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The Effect of Family Structure on Student Achievement and Well-Being

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this capstone to my loving and supportive wife Leah, my baby girl Emerson Chloe, and my wonderful parents Glen and Kathy. I could not have done this without you all!

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Table of Contents

Abstract

The purpose of this research was to study the effect family structure has on both academic achievement and overall well-being of students. All students are affected by their family structure. Since the 1960s, there has been a continuous and significant shift away from the traditional, intact family structure of two biological parents. As of 2020, less than half of children in the United States will grow up with two continuously married parents, and single parent households have more than tripled. Family structure was split up into three different categories: two biological parents, one biological parent, and no biological parents. The results showed that students who live with two biological parents have, on average, more success in school and an overall healthier well-being. Conversely, students who live with a single biological parent are negatively affected in the classroom and in their overall well-being. Students who live with no biological parents are at the greatest disadvantage. These students are at the highest risk of dropping out of school and dealing with depression and anxiety. Schools and teachers need to be aware of the family structure of students as awareness is the first step for helping students who are in fragile families. These students need extra support because they are more likely to struggle academically and emotionally.

Keywords: Family structure, fragile, intact, student academic achievement, well-being

The Effect of Family Structure on Student Academic Achievement and Well-Being

Chapter One: Introduction

A student's home life can affect not only their academic achievement but also their overall well-being. The research focused on the effect family structure has on student academic achievement and well-being. A student under the age of 18 either lives with two biological parents, one biological parent, or zero biological parents. The United States has seen a shift away from the traditional, intact family structure of two biological parents (Huang et al., 2017; Iqbal et al., 2021; Wasserman, 2020). More and more students are coming from fragile families because of this shift. Are these students negatively affected? Student academic achievement and well-being are two important areas of focus.

Scope of Research

The general premise of the research was to study the effect of family structure on student academic achievement and well-being. There are many different types of family structures such as two biological and married parents, two biological and cohabiting parents, one biological parent married to a step-parent, one biological parent cohabitating with a step-parent, one single biological parent, parents who have adopted, foster care parents, grandparents, and homosexual couples (Wasserman, 2020). To simplify family structures, there will be three categories of a family structure: two biological parents, one biological parent, and zero biological parents (Huang et al., 2017). For the purpose of this research, the focus will be less on the difference between married and cohabitating couples and more on the number of biological parents a student lives with regularly because cohabitating couples exhibit similar effects of single biological parent families instead of married biological parents, but the research is still limited (Sengul et al., 2019). This has been chosen to bring clarity and simplicity to the research and results. Regarding student academic achievement, different measures will be used such as grade-

point average (GPA), test scores, and graduation rates (Huang et al., 2017; Iqbal et al., 2021; Jones et al., 2018). Different studies use different methods to measure student achievement, and all will be used because they all reflect some aspect of academic achievement which is one of the goals of the research. Lastly, student well-being will be measured using social and emotional health (McLanahan & Sawhill, 2015).

Importance of the Research

The United States has seen a shift away from the traditional, intact family structure of two biological parents (Huang et al., 2017; Iqbal et al., 2021; Wasserman, 2020). As of 2020, less than half of children in the United States will grow up with two continuously married parents (Wasserman, 2020, p. 56). Single parent household have more than tripled since the 1960s (Huang et al., 2017). Therefore, this research is important because of its relevance. Both schools and teachers need to be aware of this drastic shift in family structure. Schools and teachers must understand the effect family structure has on a student's academic achievement and overall well-being. This research can be used to bring awareness to the effect family structure has on students and the need for schools and teachers to know about the home life of their students. Schools and teachers who have a greater awareness of the family structure of their students and the effect it has on them can more effectively teach, serve, and support them.

Research Questions

The research question for this capstone states: What is the effect of family structure on student academic achievement and well-being? The essential question of Concordia St. Paul's Educational Leadership program states: In light of what is known about pedagogy in the contemporary educational setting, how shall educators lead equitably and inclusively in order to positively impact student development and learning? There is a direct connection between the

two questions. The research question seeks to identify inequity and exclusivity which affects student development and learning. By identifying inequity and exclusivity based on a student's family structure, educators can intentionally seek to support and help students who are at a disadvantage because of family structure. By doing so, educators are better able to lead equitably and inclusively to positively impact development and learning for all students regardless of family structure and especially those who are disadvantaged because of their family structure.

Definition of Terms

Family structure can be defined as the living situation of children based on the number of adults and their relation to those adults with whom they live (O'Malley et al., 2015).

Fragile family can be defined as a family that does not have two married, biological, and heterosexual parents (Sengul et al., 2019; Wasserman, 2020). Fragile families are broken up into two categories: families with one biological parent and families with zero biological parents.

Intact family can be defined as a family that has two married, biological, and heterosexual parents (Sengul et al., 2019; Wasserman, 2020).

Student academic achievement can be defined as the objective measure of how well a student is performing in school (Iqbal et al., 2021; Sengul et al., 2019; Wasserman, 2020).

Well-being can be defined as the social and emotional health of a student (McLanahan & Sawhill, 2015).

Summary

In summary, the focus of this research is on the effect family structure has on student academic achievement and well-being. A student's home life can affect not only their academic achievement but also their overall well-being (McLanahan & Sawhill, 2015). There has been a

drastic shift away from the traditional family structure of two biological parents, also known as an intact family; therefore, it is important to know the effect this shift has on students (Egalirte, 2016; Huang et al., 2017; Iqbal et al., 2021; Wasserman, 2020). Family structure is the living situation of the children based on the amount of adults and their relation to those adults (O'Malley et al., 2015). The three categories are two biological parents, one biological parent, and zero biological parents (Huang et al., 2017). A fragile family is one that has either one or zero biological parents. Different measures are used for student academic achievement, but all are objective measures for how well a student is performing. Well-being is measured by the social and emotional health of a student (McLanahan & Sawhill, 2015). The research question is connected to the program's essential question by seeking to help educators lead equitably and inclusively by identifying potential inequities due to family structure.

In chapter two, there will be a study of the literature on the effect of family structure on student academic achievement and well-being. The first family structure discussed is an intact family of two biological parents. Academic achievement and well-being of these students are both discussed. Fragile families are then discussed, starting with single biological parents and then zero biological parents. In chapter three, the insights that have been gained will be discussed followed by the application from the research. To finish chapter three, new questions that emerged from the results of this research are discussed and future studies are suggested.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

All students are affected by their family structure either positively or negatively. Family structure can be defined as the living situation of children based on the number of adults and their relation to those adults with whom they live (O'Malley et al., 2015). In the United States, the family structure has seen a shift away from the traditional structure of two married biological parents (Egalite, 2016; Huang et al., 2017; Iqbal et al., 2021; Wasserman, 2020). As of 2020, less than half of children in the United States will grow up with two continuously married parents (Wasserman, 2020, p. 56). As of 2017, single parent households more than tripled since the 1960s (Huang et al., 2017). And 40% of births in 2017 were to unmarried mothers, which is more than double from 1980 (Wasserman, 2020, p. 56). Of these unmarried births, 56% of fathers will be living away from their child by age three (Egalite, 2016). Compared with other countries, the United States has the highest proportion of single-parent families (Woessmann, 2015). Additionally, more children are in the foster care system, homeless, or growing up with grandparents (Hayles et al., 2018; Jones et al., 2018; O'Malley et al., 2015). Over one million youth are homeless, and approximately 1% of all children in the United States are in the foster-care system (O'Malley et al., 2015). As of 2012, 2.7 million grandparents report as primary caregivers to 4.5 million grandchildren (Hayles et al., 2018). This shift in family structure has had an effect on student performance and achievement in the classroom such as grades, test scores, and dropout rates (Huang et al., 2017; O'Malley et al., 2015; Iqbal et al., 2021; Sengul et al., 2019; Wasserman, 2020). In fact, family structure was the single greatest predictor of student performance and achievement in the classroom (Huang et al., 2019). Different family structures also affect the overall well-being of a child (McLanahan & Sawhill, 2015). Given the shift in the family structure in the United States, understanding the impact of family structure on both

student achievement and child well-being is important for teachers and schools to help and support all students better. This paper will address the topic of how family structure impacts student achievement and well-being.

There are many different family structures. An intact family structure is one that has two married, heterosexual, and biological parents (Sengul et al., 2019; Wasserman, 2020). Families that are not intact are called fragile. Fragile families can be put into two different categories: families with a single biological parent and families with no biological parents (Sengul et al., 2019). Families with a single biological parent would include single-parent families, married stepfamilies, and cohabiting stepfamilies. Families with no biological parents would include grandparents as the primary caregiver, foster care, orphans, or other guardians. One family structure that will not be discussed is biological cohabiting couples. This is because cohabitation of biological parents has similar effects of single biological parent families instead of married biological parents, but the research is still limited (Wasserman, 2020). For this reason, the family structure of cohabitating biological parents will not be included in the discussion. The three family structures that will be addressed in this paper are intact families which include two married biological parents, fragile families which include single biological parents, and another type of fragile family which include zero biological parents.

Academic achievement can be defined and measured in different ways. Academic achievement can also be referred to as academic performance, educational attainment, and educational outcomes (Iqbal et al., 2021; Sengul et al., 2019; Wasserman, 2020). Academic achievement is most effectively measured objectively. Objective measurements of academic achievement are grade point average (GPA), grades on a scale from an “A” to an “F”, and multiple-choice tests. In this paper, these, along with school dropout rates, will be the

measurements used to measure academic achievement. Child well-being can be defined as a child's social, emotional, and mental health (McLanahan & Sawhill, 2015). This can be measured in different ways but most often was measured by self-reported measures (Hayles et al., 2018).

Two Biological Parents

The first family structure discussed is one with two biological parents. This family structure will most often be referred to as an intact family, while at other times will still be described by having two biological parents. An intact family structure is one that has two married, heterosexual, and biological parents (Sengul et al., 2019; Wasserman, 2020). This does not include biological cohabiting couples. This is because cohabitation of biological parents has similar effects of single biological parent families instead of married biological parents, but the research is still limited (Wasserman, 2020).

Academic Achievement

Students who live with intact families have the highest academic achievement and success of all family structures (Egalite, 2020; Huang et al., 2017; McLanahan & Sawhill, 2015; Motamedi, 2020; O'Malley et al., 2015; Sengul et al., 2019; Wasserman et al., 2020; Woessmann, 2015). There is overwhelming research and support for this correlation which spans across different grade levels, socioeconomic statuses, and ethnicities. Huang et al. (2017) conducted research that found middle school students who live with intact families had the highest GPA average out of all family structures. The average was 3.26 which was .21 higher than students from single biological parent family structures and .33 higher than students with zero biological parent family structures. Similarly, O'Malley et al. (2015) found that middle school students who live with intact families, after controlling for age, gender, and race, had a

GPA of 2.96 which was .4 higher than the average. In a multi-level analysis, Sengul et al. (2019) found that high school students who live with intact families had higher academic achievement than students who were in fragile families. This was found while controlling for socioeconomic status, school urbanicity, and school type. Egalite (2016) measured student academic achievement through grade repetition and found that students who live with intact families had the lowest percentage of grade repetition of 2.7% while students with one parent households repeated grades at 5.3% and students with no biological parents repeated a grade level at a stunning 6.6%. Woessmann (2015) found that students in the United States are especially impacted by family structure. There is a sizable achievement gap between children who live with intact families and those who live with fragile families that is particularly pronounced in the United States. The average difference between these family structures was one grade level as opposed to the average across all the other countries which was much lower.

There are many factors that impact academic success for students with intact families. According to Egalite (2016), married biological parents in general have many other attributes that affect their children's educational attainment. Despite disagreement about why children who live with intact families achieve better academically, some ideas are posited (McLanahan & Sawhill, 2015). First, since intact families provide more access to parent's quantity and quality of time, students are able to receive support from both biological parents which enhances student motivation (Sengul et al., 2019; Wasserman, 2020). When student motivation is enhanced, academic achievement often follows. Also, intact families oftentimes have more access to economic resources and role models (Wasserman, 2020). Both economic resources and role models help improve student achievement. There can also be specialized help from both father and mother for son and daughter. With intact families, fathers spend more time with their sons

while mothers spend more time with their daughters, but this can only happen when both father and mother are present. Parental involvement is the key advantage of children from intact families (Tong & Zhou, 2023). Parental involvement includes talking about school-related issues, monitoring grades and behavior, and helping with homework. Academic learning is greatly aided by supervision and guidance, and students with fragile families are less likely to receive these from their family. A supportive and positive family environment is important for developmental changes in academic achievement and engagement (Harris et al., 2020). Examples of a supportive and positive family environment include high levels of cohesion and low levels of conflict. Another factor discussed was the positive effect of maintaining a positive relationship with family members which creates a positive learning environment and motivation (Motamedi, 2020). The mean adjustment score for students with intact families was higher than that of students living with fragile families. These are all contributing factors to why students who live with intact families have, on average, higher academic achievement than students in fragile families.

Child Well-Being

Children who live with intact families have better social and emotional health when compared to children who live with fragile families (Egalite, 2016; Harris et al., 2020; Hayles et al., 2018; McLanahan & Sawhill, 2015; Motamedi, 2020). Children have an overall better well-being which includes their emotions, mental and psychological health, ability to adapt, and social development. McLanahan and Sawhill (2015) found that marriage, which intact families provide, positively affected a child's well-being. Family stability affected not only the child's cognitive development but also the social and emotional development. When trying to provide the benefits of intact families to children from fragile families, McLanahan and Sawhill (2015) found that

marriage is more than just the sum of different parts. Advantages of marriage for children cannot be replicated simply through policy interventions. Motamedi (2020) found that intact and affectionate families were the best types of families for the upbringing of a child and his or her overall well-being. Family structure was the most important factor in a child's psychological, behavioral, and social growth. Data analysis also showed that these children had a significantly higher ability to adapt when faced with life changes and challenges.

Egalite (2016) found that students with intact families between the ages of 12 and 17 were less likely to have behavioral problems. School suspension rates of students with intact families happened less than half the time of those with fragile families. Similarly, Harris et al. (2020) found lower rates of school dropout and higher rates of school completion for students with intact families. Harris et al. (2020) highlighted the importance of the home environment on developmental changes of children. Lastly, Hayles et al. (2018) found that intact families provided stability to children that helped with a variety of different developmental outcomes. Living with both biological parents was conducive to the child's overall well-being and tended to see children experience better psychosocial outcomes. These children also reported better overall life satisfaction. Both marital status and biological parentage, which are provided by intact families, are integral to children's well-being.

Single Biological Parents

Families that are not intact are called fragile. One type of a fragile family is a family with a single biological parent (Sengul et al., 2019). Families with a single biological parent include single-parent families, married stepfamilies, and cohabiting stepfamilies. Once again, cohabiting biological parents, despite the fact that they behaviorally act like single biological parent households, will not be included in this category (Wasserman, 2020).

Academic Achievement

Students from fragile families, specifically single biological parent families, have lower academic achievement than students who live with intact families (Huang et al., 2017; Jones et al., 2018; McLanahan & Sawhill, 2015; Motamedi, 2020; O'Malley et al., 2015; Iqbal et al., 2021; Sengul et al., 2019; Tobishima, 2018; Tong & Zhou, 2023; Wasserman, 2020; Woessmann, 2015). Sengul et al. (2019) found in their research that students with single biological parents had lower academic achievement. In their research, students scored on average .13 points below the grand mean. Huang et al. (2017) also found that students residing without one biological parent had lower academic achievement. Students with a single biological parent household had an average GPA of 3.01 which was .21 lower than students with intact families. Consistent with those findings, O'Malley et al. (2015) found that students in this category achieved lower academic achievement even after controlling for age, gender, and race. In their research, they found that these students averaged a 2.72 GPA which was .2 below the mean.

This correlation held true in other countries as well. A study done by Tobishima (2018) of Japanese students found that students with a single biological parent had a lower mean level of academic achievement as compared to students with intact families. The measure used for academic achievement was mathematics scores, and it was statistically significant. This held true even after controlling for the mothers' or fathers' education levels. This means that without factoring in mothers' or fathers' education levels, Japenese students with a single biological parent had lower academic achievement. Likewise, a study done by Tong and Zhou (2023) of Tibet students revealed that there is evidence to show that single parenthood has a negative impact on children's educational outcomes including lower achievement and a greater probability of dropping out of school. Countries with larger increases of single parenthood

tended to have larger increases in the achievement gap by family structure (Woessmann, 2015). Despite these international studies, it still holds true that the educational achievement gap between children raised in single-parent and two-parent families is particularly pronounced in the United States. While it is true that children living with single parents are at a disadvantage in nearly all countries, the United States has a much greater achievement gap between children in single parent households and those in dual-parent households as compared to other countries.

Divorce is one of the primary reasons for single biological parent families, and the effects of divorce can be a barrier in a student's academic performance. Iqbal et al. (2021) found a significant impact of divorce on both academic performance and cognitive development of elementary school-aged children. The highest mean score for academic performance was 4.52, and the highest mean score for cognitive development was 4.62, which both showed a significant relationship between academic performance and cognitive development of students in single biological families. This indicated a negative effect of parental divorce on academic achievement and cognitive development of students. Additionally, the participants had lower scoring in-class tests, written and verbal activities, and standardized achievement tests.

There are many reasons and factors for why students who reside in single biological parent households have lower academic achievement than students with intact families. One reason is having less involved parents (Egalite, 2016; Huang et al., 2017; Tong & Zhou, 2023; Woessmann, 2015). Academic learning requires supervision and guidance. When there is a single parent, he or she has less time to support, supervise, and guide their children to help them in school. They also have less time for enriching activities and reading with their children. One-to two-year olds who live with a single parent get read to 5.7 times per week on average while those who live with two married parents get read to 8.5 times per week (Egalite, 2016). Another

reason is that single biological parent families have fewer economic resources (Huang et al., 2017; Jones et al., 2018; Tobishima, 2018; Wasserman, 2020; Woessmann, 2015). Students who have fewer economic resources are more likely to have a lower academic achievement than students with more economic resources. Economic resources can provide living in a neighborhood with a higher quality school, tutoring services, books, and other resources. While economic resources in and of themselves do not solve the achievement gap problem between students with one biological parent and those with two biological parents, it does play a role in the achievement gap. Single parents also carry more stress because of the responsibilities associated with not having a spouse (Jones et al., 2018). These responsibilities include caring for children, working, paying bills, chores, household duties, and other duties. Lastly, parental education levels of single parents also play a factor in the lower academic achievement of their children (Tobishima, 2018). The effect of the parent's educational level was more significant for single mothers than it was for single fathers. These are just a few reasons and explanations for lower academic achievement of these students. Living in a single parent home asserts a level of risk that even a conscientious adult in the home might not be able to overcome alone (O'Malley et al., 2015). Likewise, advantages of married parents for children cannot be replicated through policy interventions either (McLanahan & Sawhill, 2015).

Child Well-being

Children who live with single biological parents have an overall lower well-being than their counterparts who live with an intact family (Egalite, 2016; Harris et al., 2020; Jones et al., 2018; Martiny et al., 2022; McLanahan & Sawhill, 2015; Motamedi, 2020; Woessmann, 2015). To begin, these children have lower emotional health. Jones et al. (2018) found that children in single parent families were four times more likely to have emotional problems. The family

instability that single parenthood causes has an effect on children's emotional development (McLanahan & Sawhill, 2015). Harris et al. (2020) found that students who experienced challenges in the family, including having a single parent or experiencing a divorce, were at a greater risk to experience emotional problems.

Children who live with single biological parents also have greater mental challenges than students with intact families (Jones et al., 2018; Motamedi, 2020; Woessmann, 2015). Specifically, these children are more likely to deal with anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, and psychological and psychopathological disorders. As a result, they are also more likely to commit suicide (Jones et al., 2018). These children are more likely to have slower social development than their peers who have intact families (McLanahan & Sawhill, 2015; Motamedi, 2020).

Lastly, children with single biological parents are more likely to have behavioral problems (Egalite, 2016; Jones et al., 2018; Martiny et al., 2022; Motamedi, 2020). Egalite (2016) found that 10.2% of students between the ages of 12 and 17 who only have one biological parent were suspended as compared to 5.3% of students who belonged to intact families. These students are four times more likely to have behavioral problems which included going to jail, joining a gang, abusing drugs and alcohol, and engaging in sexual activity which leads to teen pregnancy (Jones et al., 2018). These students are more likely to show more aggression and disobedience as well (Motamedi, 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the stark contrast of overall child well-being between students with intact families and students with a single biological parent. Martiny et al. (2022) found that students living in one-parent homes were associated with lower child well-being and more negative emotions during the pandemic. This research that was conducted in Norway found significant differences in child well-being between single parent and dual parent

households. Students living with one biological parent showed significant correlations with lower well-being and more negative emotions. While this was true beforehand, the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted this stark contrast even more.

Similar to lower academic achievement, there are many reasons that may contribute to the lower overall well-being of children in single-parent households. One reason may be that single parents are dealing with psychological distress themselves (Woessmann, 2015). These parents are therefore less equipped to help their children with any mental struggles and are unable to model for their children positive and good mental health and well-being. Another reason is that single parent households are less likely to show the amount of affection that dual parent households show (Motamedi, 2020). Intact families have two parents who can show affection to their children and have more time, on average, to do so too. Single parents have less time and no partner to show affection to their children. Togetherness is also an important factor to the positive well-being of a child. When there is only one parent, providing this togetherness can be more difficult. Whatever the reasons, children with single parents do tend to have lower overall well-being which includes emotional, social, mental, and behavioral problems.

Zero Biological Parents

Another type of fragile family is a family with zero biological parents (Sengul et al., 2019). Students who have zero biological parents may be raised by grandparents, in a foster care system, orphans, homeless, or raised by another guardian (Hayles et al., 2018; Jones et al., 2018).

Academic Achievement

Students with zero biological parents have the lowest academic achievement of any family structure (Egalite, 2016; Huang et al., 2017; O'Malley et al., 2015; Sengul et al., 2019). Sengul et al. (2019) found that students with zero biological parents scored on average 1.23

below the grand mean. They found a negative relationship between students living with guardians and their math achievement. This was far lower than even students with single biological parents. Similarly, Huang et al. (2017) found that students with no biological parents had the lowest GPA of 2.89 which was .33 lower than the average. This was statistically significant for students with no parents and even those with a positive perception of school climate. O'Malley et al. (2015) also found students with zero biological parents averaged, after controlling for age, gender, and race, 2.59 which was also .33 lower than the overall average. Egalite (2016) found that these students have the highest percentage of grade repetition. A stunning 6.6% of students with zero biological parents repeat a grade level. This is more than double the percentage of students who live with intact families.

A positive school perception does not help students who have zero biological parents with their academic achievement, while a positive school perception along with mentorship can help students who have a single biological parent (Huang et al., 2017; O'Malley et al., 2015). This shows how a school cannot by themselves make up for this disadvantaged family structure. Well-intended educational policies cannot entirely substitute for the disadvantage of a student with no biological parents (Tong & Zhou, 2023). This group of students have a unique level of risk.

They share many of the same reasons with single biological parent households as to why they are disadvantaged academically but to a greater extent. The most obvious reason for this is the lack of parental involvement (Egalite, 2016; Huang et al., 2017; Tong & Zhou, 2023; Woessmann, 2015). Academic learning requires supervision and guidance, so students who have zero biological parents have the least amount of support and guidance academically at home. Well-intended grandparents and even foster care families do not make up for the lack of having

biological parents present (Hayles et al., 2018; Huang et al., 2017). Another reason, similar to students with single biological parents, is a lack of economic resources (Huang et al., 2017; Jones et al., 2018; Tobishima, 2018; Wasserman, 2020; Woessmann, 2015). Examples of how these students are often disadvantaged with fewer economic resources include living in neighborhoods that have lower quality schools, fewer books, and a lack of tutoring services. Students with fewer economic resources are more likely to have lower academic achievement. Another reason for lower academic achievement for these students is the situation in which their guardians find themselves. Grandparents, for example, are more likely to experience negative health, social isolation, and role overload (Hayles et al., 2018). As a result, they are unable to provide for the children for whom they are responsible as well as intact families and even single biological parent families do. Students in foster care situations are more likely to go through severe negative life events which impacts their ability to achieve academically as well. These students may experience a lack of consistency in terms of which family they are with, which school they attend, and how much support they are given. Even well-intended foster care parents may have trouble overcoming the obstacle the child has endured. Lastly, there is inconsistency in guardian education levels which affect these students as well. Education levels of parents do play a role in the academic achievement of children (Tobishima, 2018). Since children with zero biological parents lack parents with any education at all, this is another reason for low academic achievement. Even though grandparents may have a high education level, the amount of time they have been out of the system affects their ability to help the child they are raising because of the change in education that happens over time. In a similar vein, foster care parents can only do so much regardless of their education level because of the limited and inconsistent time they may

have with the child. These are all factors that contribute to a lower academic achievement for students with zero biological parents, but there are surely more than the factors mentioned here.

Child Well-Being

Students with zero biological parents also have the lowest level of well-being of any family structure which includes emotional, social, mental, and behavioral outcomes (Egalite, 2016; Hayles et al., 2018; Motamedi, 2020). To begin, these children are negatively affected on an emotional level. Motamedi (2020) found that being an orphan or a foster child caused emotional immaturity and complicated the child's emotional adjustment in various environments. Students raised by grandparents have a greater chance to have emotional problems with their peers (Hayles et al., 2018). These children are also negatively affected on a social level. Motamedi (2020) found that orphans and foster children are more likely to have a complicated social life, including an impaired ability to adjust socially to various environments. Children raised by grandparents are more likely to have antisocial behaviors such as aggression and defiance at disproportionate levels (Hayles et al., 2018). These children are also negatively affected on a mental level. The collapse of family structure can cause psychopathological disorders (Motademi, 2020). Children in foster care are at risk for significant psychological challenges (Hayles et al., 2018). They are more likely to receive clinical diagnoses of mental illness than youth in the general population. Lastly, these children are negatively affected on a behavioral level. Egalite (2016) found that students with zero biological parents are more likely to be suspended than students who have one or two biological parents. Students between the ages of 12 and 17 with zero biological parents had a suspension rate of 13.8% which is more than double the rate of students with two biological parents and over 3% more than students with one biological parent. Hayles et al. (2018) found that children in foster care are at risk for significant

behavioral challenges. They are more likely to be incarcerated, delinquent, and abuse drugs and alcohol. Overall, students with zero biological parents had lower life satisfaction than those with intact families.

Just like academic achievement, there are many reasons as to why these children have the lowest overall well-being and life satisfaction of any family structure. As previously discussed, these children are more likely to have experienced severe negative life events (Hayles et al., 2018). Severe life events may include being abandoned, abused, neglected, or mistreated; losing a parent to death or jail; exposed to drug or alcohol abuse at an early age; or passed off to grandparents or the foster care system because of a lack of care, love, or resources. Likewise, discontinuity and separation adversely affect child attachment and developmental outcomes. Another reason is that grandparents are more likely to be dealing with physical or psychological distress themselves (Woessmann, 2015). This leaves them less equipped to help the children who are in their care because of what they themselves are dealing with. Another reason is that these children have a lack of family connectedness and experience less affection than children in other family structures (Motamedi, 2020). Since they have zero biological parents, they do not have parents who know them best to show love and affection; on the contrary, they are more likely to feel abandoned and unwanted. Lastly, marital status and biological parentage are integral to a child's well-being (Hayles et al., 2018). Students with zero biological parents lack both things. Regardless of the reasons, children with zero biological parents tend to have lower overall well-being and life satisfaction which includes emotional, social, mental, and behavioral problems.

Conclusion

In conclusion, family structure impacts both academic achievement and the overall well-being of a student. All students have a family structure and are therefore affected either

positively or negatively by the one in which they find themselves. Students who find themselves living with intact families which include two married biological parents have the greatest outcomes academically, emotionally, socially, mentally, and behaviorally (Egalite, 2020; Harris et al., 2020; Hayles et al., 2018; Huang et al., 2017; McLanahan & Sawhill, 2015; Motamedi, 2020; O'Malley et al., 2015; Sengul et al., 2019; Wasserman et al., 2020; Woessmann, 2015). Academically, these students achieve at the highest rate. This is well-researched and agreed upon as shown in this literature review. Reasons for this outcome include more involved parents, more time available for parents to support and supervise academics, more economic resources, higher parental education level, and more reading time at a young age. Students with intact families also have a better overall well-being than those in fragile families. This is inclusive of emotional, social, mental, and behavioral outcomes. These students are more likely to have emotional stability and maturity, stronger social health, fewer mental illnesses, and better behaviors. Overall, students who have two married biological parents are at a great advantage both academically and in terms of their overall well-being.

Students who live with a single biological parent are at a greater disadvantage academically, emotionally, socially, mentally, and behaviorally than their peers who have intact families (Egalite, 2016; Harris et al., 2020; Huang et al., 2017; Jones et al., 2018; Martiny et al., 2022; McLanahan & Sawhill, 2015; Motamedi, 2020; O'Malley et al., 2015; Iqbal et al., 2021; Sengul et al., 2019; Tobishima, 2018; Tong & Zhou, 2023; Wasserman, 2020; Woessmann, 2015). Academically, these students achieve at a lower rate than students with intact families. Reasons for this outcome include less involved parents, less time to support and supervise academics, fewer economic resources, lower parental educational level, less reading time at a young age, and having all responsibilities fall on the single biological parent. Students with a

single biological parent have a lower overall well-being than those with intact families. This is inclusive of emotional, social, mental, and behavioral outcomes. These students are more likely to have more social and emotional problems, mental illnesses, and behavioral problems. These mental illnesses can lead to higher rates of depression, anxiety, and even suicide. Behaviorally, these students are more likely to be suspended or even incarcerated. Overall, students who have a single biological parent are at a disadvantage both academically and in terms of their overall well-being as compared with their peers who have both biological parents.

Students who live with zero biological parents are at the greatest disadvantage academically, emotionally, socially, mentally, and behaviorally as compared with their peers who have one or two biological parents (Egalite, 2016; Hayles et al., 2018; Motamedi, 2020; Huang et al., 2017; O'Malley et al., 2015; Sengul et al., 2019). Whether these students are orphans, in foster care, or being raised by their grandparents or other guardians, it is well-researched and agreed upon that they are at the greatest disadvantage academically and achieve the lowest by a large margin. Reasons for this outcome include a lack of parental involvement, lack of time from guardians to help support and supervise academics, fewer economic resources, lack of parental education, lack of reading time at a young age, and more responsibility falling on the child because of shared responsibility of biological parents. Students with no biological parents have the lowest overall well-being. This is inclusive of emotional, social, mental, and behavioral outcomes. These students are the most likely to have social and emotional problems, mental illnesses, and behavioral problems. These mental illnesses can lead to higher rates of depression, anxiety, and suicide. Behaviorally, these students are the most likely to be suspended or even incarcerated. Overall, students who have zero biological parents are at the greatest disadvantage by family structure both academically and in terms of their overall well-being.

Chapter Three: Summary

The United States has seen a shift away from households that have children being raised by both biological parents who are married (Egalite, 2016; Huang et al., 2017; Iqbal et al., 2021; Wasserman, 2020). As of 2020, less than half of children in the United States will grow up with two continuously married parents. As of 2017, single parent households have more than tripled since the 1960s. Additionally, 40% of births in 2017 were to unmarried mothers, which is more than double from 1980. Compared with other countries, the United States has the highest proportion of single-parent families. This shift of family structure has had an effect on children both academically and emotionally.

Family structures are considered either intact or fragile (Sengul et al., 2019; Wasserman, 2020). The three family structures discussed were intact families which have two married biological parents, one type of fragile family which includes a single biological parent, and another type of fragile family which includes zero biological parents. Families with a single biological parent include single-parent families, married stepfamilies, and cohabiting stepfamilies. Families with no biological parents include grandparents as the primary caregiver, foster care, orphans, or other guardians.

Regarding academic achievement, family structure was the single greatest predictor of academic achievement in the classroom (Huang et al., 2019). Students who live with intact families have, on average, the highest scores (Egalite, 2020; Huang et al., 2017; McLanahan & Sawhill, 2015; Motamedi, 2020; O'Malley et al., 2015; Sengul et al., 2019; Wasserman et al., 2020; Woessmann, 2015). This includes GPA, test scores, and graduation rates. In comparison, students who live with a single biological parent have lower academic achievement. And finally, students who have zero biological parents have the lowest academic achievement of all family

structures. While there is not a consensus on exactly why this is the case, a few reasons were discussed. First, students with intact families have more quantity and quality of time from their parents. Since there are two parents, they tend to be more involved in the academics of their children. Another reason includes more access to economic resources. Students with single or zero biological parents have fewer economic resources on average. These economic resources can support students by choosing a neighborhood to live in that has a high-quality school, providing tutors and after school help, and having more books and enriching activities available. Lastly, the education level of parents has an effect on student academic achievement. Intact families are more likely to have parents with a higher level of education than those who have single biological parents.

Regarding child well-being, children who live with intact families had a better overall well-being than those with single or zero biological parents (Egalite, 2016; Harris et al., 2020; Hayles et al., 2018; McLanahan & Sawhill, 2015; Motamedi, 2020). This includes emotional, mental, social, and behavioral outcomes. Students with intact families are suspended at a lower rate, experience mental health challenges such as depression and anxiety at a lower rate, are less likely to be incarcerated, and are more likely to have better social and emotional health than their peers. Similar to academic achievement, there is a lack of agreement across the board on why this is the case. Some ideas discussed included the fact that single parents deal with psychological distress themselves, dual parent households are more likely to show affection and togetherness, and dual parent households have more time to spend with their children.

Insights Gained from the Research

The research question stated: What is the effect of family structure on student academic achievement and well-being? The main finding is that family structure does in fact have a

significant impact on students academically, emotionally, mentally, socially, and behaviorally. Students who live with intact family structures have the most positive outcomes; students who live with a single biological parent have lower outcomes than those with intact families; and students who live with zero biological parents have the lowest outcomes of any family structure across the board. There were no outliers in the literature regarding the fact that students who live with intact families do have the most positive outcomes academically, emotionally, mentally, socially, and behaviorally. Additionally, there was consensus that divorce impacts students negatively across all outcomes as well. However, there was disagreement in the literature as to why this is the case and whether schools can overcome the obstacle of a fragile family structure. Some of the literature stated that schools are unable to overcome this obstacle while others had research on things that help these students such as a positive school perception and mentors. This needs to be studied further.

The essential question of the Concordia St. Paul's Educational Leadership program states: In light of what is known about pedagogy in the contemporary educational setting, how shall educators lead equitably and inclusively in order to positively impact student development and learning? This research connected to this essential question because it discussed the inequity students experience based on their family structure. Students who are in fragile families are at a great disadvantage academically and emotionally. This starts at a young age based on the amount of time parents are reading to their children. Schools and teachers must first have an awareness of the family structure of their students. Then, special attention, support, and care for students in fragile families must take place for teachers to lead equitably and inclusively to impact development and learning for all students.

Application

The results of this research could be used in a few different ways to improve instruction and support of all students. To begin, schools need to know the family structure of their students. When students register and enroll, family structure needs to be a part of the information schools receive. This should include the marital status of parents, the number of biological parents present, and the custody rules for adults involved in the child's life. This should also include the relationship guardians have with their children. Schools must be aware of the family structure of their students. This is where things start. Next, schools must inform teachers of students who are in fragile families. Fragile families include any family that does not have two married biological parents. Teachers need to be aware of this not only to support these students better but also as they communicate with families about their student.

To go along with awareness, schools then need to provide added understanding and support for students who are in fragile families. This support may look different at different grade levels, but examples of this may include more grace around due dates for students with divorced parents, more one-on-one attention for students who live with zero biological parents, or a mentorship role from a teacher for a student who is experiencing family crisis. This particular research focused solely on the effects of family structure rather than what can be done, so future studies should seek to find research-backed practices to best support these students.

At a government level, laws and policies should focus on encouraging marriage and discouraging divorce. While the support of single-parent households is necessary and good, government officials should seek laws and policies that incentivize parents to get married and stay married. Research shows that schools can only do so much to overcome the family structure of students in fragile families, so there needs to be an emphasis on encouraging intact families.

Future Studies

A generalization made in this research was that single-parent households and stepfamily households that include one single biological parent are in the same category and therefore share the same results. A new question that emerged as a result of this research states: Does a supportive stepparent alleviate the effects of divorce or a fragile family structure on student achievement and overall well-being? Is there a significant difference of outcomes between single-parent households and stepfamily households?

Another generalization made during this research is that all intact families have a similar effect on student achievement and overall well-being. Two more questions emerged as a result of this research: How much does the level of support from parents as opposed to just the family structure affect the outcomes discussed? How do physical, drug, and alcohol abuse of parents in intact families effect the outcomes discussed?

A limitation of this research is that it did not include cohabiting couples or same-sex couples. Research on both family structures is limited at this point in time. Therefore, future studies should research the effect of cohabiting biological couples and same-sex couples on the academic achievement and overall well-being of students.

At a policy-level, there should be research on policies that best incentivize and encourage biological parents to get married and to stay married. Therefore, another question that emerged from this research includes: What policies, laws, and regulations most effectively encourage and incentivize biological parents to get married and stay married?

Lastly, the most important question that needs to be researched in future studies should focus on best practices to help and support students in fragile families. What can schools and teachers do to close the achievement gap between students from intact families and students from

fragile families? What are best practices to help students in fragile families? Finding answers to these questions will help schools achieve the goal of helping all students reach their academic potential while experiencing high emotional, mental, and social satisfaction in life.

In conclusion, family structure affects children in many different facets of their life. These facets include academics, emotions, mental and social health, and behaviors. While there is disagreement as to the reasons for this, children who live with two married biological parents are at the greatest advantage. More research must be done to find best practices for schools and teachers to help support children who do not live with two married biological parents.

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Appendix

Article Tracking Matrix

Articles: author(s) name and year of publication	**Method** Qualitative/ Quantitative/ Meta-Analysis Mixed-methods	**Theme 1: Intact families**	**Theme 2: Single biological parent families**	**Theme 3: Zero biological parent families**	**Theme 4: Effect of divorce**	**Outlier**
Egalite, 2016	Meta-Analysis	X	X	X		
Harris et al., 2020	Quantitative	X			X	
Hayles et al., 2018	Quantitative	X		X	X	
Huang et al., 2017	Quantitative	X	X	X		
Jones et al., 2018	Quantitative		X			
Iqbad et al., 2021	Quantitative	X	X		X	
Martiny et al., 2020	Mixed-methods		X			
McLanahan & Sawhill, 2015	Qualitative	X	X			
Motamedi, 2020	Quantitative	X		X	X	
O'Malley et al., 2015	Quantitative	X	X	X		
Sengul et al., 2019	Meta-Analysis	X	X	X		
Tobishima, 2018	Meta-Analysis		X			
Tong & Zhou, 2023	Qualitative		X	X		
Wasserman, 2020	Qualitative	X	X			
Woessmann, 2015	Quantitative	X	X			

***To be completed by Instructor and Second Reader:**

Student Name: Jonathan Schlecht

Instructor Name: Dr. Danielle Thompson

Second Reader Name: Dr. Brian Boothe

FINAL CAPSTONE PAPER RUBRIC: (PASS OR FAIL)				
Criteria (Total points)	**Exemplary 420-403**	**Proficient 402-361**	**Competent 360-319**	**Unsatisfactory 0**
Cover Page; TOC, Abstract, Chapter One (50 points)				
Cover Page; Table of Contents, Abstract, and Chapter One: **Possible Points: ____/50** **Instructor Feedback:** **2nd Reader Feedback:**	The writer has **consistently** utilized the capstone paper template and followed **all guidelines** for the development of the cover page, TOC and Abstract; the writer has developed **a well-organized, succinctly written** chapter one informing the reader of the following: the topic and scope of the research investigation. importance of the topic to the field of education. statement of interest to engage the reader. at least 3 sources cited with a clear connection to the research question. definition of terms. how the scope of the problem investigated will be organized in a logical sequence using subtopics. the research question concludes the chapter connecting to the Essential Question. Chapter ends with a conclusion (chapter summary) paragraph that includes a transition to the following chapter. **48-50 points**	The writer has **usually** utilized the capstone paper template and followed **most of the guidelines** for the development of the cover page, TOC and Abstract; the writer has **mostly** developed chapter one informing the reader of the following: the topic and scope of the research investigation. importance of the topic to the field of education. statement of interest to engage the reader. at least 3 sources cited with a clear connection to the research question. definition of terms. how the scope of the problem investigated will be organized in a logical sequence using subtopics. the research question concludes the chapter connecting to the Essential Question. Chapter ends with a conclusion paragraph that includes a transition to the following chapter. **43-47 points**	The writer has **sometimes** utilized the capstone paper template and followed **some of the guidelines** for the development of the cover page, TOC and Abstract; the writer has **partially** developed chapter one informing the reader of the following: the topic and scope of the research investigation. importance of the topic to the field of education. statement of interest to engage the reader. at least 3 sources cited with a clear connection to the research question. definition of terms. how the scope of the problem investigated will be organized in a logical sequence using subtopics. the research question concludes the chapter connecting to the Essential Question. Chapter ends with a conclusion paragraph that includes a transition to the following chapter. **38-42 points**	The writer has **rarely** met the required components for the criteria in this category resulting in "0" points. **NOTE: Less than 319 points results in "0" for this assignment as it is a "pass or fail" paper representing the successful completion of the MAED program requirements competently.**

Chapter Two: Literature Review (210 points)				
Chapter Two: Literature Review **Possible Points: ____/210** **Instructor Feedback:** **2nd Reader Feedback:**	The writer has **consistently** provided a professionally written narrative which summarizes and synthesizes the information from the selected research studies to develop a response and answer to the research question proposed in Chapter One. The narrative **fully** answers the proposed research question. Includes a minimum of 15 scholarly, peer-reviewed qualitative/quantitative/mixed-method **original** research studies. Chapter ends with research finding summaries and conclusions. The writer has **consistently** provided a **succinct and precise** summary of findings. includes a review of the proposed problem that was investigated. the importance of this topic. and a paraphrased summary of the main points or themes of the literature review. Chapter ends with a conclusion paragraph (chapter summary) that includes a transition to the following chapter. **202-210 points**	The writer has **usually** maintained a professionally written narrative which summarizes and synthesizes the information from the selected research studies to develop a response and answer to the research question proposed in Chapter One. The narrative **mostly** answers the proposed research question. Includes a minimum of 15 scholarly, peer-reviewed qualitative/quantitative/mixed-method **original** research studies. Chapter ends with research finding summaries and conclusions. The writer has **usually** provided **a mostly developed** summary of findings. includes a review of the proposed problem that was investigated. the importance of this topic. and a paraphrased summary of the main points or themes of the literature review. Chapter ends with a conclusion paragraph (chapter summary) that includes a transition to the following chapter. **181-201 points**	The writer has **sometimes** maintained a professionally written narrative which summarizes and synthesizes the information from the selected research studies to develop a response and answer to the research question proposed in Chapter One. The narrative **partially** answers the proposed research question. Includes a minimum of 15 scholarly, peer-reviewed qualitative/quantitative/mixed-method **original** research studies. The writer has **sometimes provided a partially developed summary** of findings. includes a review of the proposed problem that was investigated. the importance of this topic. and a paraphrased summary of the main points or themes of the literature review. Chapter ends with a conclusion paragraph (chapter summary) that includes a transition to the following chapter. **160-180 points**	The writer has **rarely** met the required components for the criteria in this category resulting in "0" points. **NOTE: Less than 319 points results in "0" for this assignment as it is a "pass or fail" paper representing the successful completion of the MAED program requirements competently.**
Chapter Three: Discussion / Application / Future Studies (75 points)				
Chapter Three: Discussion/ Application/ Future Studies **Possible Points: ____/75** **Instructor Feedback:**	The writer has **consistently** developed a **clear** summary of insights gained from the research that leads to improved instructional practice. The writer provided a **clear** description with examples of how the research is applied to instructional or educational practice. has provided a minimum of	The writer has **usually** developed a **mostly clear** summary of insights gained from the research that leads to improved instructional practice. The writer provided a **mostly clear** description with examples of how the research is applied to instructional or educational practice.	The writer has **sometimes** developed a **partially clear** summary of insights gained from the research that leads to improved instructional practice. The writer provided a **partially clear** description with examples of how the research is applied to instructional practice.	The writer has **rarely** met the required components for the criteria in this category resulting in "0" points. **NOTE: Less than 319 points results in "0" for this assignment as it is a "pass or fail" paper representing the successful completion of the MAED program requirements competently.**

2nd Reader Feedback:	three suggestions for possible future studies. and the chapter ends with a powerful conclusion that acts as a conclusion for the entire paper. **72-75 points**	has provided a minimum of three suggestions for possible future studies. and the chapter ends with a powerful conclusion that acts as a conclusion for the entire paper. **65-71 points**	has provided a minimum of three suggestions for possible future studies. and the chapter ends with a powerful conclusion that acts as a conclusion for the entire paper. **57-64 points**	
APA Format & Mechanics (85 points)				
APA format & Mechanics **Possible Points: ____/85** **Instructor Feedback:** **2nd Reader Feedback:**	The writer has **consistently** met the criteria for the following requirements for this paper: APA formatted cover page; Table of Contents right/left justified; clear, half page Abstract – per APA formatting provided; in text citations per APA and included in References page; Reference page formatted per APA guidelines; Correct use of APA level headings; correct use of spelling, grammar, and punctuation; Higher level professional language; third person writing only; correct use of past tense. **82-85 points**	The writer has **usually** met **most** of the criteria for the following requirements for this paper: APA formatted cover page; Table of Contents right/left justified; clear, half page Abstract – per APA formatting provided; in text citations per APA and included in References page; Reference page formatted per APA guidelines; Correct use of APA level headings; correct use of spelling, grammar, and punctuation; Higher level professional language; third person writing only; correct use of past tense. **73-81 points**	The writer has **sometimes** met **some** of the criteria for the following requirements for this paper: APA formatted cover page; Table of Contents right/left justified; clear, half page Abstract – per APA formatting provided; in text citations per APA and included in References page; Reference page formatted per APA guidelines; Correct use of APA level headings; correct use of spelling, grammar, and punctuation; Higher level professional language; third person writing only; correct use of past tense. **65-72 points**	The writer has **rarely** met the required components for the criteria in this category resulting in "0" points. **NOTE: Less than 319 points results in "0" for this assignment as it is a "pass or fail" paper representing the successful completion of the MAED program requirements competently.**
Reviewed July 2023		**TOTAL POINTS _____/420** **Pass or Fail: 319 points are required to pass**		