

EXPERIENCES OF STUDENTS WHO ARE SINGLE MOTHERS ON UNIVERSITY CAMPUSES: A SYSTEMATIC REVIEW FROM 1997- 2019

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ABSTRACT

The rapid growth in population of students who are single mothers on university campuses is a concern for many. A greater percent of these students either drop out or delay to graduate. Seemingly, there is a gap in ways these students are being supported. Studies show that this group of students has attracted little attention in the literature, despite their vulnerability and multiple responsibilities they have to balance. Thus, limiting the resources on how these group of students can be better served. A systematic review of literature from 1997 to 2019 was conducted to establish the experiences of students who are single mothers and identify the gaps in ways these students are being supported on university campuses. The findings of the study show that the experiences of students who are single mothers are several and can be summarized into groups as sociological factors, psychological factors, economics, and structural factors. These factors are intertwined and their effects vary by attitude, institutional culture, and nationality. Based on the findings, the study suggests the best practices to support students who are single mothers to continue on with their higher education. The implications for institutional leaders, policymakers, and students who are single mothers are presented.

Keywords: *student who are single mothers, higher education, experiences on campus, inclusion, persistence*

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INTRODUCTION

The number of students who are parents has been on the rise on university campuses (Institutional for Women Policy Research [IWPR], 2017a; Nicholas, Biederman, & Gringle, 2017). Approximately, 70% of students who are parents are female and over a half are single

(Miller, Gault, & Thorman, 2011). In 2012, the number of students who are single mothers was approximately 2.1 million representing 11% of undergraduate students enrolled in the 2012/2013 academic year (U. S. Department of Education and the IWPR (2017a). As Kruevelis, Cruse, and Gault, (2017) projected, this number is likely to increase in the future.

Despite the increasing population of students who are single mothers, their persistence to graduation has been low (Lovell, 2014a; IWPR, 2017b; Zhan, & Pandey, 2004). As of 2015, only 31% of students who are single mothers aged 25 and above had a degree compared with 54% of comparable married mothers and 40% of women overall (Kruevelis et al.,2017). Further approximately, 43% of the students who are single mothers were less likely to complete their degrees (IWPR, 2017b). This percentage was higher (i.e. 52%) in a report by Hussar and Bailey (2011).

Students who are single mothers have attracted little attention in the literature, regardless of their multiple identities and vulnerability (Duquaine-Watson, 2006; Haleman, 2004; Hinton-Smith, 2012; Ogunsiyi & Wilkes, 2005; Zhan & Pandey, 2004). Most studies on students who are single mothers' success stories focus mainly on students in community colleges (Sandoval-Lucero, Maes, & Klingsmith, 2014). Although universities are slowly acknowledging and serving this unique group of students, they are relying on general statistics meant for policy researchers. Rarely have individual institutions formally collected data on students who are single mothers (Mercado-López, 2018). According to Mercado-López (2018), a lack of data on student parents is partly due to a common understanding about the path to the degree, which has reinforced the stigmas of pregnancy and parenthood, further making the struggles of student parents invisible. The absence of a comprehensive analysis of these students' experiences in four-year institutions has contributed to little information on how they can be better served. Thus, the need to examine the existing literature on experiences and support mechanism in place for students who are single mothers on university campuses.

The current study reviews literature to identify gaps in ways students who are single mothers are being supported on university campuses. Also, the study identifies the unique experiences of students who are single mothers and based on the literature suggest best practices to support this group of students achieve their educational goals.

The study has significant implications for policymakers, institutional leaders, and researchers. For policymakers, this study guides policy implementation, especially, those related to supporting and creating an inclusive environment for students who are single mothers. Like previous studies, this study appears to suggest a need for institutional leaders to review campus policies that include; providing child care support, accommodating the needs of students who are single mothers, providing a supportive learning environment to students who are single mothers and their dependents, and enhancing professional development. Also, the study suggests a need for more research on this topic to unfold the experiences of students who are single mothers on university campuses.

Literature and Theoretical Framework

In this study, students who are single mothers are defined as female students with a child (ren) without a spouse or partners (Ogunsiji & Wilkes, 2005). Unlike traditional students, this group of students is expected to balance multiple identities pertinent to their educational success, economic success, health, and well-being , which can be complex(Austin & McDermott, 2003; Kena et al., 2014; Lovell, 2014a; Moghadam, Khiaban, Esmaeli, & Mahvash, 2017; National Center for Education Statistics, 2008; Parsons, 2008; Zhan & Pandey, 2004). The nature of complexity extends beyond the identity of these students as single mothers because of life changes, choice, and additional responsibilities that put them in challenging situations (Parsons, 2008). When these unique challenges of student parents are left unaddressed, they can inhibit their persistence to degree completion (Austin & McDermott, 2003; Brown, & Nicholas, 2013; Cruse, Gault, Suh, & DeMario, 2018; Nicholas et al. 2017).

Several researchers have suggested the need to support students who are single mother to attain their educational goals (Brown & Nichols, 2013; Duquaine -Watson, 2006, 2007; Gault, Milli, & Cruse, 2018;Haleman, 2004; Katz, 2013; Lovell, 2014b; Nichols et al., 2017; Ray, Bratton, & Brandt, 2010; Yakaboski, 2010). Some of these studies also document the benefits of investing in students who are single mothers. For example, Gault et al., (2018) and Kruvelis et al. (2017) found that investing in supportive services would help students who are single mothers persist and earn a degree that would not only improve their personal welfare , but bring substantial economic returns to their dependents and the society. Baum & Payea (2007) and Gault et al., (2018) showed that providing high-quality childcare to children of

student parents could increase benefits, such as high earning and a reduced crime rate that may cause high national tax pay rates. Also, supporting students who are single mothers and their dependents could in future reduce the nation's social welfare expenditures that are a burden to the nation (Gault et al.,2018; London, 2006).

The need to support students who are single mothers to reach their full potential aligns with the nation's vision to increase the percentage of the population between 25 and 64 years of age college attainment by 60% by the year 2025. This vision cannot be achieved without increasing the rate at which students who are single mothers are obtaining their degree. Although improving the completion rate of students can be challenging, providing resources and services to this growing number of students could be helpful. A recent study by Cruse et al. (2018) showed a strong correlation between the campus child care services and completion rate student parents. Cruse and colleagues explained that student parents who used a campus child care center had over three times higher graduation rate than those who did not.

Earlier studies, however, are inconsistent about the experiences of students who are single mothers on university campuses. While some researchers such as Lashley, (2014) and Parsons (2008) showed that despite the barriers, some students who are single mothers navigate their educational pathways smoothly, a considerable amount of research still show the barriers hindering students' parents from navigating successfully(Austin & McDermott, 2003; Brown & Nichols, 2013; Cruse et al.,2018;Duquaine-Watson, 2006; Gerrard, & Roberts, 2006; Haleman, 2004; Kotwal, & Prabhakar, 2009; Lovell, 2014a; Nichols et al.,2017; O'gorman, 2015; Yakaboski, 2010). This lack of consistent findings in the literature depicts the scarcity of research on this group of students and a lack of awareness of the experiences of this unique group of students on university campuses.

While universities claim they are investing in resources and services to improve success for all students, not all students are benefiting from them. As stated by Mercado-López (2018) many institutions have failed to acknowledge student parents in their narratives and retention strategies. Also, while Title IX aims at protecting pregnancy status, parenting is not concluded. These limitations in the policy leave student parents to struggle with the lack of child support, additional financial responsibilities, housing responsibilities, and tied class schedules, all of which can affect their academic performance. Brown and Nicholas (2013) and Nicholas et al. (2017) also noted that lack of formal policies and inconsistency in policy

implementation may affect the persistence and academic performance of students who are single mothers. Yet, most institutions consider issues facing student parents on campuses as the responsibility of the individual and mainly as optional institutional support services (Nicholas et al., 2017).

Like other students, the academic success of students who are single mothers depend on several factors related to sociological factors that include support of peers, university services, family and faculty support as well as psychological belief factors (i.e., personal ambition, previous experience, effort and discipline, and self-efficacy) (Van Stone, Nelson, and Niemann, 1994). Further, Van Stone et al. (1994) examined the primary sociological and psychological belief factors related to their academic success and suggested a need for further studies to examine the relationship between these factors. Given the increasing attention on this topic, the review of the literature aligns with previous research on this topic, as it focuses on experiences of students who are single mothers on campuses and what support units may be necessary to make feel valued.

Feminist researchers have stressed the importance of creating avenues for women to express their experiences (Maynard,1994,) and for understanding institutions that shape their settings, with an aim of creating a more inclusive environment for all genders (Patton, Renn, Guido, & Quaye, 2016). Previous studies have examined the experiences of student parents and parenting stress mainly at community colleges. Given the increasing number of student parents on university campuses, and most of them being single mothers, this study attempts to uncover the extent research focusing on this unique student population exists, their experiences, and the gaps in ways they are currently supported through a systematic literature review.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

A systematic review of the literature was conducted using the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) process in several databases. PRISMA guidelines were deemed appropriate for summarizing and identifying gaps in the literature on the student mother unique experiences (Moher, Liberati, Tetzlaff, & Altman, the PRISMA Group, 2009). A search was conducted in several databases including the Academic Search Ultimate, PsychINFO, Education Source, Humanities Source Ultimate, Humanities Source, ERIC, and SocIndex databases to retrieve articles of potentially relevant studies. A

further search of journals that publish work on women and female students' experiences in higher education was also conducted. These journals included: Journal of Students Affairs Research and Practice, Journal of Education Policy, Gender and Education, International Journal of Qualitative Studies on Health and Well-being, Journal of Social Science, Journal of Further and Higher Education, Community College Journal of Research and Practice, Journal of Poverty, Journal of College Student Retention, Educational Policy, and Comprehensive Psychology. A secondary search scrutinizing the reference sections of the articles was carried out to ensure that all relevant publications were included in the review. The search comprised combinations and derivations of concepts: (higher education or college or university or post-secondary or postsecondary) AND TX (support or supporting or aid or assist or help or guidance) AND (single-mother students or students who are single mothers) AND (experiences or perceptions or attitudes or views).

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

The inclusion and exclusion criteria were set as follows; The article was included in this study if: (a) the article was published between 1997 and 2019, peer-reviewed, and empirically based, (b) the sample used in the study contained a sample of students who are single mothers and (c) the study reported specific outcomes on students who are single mothers. Thus, articles that did not specifically show a contribution to students who are mothers' experiences and transition to completion were excluded. Figure 1 in appendices presents a summary of the articles search and screening. The authors independently coded the articles to determine the inclusion and exclusion eligibility based on the three criteria. A total of 24 articles were included in this study. Table 1 in presents a summary of the articles.

RESULTS

Sample Characteristics

A total of 24 studies published between January 1997, and November 2018 met the criteria for inclusion. The vast majority of the articles (17, 70.8%) were published after 2008. Sixteen of the 24 total articles included in the review were published using data from the US (n = 19, 79.16%). The rest used data from Australia (n = 1, 0.04%), Canada (n = 1, 0.04%), the United Kingdom (n = 1, 0.04%), England (n = 1, 0.04%), India (n = 1, 0.04%), and Iran (n = 1, 0.04%). One study combined data from the UK and Denmark. Among the 24 articles, the sample sizes ranged from 5 to 205. Thirteen studies (54.16%) analyzed student parents and 11

(45.8%) focused solely on students who are single mothers. The analysis showed that five studies (20.8%) categorized students by race, one (0.04%) involved students in a nursing program and another in computer sciences. Three (13.0%) studies focused specifically on socioeconomic background, and one compared the experiences of students who are single mothers by country and institutions. Most studies (19, 79.2%) used qualitative research methods for their study design and data collection. Three (13.04%) used a quantitative approach, and one (0.04%) study used a mixed methods design. Six studies used semi-structured interviews, 18 included a combination of survey interviews, archival data, and focus groups for data collection. Most of the studies used specified qualitative approaches such as hermeneutic phenomenology approaches. Six studies (25.0%) conducted content analyses. Ten studies (41.7%) applied thematic analysis, and three articles (13.04%) tested the associations between variables.

In sum, the descriptive statistics show that studies on students who are single mothers are gaining the attention of educational researchers, underscoring the importance of the present review. However, as the field is still in its infancy stage, it is important for future research to find gaps in the literature focusing on students who are single mothers to enhance the understanding of what specific areas need to be emphasized on to increase the participation and graduation rates of students who are single mothers.

Theoretical Framework used for Studies Examined

Only eight studies integrated a theoretical framework in their research. One study used grounded theory to explain college persistence among single mothers (Austin, & McDermott, 2003). Parsons (2008) used a combination of Bourdieu's theory of social reproduction and the feminist theory to explain life chances, choices, and identity of single mothers in post-secondary education. It appears the use of social reproduction and feminist theories either alone or in combination with other theories has been on rise since the year 2010. For instance, Yakaboski (2010) used a feminist epistemological framework to explain the experiences of single mother undergraduate students. Moreau and Kerner (2015) combined feminist theoretical framework and social constructivist in exploring student parents' experiences. Brown and Nichols (2013) used Bourdieu's theory of social reproduction to explain policy and programming to support a growing population of students who are parents on university campuses.

Research also shows that researchers are using different theoretical approaches to explain the experiences of parenting student on campuses. For example, Brooks (2012) used social constructivists, Beeler (2016) used Astin's (1993) College Impact Model, and Nicholas et al. (2017) used, Tierney's (2008) interpretivists' framework of organizational culture. Together, these theories provide guidance in understanding the experiences and the support systems necessary for students who are single mothers.

Supporting Students who are Single Mothers on Campuses

The analysis showed that the support mechanism for students who are single mothers and parenting students differed depending on the country the study was conducted (Brooks, 2012) and the attitude of the community towards students who are single mothers (Brooks, 2012; Mottarella, Fritzsche, Whitten, & Bedsole, 2008). For instance, Brooks (2012) compared parenting student within higher education in the United Kingdom and Denmark and found considerable differences in attitudes by nation and gender towards student parents. In Brooks (2012) study, cultural and attitudinal emerged as key differences in the ways students who are single mothers were supported. As Mottarella et al. (2008) stated, students who are mothers who lived on campus environment were negatively perceived as being cold-hearted, arrogant, and less agreeable. The level of stereotypes was more in student parents who resumed their academic responsibilities in less than 6 months after having a child. Moreover, Mottarella, et al., (2008) and colleagues further reported that these group of parenting students were more likely to miss out on social support critical to academic integration and success.

Unique Experiences of Students who are Single Mothers

The literature review provided evidence that unlike other students, students who are single mothers have unique experiences on university campuses that range from: worrying about the quality of parenting they provide to their dependent (Austin & McDemott,2003; Brown & Nicholas,2013; Duquaine-Watson, 2006, 2007; Katz, 2013), personal health (Brown & Nicholas, 2013; Katz, 2013; Ogunsiji, & Wilkes, 2005), guilt of low class performances (Brown & Nicholas, 2013; Duquaine-Watson, 2006, 2007; Gerrard & Roberts, 2006; Haleman, 2004; Katz, 2013), financial constraints (Brown & Nicholas, 2013; Gerrard, & Roberts, 2006; Yakaboski, 2010), to interpersonal relationships because of multiple responsibilities (Gerrard, & Roberts, 2006; Kotwal & Prabhakar, 2009; Ogunsiji, & Wilkes, 2005). Duquaine-Watson (2006, 2007) added that students who are single mothers reported

experiencing challenges with the time constraint, child care, financial constraints, and a chilly institutional climate. Since these challenges are interconnected and in combination, they hinder students who are single mothers from accessing and taking part in vital campus activities central to their academic success, it was prudent that these experiences be categorized and their effects be discussed in groups. The experiences of students were best categorized into four institutional characteristics: academic performance, financial support, social support, institutional environment. Below is their brief description.

Academic Performance

Regarding academic performance, 4 out of 24 studies showed that the academic performance and professional trajectory of students who are single mothers was compromised. The unplanned situations(i.e. lack of caretakers, sickness) forced them to miss classes or important class activities. Austin and McDermott (2003) reported that students who are single mothers experienced conflict in making decision emanating from their multiple identities (as a student and as a mother). As a result, students who are single mothers experienced difficulties in maximizing their performance in any of their multiple identities(Van Stone et al., 1994).

On the contrary, studies by Haleman (2004) and Parsons (2008) found some students who are single mothers were positive about the whole experience. Although unskilled, some students who are single mothers believed the experience of being a student, a mother, and single prepared them to deal with the rigor and pressure of college work. They valued education as a means for upward growth and as an important way of becoming role models for their children (Haleman,2004; Lovell,2014a). Also, some of the students who are single mothers viewed failing as a result of personal factors rather than a structural barrier(Haleman,2004).

Financial Support

Nine (9) of the reviewed articles showed that students who are single mothers experienced difficulties relating to financial resources. For instance, students who are single mothers incurred high debts and living expenses compared to non-mother students (Brown, & Nichols, 2013; Duquaine-Watson, 2007; Gerrard, & Roberts, 2006; Parsons, 2008). Also, students who are single mothers experienced difficulties securing financial aid. As noted by Duquaine-Watson (2007), only 1 out of 13 students who are single mothers that applied for

financial support from the government received. As a result of financial difficulties, most students who are single mothers dropped out or attended community colleges, where besides academic success, their social, spiritual, psychological, and personal development needs were taken care of.

Social Support

From the literature reviewed, providing social support to students who are single mothers showed to be key in their progress and academic success. Seven (7) studies focused on social support of students who are single mothers. While some studies reported that students who are single mothers received support from family, peers, faculty, and campus community (Lovell, 2014b; Ray et al., 2010; Wijnberg, & Weinger, 1998), others studies such as Beeler (2016), O’Gorman (2015), and Ray et al. (2010) showed these students lacked support. For instance, Wijnberg and Weinger (1998) and Lovell (2014a) pointed out that students who are single mothers valued emotional and financial support. , Although emotional and financial support are not directly related to their academic success, they are key to these students’ academic success.

A study by Wijnberg and Weinger’s (1998) reported that some students who are single mothers had conflicts with their social networks , thus denying them off the emotional support that was crucial for their academic progress and success. To overcome such experiences, Austin and McDermott (2003) and Ray et al. (2010) pointed out that students who are single mothers need to be strategic and know campus resources that can help them persist with their education. This include building social networks among students, creating relationships with faculty, choosing more flexible academic programs, and being aware of university services.

Institutional Environment

A conducive environment for learning is crucial for students’ academic success. For this study, five (5) articles reported that students who are single mothers experienced a chilly academic environment while interacting with faculty, staff, and peers (Duquaine-Watson, 2007; Yakaboski, 2010). Duquaine-Watson (2007) specifically highlighted the indirect and explicit ways student parents were perceived as being different and disregarded for being single mothers. As Duquaine-Watson (2007) reported, student parents described encountering demeaning policies, actions, and arrogance when interacting with others on the campus. Also,

these students experienced a feeling of loneliness, helplessness, and hopelessness (Kotwal & Prabhakar,2009). These experiences reinforced students who are single mothers' perception of being disregarded, considered abnormal, and un-welcomed. According to Duquaine-Watson (2007), the chilly climate and the feeling of low self-esteem have a great negative influence on students who are single mothers' identity and confidence, which are key for success in an academic environment.

From a different perspective, O'Gorman (2015) noted that students who are single mothers had difficulties negotiating their experiences and expectations on university campuses that were designed only with traditional students in mind. O'Gorman examined attributes such as power and moral regulation dynamics and found that students who are single mothers experienced shame, violence, scrutiny, stigma, and resistance on-campus environment. O'Gorman further explained that these negative stigmas barred students who are single mothers from accessing higher education. According to O'Gorman, the effects of negative stigmas on student parents' academic success are even worse than financial barriers. Advancing on the same idea, Austin and McDermott (2003) pointed out several experiences of students who are single mothers that ranged from isolation, difficulty with the process of social integration, stressed because of the bureaucratic process to securing daycare from temporal assistance for needy families, struggled to find affordable child care, and difficulty finding suitable housing facilities. Altogether, these unwelcoming institutional situations were found to negatively contribute to lower academic performance and persistence of students who were single mothers.

Institutional Support

A considerable body of literature provide evidence for institutions to support students who are single mothers attending post-secondary institutions (Austin & McDermott, 2003; Beeler,2016; Brown & Nichols, 2013; Duquaine-Watson, 2006, 2007; Huff & Thorpe,1997; Katz, 2013; Lynch, 2008; Lovell, 2014a, 2014b; Moghadam et al., 2017; Moreau & Kerner, 2015; Nichols, Biederman, & Gringle,2017; O'Gorman, 2015; Yakaboski, 2010). Some studies provided specific suggestions on how institutions can support students who are single mothers to help them navigate the higher education environment. Duquaine-Watson (2006, 2007) and Beeler (2016) suggested that institutions should establish a Women's Resource and Action Center with various programs to assist in meeting the needs of students who are single

mothers. Lovell (2014b) suggested that institutions should provide counseling services customized for students who are single mothers. Counselling services are crucial in assisting students who are single mothers to maintain a healthier life balance between family and school work. Counseling can also contribute in keeping these students on campus. According to Duquaine-Watson (2006) supporting “students who are single mothers is a significant step toward democratizing education” (p.5). Such support initiatives have the ability to have alter the attitudes and policies that limit students who are single mothers’ from accessing post-secondary education.

Other scholars such as Mottarella, et al. (2008) and Duquaine-Watson (2007) suggested that institutional leaders should work to discourage stereotypes and eliminate chilly climates as way of supporting students who are single mothers’ academic success. Like other stereotypes, those pertaining to students who are single mothers can be harmful as they can discourage the participation of, and discriminate against “certain groups based on gender, marital status, parental status, class, or other identities” (p.20). Further, Duquaine-Watson (2017) suggested that institutions may need to enact policies such as requiring faculty members to incorporate a statement for student parents on their syllabi. Such statements may increase consciousness and awareness of the existence and experiences student parents meet on campuses. Furthermore, increasing awareness is a basis toward creating an institutional climate that is diverse, supportive and inclusive of all parenting students. On the same note, Moghadam et al. (2017) and Nichols et al. (2017) suggested establishing formal university-wide policies to guide practice-based response to the needs of parenting students including but not limited to creating more avenues for faculty-student integration and accommodations.

In O’Gorman’s (2015) study, students who are single mothers suggested a range of support mechanisms that can help them complete their post-secondary degrees. First, students suggested providing financial support in the form of non-loan-based programs, such as grants and scholarships. According to O’Gorman, students who are single mothers stated that such financial support would allow them to finish their education with a smaller debt load. Multiple other studies such as Duquaine-Watson (2007), Huff and Thorpe (1997), Lovell (2014a, 2014b), Yakaboski (2010), and Austin and McDermott (2003) also alluded to the need for institutions to financially support this unique group of students. In particular, Duquaine-Watson (2007) suggested that faculty members can seek grants or institutional funding to

increase the participation of parenting students in on-campus programs. Second, parenting students also suggested that institutions should have policies that allow flexible class attendance, assignment deadlines, and class cell phone to help students who are single mothers manage their multiple identities with ease (Brown & Nichols, 2013; Duquaine-Watson, 2007; Moreau, & Kerner, 2015; O’Gorman, 2015; Yakaboski,2010). Third, students who are single mothers suggested that institutions need to creating a family-friendly atmosphere on-campus by providing services, such as family housing, a support group for students with dependents, and allow parenting students to bring children to class when childcare is not available. According to O’Gorman (2015), such services would help students who are single mothers manage their multiple roles as parents and students. In line with providing a family friendly on a campus environment, Yakaboski (2010) suggested the need for institutions to host family campus events as this would help create a community where these students and their children would feel that they belong and are valued.

Providing on-campus support through work-study program is another way that institutions can support students who are single mothers to achieve their educational goals. Unfortunately, the program like temporal assistance for needy families that are meant to support parenting students through their education has regulations that favor parenting students at community colleges and not at the university level. Also, the temporal assistance for needy families program requirements hinder student parents at university level from working 20 hours while studying. As Austin and McDermott (2003) noted, students who are single mothers were of the idea that the scope of temporal assistance for needy families program regulations should be extended to include students attending universities and allow parenting students to work for over 20 hours. Research also showed that a fair implementation policy that supports parenting students to work while attending classes would reduce the rate of dropout resulting from financial challenges (Austin & McDermott, 2003).

DISCUSSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

This section discusses key findings and implications for practice. Like earlier studies, such as Lynch (2008), Austin and McDermott (2003), Brown and Nichols (2013), Brown and Amankwaa (2007), Duquaine-Watson (2007), the findings of this study suggest a need for more peer-reviewed studies focusing on students who are single mothers, their experiences

and how institutions may best support this unique population of students achieve their educational goal and career pathways.

Regarding the experiences of students who are single mothers, this study found that despite the several mechanisms institutions have put in place to support all students achieve their educational goals, students who are single mothers face several challenges. These challenges can be summarized into four groups. The first group sociological factors which comprise challenges emerging from other students, faculty, and university institutions. Second, psychological factors that include challenges emerging from personal, prior knowledge and experiences, disciplines, and self -esteem. A third group includes economics. The fourth group includes structural factors such as policies that limit parent students from pursuing academic, culture of higher education, and mentality that higher education was purely meant for traditional students. These factors are intertwined. Further, research shows that the interactive effects of these factors can increase the dropout rates among students who are single mothers. These findings are like those of several earlier studies focusing on barriers to student parents' persistence to degree completion or experiences of students who are single mothers or parent students on university campuses (Austin, & McDermott, 2003; Beeler, 2016; Brown, & Nichols, 2013; Duquaine-Watson, 2006, 2007; Huff, & Thorpe,1997; Katz, 2013; Lovell,2014a,2014b; Lynch, 2008; Moghadam et al.,2017; Moreau, & Kerner, 2015; Nichols, Biederman, & Gringle, 2017; O’Gorman, 2015; Van Stone et al.,1994; Yakaboski,2010). Further, the findings of this study appear to suggest a need for future studies to focus on specific factors by examining the extent to which each of these four categories influence the academic success of students who are single mothers.

The findings show that the supportive mechanisms for students who are single mothers differed by nationality, institutional culture, and attitudes by gender (Brooks, 2012; Mottarella et al., 2008). Also, institutional support for students who are single mothers was diminishing (Cruse et al., 2018). The likely diminishing mechanisms for supporting this group of students could explain a recent increase in research on the challenges students who are single mothers are facing on university campuses. Based on this finding, this study suggests a need for increased support for this group of students to pursue their degrees. Further, these findings suggest a need for future studies to investigate how the experiences of

students who are single mothers differ by the country the study was conducted, institutional culture, and effectiveness of the mechanisms put in place to support parenting students.

The findings of this study showed that the majority 78.3% of the articles reviewed used data from the US institutions. Although the US institutions comprise students from worldwide, there are high possibilities that international students to be part of the single mother population. It is important that future studies examine the experiences of students who are single mothers by race and nationality to disentangle the differences in support mechanisms and experiences.

The reviewed literature proposed several mechanisms that institutions can use to provide a supportive environment for students who are single mothers. The mechanisms ranged from creating an inclusive campus environment (i.e., increasing the visibility of student parents by acknowledging that this group of students exists as part of the campus community, faculty including a statement on their syllabi on student parents, and increasing flexibility in the curriculum), providing financial support to helping these groups of students manage their multiple identities that are directly related to their educational goals. Some studies implied that some institutions already have support mechanisms in place for students who are single mothers. However, the literature appears to suggest a need for more studies examining the type of support mechanisms institutions are providing to parenting students and to what these services are helping parenting students achieve their educational goals.

The findings of this study have significant implications for both institutional leaders and policymakers to create awareness of support services available for students who are single mothers on campuses. Also, institutional leaders need to create a welcoming environment free from stereotypes. The findings of this study also have significant implications for researchers. It would be great to examine the extent to which the support services are being provided to these students. Earlier studies showed that several support mechanisms for students have been implemented, but studies examining their effectiveness are limited.

The findings of this study also have significant implications for students who are single mothers. As Haleman (2004) and Parsons (2008) stated, students who are single mothers need to be more proactive, strategic, and know the resources available on campuses that can help them achieve their educational goals. As being aware of the support resources available and knowledgeable about their rights as student parents can help them better

advocate for themselves and even help faculty who are not knowledgeable about the rights of student parents (Mercado-López,2018).

In addition, the findings seem to suggest that students who are single mothers need to establish and nurture strong social networks for support. As showed in the literature, some students who are single mothers were positive about the whole experience of being a student and a single mother (Haleman, 2004; Parsons, 2008). This is because of the support they got from extended family members, peers, faculty, and their dependents. As a result, they stayed positive and believed their multiple identities were a learning moment that was exposing them to the reality of the world. More importantly, these students valued education, as it was the only chance that would bring a change in their life and that of their children.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the experiences of students who are single mothers on university campuses. The students who are single mothers are a growing population on university campuses. Understanding the experiences of these students and creating an inclusive campus environment is a step towards supporting them balance their multiple identities, which is crucial for them achieving their educational goals nation where the study was conducted. The study has significant implications for institutional leaders and policymakers. For institutional leaders, the study suggests a need to have a deeper understanding of the experiences and the dynamics of challenges students who are single mothers face to provide adequate support. In addition, institutional leaders may need to create a more inclusive and supportive environment for this unique student population.

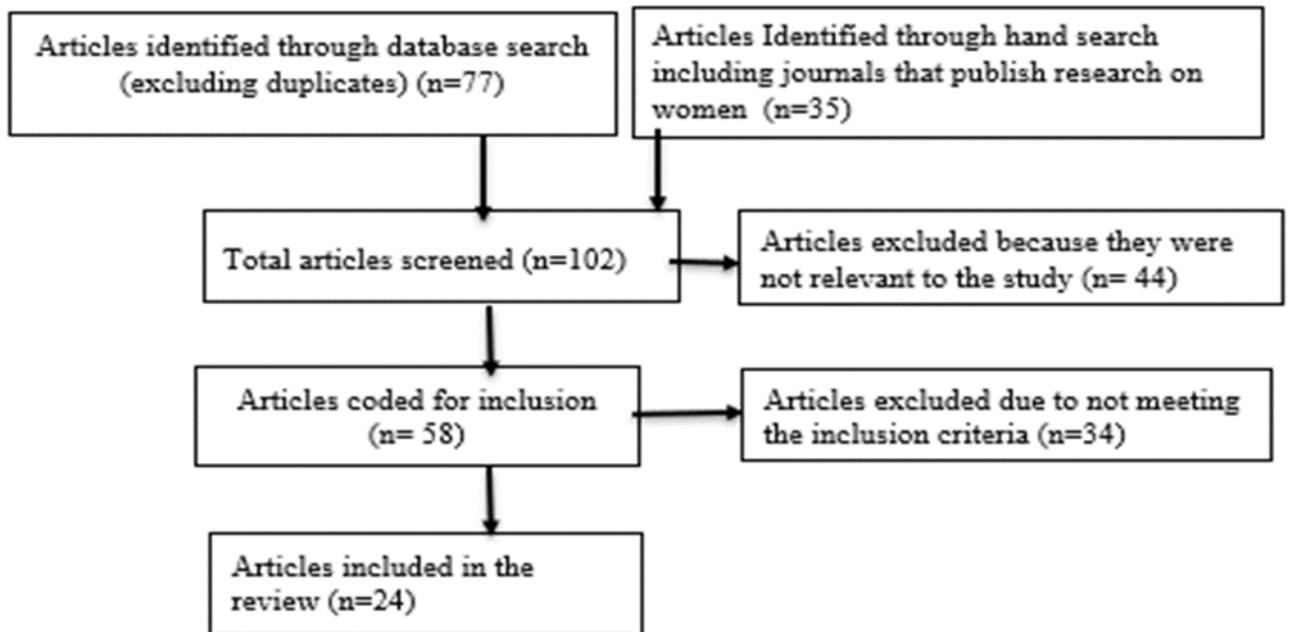


Figure 1: A summary of articles search, screening, exclusion and inclusion

Table 1 Summary of the Reviewed Articles from 1997 to 2019

Authors	Sample Characteristics	Theoretic al framework	Study Design	Analytical Methods	Findings
Austin, & McDermott (2003).	n=14 current and former female students aged between 22 and 27 years old (36% White, 36% Black, and 26% Latina) in USA.	N/A	An exploratory study	Qualitative analysis	Students who are single mothers experienced social issues, stress of children, difficulties getting child care, difficulty getting family housing on campus. institution should provide on-campus housing policy, child care policy, class scheduling and attendance, among other services
Beeler (2016)	Not available	Astin's (1930 college impact model	A literature review	Qualitative Analysis	Students who are single mothers' experienced difficulties in accessing campus child care services , received disparaging treatment from both peers and faculty members, and struggled getting information on academic entry and persistence. Institutions to provide a supportive learning climate, accessible child care, and revised pedagogical policy.

Brooks (2012)	n=20 student parents in 2 universities in the UK and Denmark.	A social constructivist framework	A case study	Qualitative Analysis	Institutions provided financial support, parental leave, flexible modes of study, and childcare support to student parents
Brown & Nichols (2013)	n=27 pregnant and parenting students (P&P) at a mid-Atlantic state university (MASU) USA.	Bourdieu's theory of social reproduction	A case study	Thematic analysis	Parenting students felt on-campus resources for childcare were not intentionally provided for them. Need Inclusive policies and programs to help them succeed on campus.
Duquaine-Watson (2007)	n=13 single, mother students (unmarried), aged from 18-26 years old, in the Midwest, USA. 4 Black, Mexican-American, or multi-racial and 9 white students.	Not available	Ethnography (two years Ethnography research)	Qualitative	Struggled with financial issue, child care, ongoing stigma and stereotypes and unsupportive learning environment. HEIs to create a supportive learning environment including providing on-campus child care, institutional policies on flexible course requirements and attendance, and conducting events and forums to recognize their presences on campus.
Duquaine-Watson	n=22 students who are single mothers in USA.	Not available	A 2-year (2002-	Themes and	Time constraints, child care, economics, and institutional climate barriers hindered degree

(2006)	Caucasian/white, 2 African American/Black, 1 Chinese American, 1 Mexican America, and 1 multi-racial.		2004)	content ethnographi c study	analysis completion.	The university to provide resources and programs to support students who are single mothers'
Gerrard & Roberts (2006)	n=12 student parents) Not undergraduate student available parents from Kingston		A	Thematic qualitative study (snowballin g)	analysis	Student parents experienced profound financial difficulties , struggled to provide for the family, and suffered depression leading to personal stress.
Haleman (2004)	n=10 women (social service recipients and higher education students). Races and ethnicities include 5 Black, 4 white, and 1- mixed race in USA	Not available	An	ethnographi c study	Thematic analysis	Experienced the negative stereotypes of single motherhood. They deemed post-secondary education as a crucial opportunity for personal growth and for the success of their children.
Katz (2013)	n= 64 single-mother students who are on welfare in San Francisco	Narrative lens	A	longitudinal qualitative	Grounded Theory	Experienced stress and lived a fragile life attending school under a reformed welfare policy. They encountered mental health

Bay area, USA.

research

issues and incurred significant debt. need to empower single mothers to advocate for themselves. HEIs to provide multiple resources to help them balance their multiple roles.

Kotwal & Prabhakar (2009)	n=50 mothers (88% widow, 6% divorced, and 6% separated) in India.	Not available	A qualitative study (interview)	Qualitative analysis	Experienced emotional, financial, and social problems. The single identity perpetuated a feeling of guilt, shame, resentment, and anxiety that trigger personality changes. Their role as sole provider forbid them from attending social gathering.
Lashley (2014).	n=28 (Black single mothers enrolled in a four-year college program in USA)	Not Available	A structured interview and survey	Qualitative Analysis	Received support through family cohesiveness, education, spirituality, support networks (family and government)making their transition easy.
Lovell (2014a)	n =8 female student-parents from a community college) in USA	Not available	Hermeneutic phenomeno	Thematic analysis	Received motivations sense of self-fulfillment of attending college from their children.

				logical perspective			
Lovell (2014b)	n=78 combined mother and parenting students in USA.	single general students in	Not available	Non-experimental and quasi-experimental design	Descriptive and regression.	Student parents with younger children face more challenges . HEIs to provide on-campus childcare and student-parent support services.	
Lynch (2008)	n=30 student mothers in the United States of America	in – of	Not available	A qualitative design.	Thematic analysis	Experienced structural environmental and socio-cultural identities barrier that affect their attrition rates.	
Moghadam, Khiaban, Esmaeili, & Salsali (2017)	n=20 student mothers (aged between 24-50 years old) in Iran.	mothers	Not available	A qualitative study (content analysis and interview)	Content analysis	Student parents sacrificed academic duties over familial duties. revised policy of on-campus child care facility and flexible education system.z	

Moreau, & Kerner (2015)	n=20 student parents in England.	Social constructivist and feminist framework	Case study	Thematic analysis	Students who are single mothers' struggle in academia are related to time, financial, health and emotional problems.
Mottarella, Fritzsche, Whitten, & Bedsole (2009)	n=205 women who continued with education after giving birth in a four-year southeastern university in the US.	Not available	A 2x3 factorial design	One-way Multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA)	The student mothers are perceived less feminine, more dominant, arrogant, and less warm-agreeable by their peers. The stereotype presents a powerful barrier for the students to succeed their education.
Nichols, Bierderm, & Grigle (2017)	n=56. (24 parenting students), 6 (non-parenting students, 5 (faculty, and 11 (staff	Tierney's (2008) interpretivists framework of organizatio	An exploratory single case design	Thematic analysis	lack of formal policy and faculty's accommodation. Received different treatment from faculty, peer and others on campus, and problematization of parenting students.

nal culture

O'gorman (2015)	n= 8 single mothers, age range from 20 to 50-year-old, in Ontario, Canada. Races and ethnicities coded 1 was Caucasian and the remaining were Aboriginal.	Moral regulation concept	Ethnography (institutional ethnographic interview).	AVOVA and hierarchical multiple regression models	Encountered barriers to access secondary education associated with the stigma attached to them as students who are single mothers. Need for financial support.
Ogunsiji & Wilkes (2005)	n=5 female participants (aged between early 30s and late 30s) enrolled in nursing program in Australia.	Hermeneutic phenomenological Framework	A phenomenology	Thematic analysis	Students who are single mothers felt exhausted all the time, overwhelmed with worries, and felt hopeless of the future. Experienced mental health concerns because of chronic tiredness and overwhelming worries.
Parsons (2008)	n=8 students who are single mothers at the Memorial University of Newfoundland, Canada.	Feminist theory and Bourdieu's Sociology	A multiple case study conducted between 1999 and	Qualitative analysis	family status negatively influenced their educational expectations and choices. Pursue post-secondary education was complex, and lengthy, and costly that lead to emotional stresses.

		of Culture	2004			Despite these challenging they were determined to achieve their education.
Ray, Bratton, & Brandt (2010)	n= 6-8 student parents in the USA , college	Not available	Case study	Not mentioned		The student parents benefitted from family therapy which was indicated by behavioral change. The single-parent students' perception of having control over their lives was important for their academic successes.
Wijnberg & Weinger (1998)	n=41 poor single mothers in the USA. Age ranged between 17-54 years old. (75% between 21 and 39). 67.1% were Caucasian, 25% were African American, 2.5 % were American Indian, and 2.5 % identified themselves as others.	Not available	Non-experimental and quasi-experimental design	Linear regression.		Had a strong social support network that extended the support to their children. They got encouragement to finish their studies, received social support from mothers and relatives and some financial help. The students experienced conflicts within their network.
Yakaboski	n=21 undergraduates at	Feminist	An	Qualitative		Experienced financial issue, scheduling

(2010) the Midwestern research epistemolo exploratory analysis conflict, age limit policies, faculty and staff
institution, USA gical study negative attitude, and lack of family campus
framework events as the barriers to full integration into
college.
advocate for a supportive learning climate at
HEIs.

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