their mothers regarding their children's comprehension of the family's financial limitations. Tommy, a 15-year-old male, understood that his family would not always have financial resources and that there would be times when certain necessities would be lacking. Similarly, Nelly, a 15-year-old female, shared that she had learned from her mother about the family's occasional struggles with limited food and resources, acknowledging the difficulties they faced. She recognised that as their financial situation improved, they would once again have an

adequate food supply. This understanding exhibited within the single-mother family unit further underscores the strong bonds between the mothers and their adolescents.

Similar to Gillies' (2006) findings, this possibly reflects an alternative system of worthiness which the mothers draw on. In her study Gillies (2006) found that middle-class parents often described their children as bright, referring to their academic achievements, however, like her findings with low-income parents, the participants in my study placed more emphasis on non-academic qualities. My analysis of the mothers' narratives showed that the mothers perceived their children possessing qualities that would keep them in school, dedicated to their schoolwork and valued by larger society, as more important than their actual academic performance. In addition, by communicating pride in their children, the mothers further strengthened the parent-adolescent bond.

Discussion and Conclusion

The concept of parental educational support encompasses multiple dimensions. In this article I argue that one dimension includes the invisible, taken-for-granted, emotional investments made by parents towards their children's educational success. Parents from low-income communities are often labelled as uncaring and uninvolved when they do not participate in the ways that schools value (Lemmer, 2007; Mncube, 2009; Munje & Mncube, 2018). However, research is increasingly making it evident that parents marginalised by society often engage in home-based practices that support educational success and that are valued by the children (Daniels, 2017; Jacobs, 2019; López et al., 2001). Within the field of parental educational support, there is a need to understand and gain insight into the less visible aspects of family dynamics, such as the emotional capital actuated by parents (Gillies, 2006). This is also important globally, as parental educational support is a key factor to educational success and, therefore, the economic growth of a country (Sibanda, 2021).

Single-mother families are a type of family unit marginalised by society. This article drew on data from a study (Jacobs, 2019) that researched the stories of parental educational support to adolescents in single-mother families. These families experienced many economic and social challenges that potentially could influence their children's education in negative ways. However, what was evident in the study was that the mothers strategically activated their emotional resources to nurture strong bonds with their children, which they perceived as the most important way in which they needed to support their adolescent child's schooling. Like previous research with low-income families, the findings show that the mothers possibly drew on an alternative value system that is

not reflected in most models of parent involvement (Gillies, 2006). Where middle-class parents rely on the communication from schools, these mothers relied on their children and, therefore, actively maintained open communication with their children by fostering honesty and openness. Demonstrating honest communication and engaging in authoritative parenting were two important mechanisms that the mothers used to foster strong bonds with their adolescent children.

In this study the mothers emphasised non-academic qualities even when their child was achieving academically. Therefore, aspects such as respect, commitment and dependability were emphasised. These qualities are valued by societal institutions such as schools. In this way mothers actuate emotional resources that would foster qualities in their children which society values and thus attract social capital, i.e., relationships with influential social networks. In this way the mothers' emotions have the potential to be transformed into embodied capital. The findings, therefore, support research that argues that emotional capital has value in its embodied form (Andrew, 2015; Cottingham, 2016; Manion, 2007).

The participants' narratives challenge the stereotype that children from single-mother families are prone to academic failure and social maladjustment. Instead, they highlight the psychological and relational resources that contribute to educational success and the development of strong character, which are fostered by the strong bonds between mothers and adolescents.

Future research should continue this path of exploring the less visible, agentic behaviour of parents from marginalised communities. Shining a light on the nuances of family dynamics can provide insight and disrupt dominant discourses that are harmful to families and schools.

Traditional patriarchal conceptions would define single-mother families as broken and dysfunctional due to the absence of a father. However, an alternative perspective encourages one to consider a broader perspective that acknowledges the mother as the head of the household and highlights the agentic ways in which single mothers actuate emotional capital in supporting their adolescent children's schooling. Therefore, if we are to build stronger partnerships between schools and families, then the emotional work of mothers, especially those from poor communities often viewed as not being involved in their children's schooling, needs to be recognised and given value as legitimate parental educational support.

Notes

- i. The article is based on the doctoral thesis of the author, Carmelita Jacobs.

- ii. Published under a Creative Commons Attribution Licence.
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