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

## Abstract

This paper explores the emotional resources activated by single mothers to support their adolescent children’s educational journeys. Emotional work of mothers is often seen as something mothers must do (Gillies, 2006). However, this view does not recognise the power and influence 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 paper 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 activate their emotions strategically to support their adolescent child’s education.

## Keywords

Adolescent; educational support; emotional capital; mother-adolescent bond; single mother.

## Introduction

Parental educational support is a key contributing factor towards the educational success of children (Epstein, 2018; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler 1997; Jeynes, 2011; Seginer, 2006; Kaplan Toren, 2013). However, in South Africa a common perception exists that parents, especially those from low socioeconomic contexts, are uninvolved and uncaring (Lemmer, 2007; Mncube, 2009; Munje & Mncube, 2018; Okeke, 2014). Researchers have found that an apparently common problem is that school communities often do not take families’ contexts into consideration (Munje & Mncube, 2018; Smit & Liebenberg, 2003). However, an alternative narrative is emerging, showing that low-income parents do engage in informal, home-based forms of support, that is often invisible to schools (Daniels, 2017; Author, 2019; Lopez, Scribner, & Mahitivanichcha, 2001; Williams & Sánchez, 2012; Newlin, 2017).

In South Africa, almost 70% of families are headed by women, most of whom live in low-income communities (Bundlender & 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, and a product of a single-mother family, I challenge this narrow focus, and break with this tradition of research, by centring the mother as a strategic role player in the family, and as the head of the household who possesses significant agency and a multitude of unrecognised resources. My aim is to acknowledge that there is diversity and nuance within families and their unique contexts (Kiguwa, 2007). In this paper, 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 and is commonly identified by the onset of biological changes such as puberty, 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). Three types of support are linked to the adolescent phase, namely school-based, home-based and academic socialisation involvement (Hill & Tyson, 2009). School-based involvement includes activities such as parents attending meetings, volunteering at the school and engaging with teachers about their child’s progress or behaviour. Home-based involvement includes activities such as parents supervising homework and providing materials such as books and learning aids. Academic socialisation is often more indirect and involves communication by the parents of their expectations and hopes for their child. All three types of parental involvement have been empirically shown to be related to positive academic outcomes such as educational success and school engagement (Hill & Tyson, 2009; Wang, Hill & Hofkens, 2014; Wang & Sheikh-Khalil, 2014). In addition, recent studies have shown that adolescents perceive parental educational support within the home as most relevant towards their educational journeys (Author, 2019; Toren & Seginer, 2015; 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) makes the argument 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.

Having power in society is often related to the financial wealth or capital of individuals. Bourdieu (2007) theorised capital as an embodied form of knowledge, skills, and learning, that gives an individual the opportunity to advance in society, and therefore obtain higher status. There are different forms of capital, namely economic, social, symbolic and cultural capital. These forms of capital, when valued by society, serve as a form of currency through which people gain more economic, social and cultural capital from their experiences and opportunities (Bourdieu, 2007). However, Bourdieu’s theory has been critiqued for placing valuable capital in the hands of the middle and upper classes only (Reay, 2004; Gillies, 2006; Yosso, 2005). Bourdieu’s way of looking at capital is problematic for children growing up in a single-mother family who may not have access to the types of capital that are valued by society and the social networks that are traditionally seen as supporting academic achievement. Dianne Reay (in an article written by Ferguson, 2017) points out that middle class parents can do more to support their children educationally because they have more resources and activities, while low-income parents often use the little, they have, to secure educational opportunities for their children. Building on Reay’s assertion I agree that parental support can have value, regardless of parents’ marital status or income, something that tends to be overlooked in the literature in this field. Instead, we find that discourses on educational support continue to be grounded in privilege that is not accessible to all families (Gillies, 2006).

Bourdieu’s concept of capital was therefore expanded by feminist researchers (see Hutchison, 2012; Gillies, 2006; 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 a parents’ engagement with their children (Gillies, 2006). However, this view does not recognise the power and influence those emotional investments can have as educational supports. Scholars believe that emotions and emotional work should have legitimate social positioning as capital in society (Gillies, 2006; Hutchison, 2012; Reay, 2004; Velazquez, 2017), especially for the “power of emotions in shaping social and cultural realities” (Hutchison, 2012, p. 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 therefore 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, p. 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 (Reay, 2004; Hutchison, 2012; Velazquez, 2017). For the purpose of this paper, 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 (Reay, 2004; Hutchison, 2012; Velazquez, 2017). According to Allat (1993, cited in Reay, 2004) emotional capital is primarily appropriated through affection, time, attention, care, patience, support, and commitment, and it is “generally confined within bounds of affective relationships of family and friends and encompasses the emotional resources you hand on to those you care about” (Reay, 2004, p. 572). 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 wellbeing in adolescents (Bornstein, 2006; Moretti & Peled, 2004; Khalid, Qadie, Chan & Schwannauer, 2018; Ryan, Deci & Grolnick, 1995). Therefore, when parents actively work on the quality of this bond, it can have significant outcomes for their adolescents’ overall wellbeing, which includes how they interact with their education. Warmth, protectiveness, and authoritarianism are key features of this bond (Khalid et al., 2018). Authoritive parenting, that is free of psychological and behavioural control, has been shown to enhance adolescents’ autonomy and sense of security (Cai, Hardy, Olsen, Nelson & Yamawaki, 2013). In addition, the quality of parenting behaviours such as warmth, affection, consistent monitoring and discipline have been associated with positive educational outcomes (Kotchik, 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 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 undertaken within the social constructivist paradigm. This paradigm recognises that reality is socially and personally constructed and that the subject is actively involved in the process of meaning making (Delport, Fouché, & Schurink, 2011; Terre Blanche, Durrheim, & Painter, 2006). The aim was therefore to gain insight into what the participants perceive as meaningful to educational support. The study’s context is a low SES community where most of the residents live in informal housing and experience socio-economic challenges. This community is mostly homogenous in terms of race due to the fact that during South Africa’s apartheid past, laws were promulgated that allowed the state to classify and separate its citizens according to race. During the apartheid era this township was demarcated as a traditionally ‘coloured’ township. Although I share the same ethnicity and gender as the participant community, I did not assume that my experiences were similar to the participants.

Using a multiple case study design, six families were purposively selected in accordance with the following profile: (a) the family unit was headed by a single mother; (b) the family unit included an adolescent between the ages of 14 and 18; (c) the adolescent was enrolled in a high school; and (d) the adolescent had been raised by a single mother for most of his/ her life. My selection of participants was motivated by their possession of unique knowledge on the research topic and that they would be “good sources of information” (Patton, 2002, p. 51).

The main method of data collection were semi-structured individual interviews, and the main sources of data were the adolescents and the single mothers. The interviews were approximately one hour each, and when necessary, follow up interviews were arranged. Interviews were held in locations that there most convenient to the participants, therefore I often visited them in their homes, and at times when no quiet space was available, the interview took place in my car. Following the interviews, a focus group discussion was held with the adolescent participants at the university premises. Ethical clearance to conduct the research was obtained from the research ethics committee of Stellenbosch University (SU-HSD-001887).

With the consent of the participants, interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed as the data for the study. The data were analysed by means of thematic content analysis (Rule & John, 2011), which involved phases of immersing myself in the data, identifying units of meaning, coding these units and then identifying patterns, links and themes in the data (Marshall & Rossman, 2011; Rule & John, 2011).

The mothers were all between the ages of 34 and 50. Although all had completed their primary school education, these mothers on average had completed only one year of high school education. At the time of the interviews, only two of the mothers were employed; one as a cashier and the other as a tea-lady. The other mothers were unemployed, and their families can be described as poor, as these households were surviving on state welfare grants. The two who were employed earned minimal wages. Apart from one mother, none received financial support from the fathers of their children. The table below provides details of the single mother and adolescent participants. Pseudonyms are used for all participants, and interestingly, the adolescents chose their own pseudonyms. Finally, it should be noted that many of the interviews were in Afrikaans, however responses were translated to English for use in this article.

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| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **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

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. This is done primarily through developing a strong bond with their child, which involves maintaining open communication, modelling an authoritative parenting style, and communicating pride and high expectations towards their child’s education.

## “My mother is my best friend”: Narratives of a strong mother-adolescent bond

My analysis of the data indicated that all of the parent-child dyads reported a having a strong bond and spoke of their relationships in terms feeling loved and supported. It was further evident that this strong bond between mother and adolescent served as a solid foundation for perceived support. During the focus group discussion, all the adolescent participants reported that their mother played both a parental role and that of a “best friend”. One of the adolescent participants (Calvin, age 17) shared 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. When I was still young, and I needed to talk about man issues, she would always listen to me, and give me ideas like a man would have given me. Most of all she is a loving mother that cares and gives all the support (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 adolescent. 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 key practices in fostering a good relationship with one’s child, which most of the mothers referred to, was communication. They emphasised that mothers and children need to be open with one another. This need for openness appeared to be perceived as the most conducive factor to perceived support. As one mother pointed out, openness and communication allow for her daughter “… to see and to feel the support” (Mandy, single mother). Similarly, Ulin (single mother) stated that she thought that communication is the most important factor that separates involved parents from parents who are not involved in their children’s lives. According to her, parents need to listen closely to their child, as subtle forms of communication or a few words can inform the parents of exactly what children need. She described it as follows:

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 therefore highlighted as valuable emotional practices. In addition, the importance of honesty was emphasized 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 create a culture of shared honesty. Honesty thus becomes a valuable form of currency used to invest in the relationship and served as a key element in keeping the channels of communication open.

Maintaining open channels of communication was also closely related to the safety of their children. All the families lived in a dangerous community, therefore the mothers felt very protective of their children. Teaching and demonstrating honesty and trust were therefore essential in terms of keeping their child safe. Investing in their child’s safety to and from school and keeping them off the streets and away from harmful or negative peer influences were appraised as important steps in supporting their child’s schooling. Barbara explained that it is the parent who should teach the child about personal development and social realities in their environments, because, when parents are not available, adolescents seek advice and support elsewhere, sometimes from people who may negatively influence them. Barbara (single mother) thus stated:

I believe that a child must communicate freely with a parent and that a parent must also be honest. And communication is very important between a parent and a child. You know, when children are afraid to communicate with their parents, they will go outside and talk to strangers who will lead them astray.

All of the mothers shared this intense concern that their children would fall prey to the negative influences within their community. Therefore, establishing a relationship in which their child felt safe to come to them and speak freely was deemed highly important. According to Mandy, it is the parent who should initiate the support. Mandy explained that parents need to reach out and offer help, as adolescents often will not ask for help. She stated that parents should find time within their difficult work schedules to attend to their children’s needs, and should show interest by asking about homework and whether their child needs their support:

 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 therefore 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 on 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 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 (Okeke, 2014; Makgopa & Mokhele, 2013). 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 have no problems with Tommy at school. The mothers therefore depended on truthful information from their children about their progress and their needs for support, so that they could respond accordingly.

### Engaging in authoritive parenting

Another way in which the mothers maintained a strong bond with their children was through authoritative parenting. The findings show that the mothers asserted themselves as parents who were in charge of the family unit. The mothers described how they often spoke with their children in a stern or scolding manner and emphasised the importance of rules in the home. Evelyn stated:

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 described themselves as firm and strict, and linked these characteristics to effective parenting. Mandy emphasised that it was important not to overindulge one’s children by giving them too much freedom or material possessions, because children should be obedient and respectful. Mandy and Ntombi’s statements illustrate all the mothers’ stance on 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 seven in the evening. Like [taking] turns [to make] food. I cook the weekends and during the week he cooks (Ntombi, single mother).

My analysis of the data shows that the mothers deemed respect and obedience as important elements in their relationships with their children. In addition to fostering opportunities for open communication where they encouraged their adolescents to feel free to speak to them about any issue, the mothers also felt that respect and understanding boundaries within the relationship were important factors, and that these contributed towards strong bonds within the family. In this way the mothers activated their emotional resources in ways that would help their children develop social capital that is valued by society.

The mothers’ use of authoritative parenting supports the work of Reay (2004) who indicated that emotions can be positive or negative in nature, and that negative emotions can also spur children on academically. She noted that there is no clear-cut pattern in how they influence children, however the findings here illustrate how mothers made use of strictness, and enforcing respect and obedience also formed part of their emotional investments in their children’s education.

The adolescents’ narratives validated the mothers’ assertions of being strict and authoritative mothers. They emphasised how their mothers taught them to always have respect, especially for others. Tommy (adolescent) states: “children are not allowed to backchat or swear at grown-ups. That is what my mother taught me.” Similarly, Palesa (adolescent) states: “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 authoritive parenting, and how many of them share 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 build capital that has exchange value for their adolescents within 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 spoke of their children with pride, pointing out that they were well-behaved and respectful children. Ntombi (single mother) compared her son Calvin (adolescent, age 17) to the children from their neighbourhood by saying: “they [other children] don’t go to school … they are on drugs … they break into people’s houses”. She further described how she had contemplated selling their house several times to escape these potential negative influences. However, she proudly stated that Calvin convinced her otherwise, and made her a promise that he would not be influenced by others in the neighbourhood, saying: “I won’t do these things that other kids are doing”.

When discussing their children, the mothers: Ntombi, Evelyn, Ulin and Beth use phrases such as “no problems with him”; “nice child”; “never disappointed me”; “doing well” and “dependable and going to achieve in life”. The mothers describe their children in terms of positive characteristics and as possessing strong character. 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 South African context, especially those living in low- income communities.

Another quality that the mothers expressed pride in was how “understanding” their adolescent child was towards their financial situation. When the family could not make ends meet, the adolescents all displayed a sense of understanding and patience until their mother could find a solution. For example, Barbara described:

“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 tries to give Tommy money to use public transport to school. However, he will tell her to save the money and then insist that he would walk to school.

The adolescents’ data validate the mothers’ stories that their children understood their families’ financial constraints. Tommy (adolescent male, age 15) understood that his family would not always have money. He understood that there would be times when the family would lack certain resources. Similarly, Nelly (adolescent female, age 15) commented that she had learnt from her mother that there would be times when the family would face constraints and lack food or other necessities, and that it would be difficult for the family. She knew that when their financial circumstances improved, they would again have enough to eat. This sense of understanding within the single-mother family unit speaks once again to the strong mother-adolescent bonds which existed in these families.

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, similar to her findings with low-income parents, the participants in the current 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

Parental educational support is a multidimensional concept. 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 school’s 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; Author, 2019; Lopez 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).

Single-mother families are a type of family unit that is marginalised by society. This article drew on data from a study (Author, 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. Of the six families, only two mothers were employed, earning a minimum wage. The other families survived on state funding and irregular service work that the mothers could find. Therefore, similar to previous research, one could describe these families as high risk for negative outcomes (Hampden-Thompson, 2009; Knowles & Holmström, 2013; Murry & Brody, 1999; Musick & Meier, 2010).

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 draw 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 authoritive parenting were two important mechanisms the mothers used to foster strong bonds with their adolescent child.

In this study the mothers emphasized non-academic qualities even when their child was achieving academically. Therefore, aspects such as respect, commitment and dependability were emphasized. 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. Researchers make the argument that emotional capital has value in its embodied form (Andrew, 2015; Cottingham, 2016; Manion, 2007).

The participants’ narratives thus challenge the image of single-mother families producing maladjusted children who are assumed to experience academic failure, and instead speak to the psychological and relational resources which lead to educational success and strength of character which are fuelled by strong mother-adolescent bonds. Future research should continue on this path of exploring the less visible, agentic behaviours 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.

## Conclusion

In this article my aim has been to draw attention to that which is often taken for granted and ignored within the education sector. A mother’s emotional investments are often understood as a natural form of parenting; however, this view does not acknowledge the power and influence that these investments can make towards children’s schooling. The use of emotional capital as an analytic tool allows these invisible and taken-for-granted aspects of family interactions to be explored and theorised (Gillies, 2006). In addition, it offers the opportunity to raise the status of mothers’ involvement in their children’s education, particularly single mothers from low-income contexts who are often viewed through a deficit lens.

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.

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