

## Single parenting and students' academic performance

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The need for strength-based research that highlights the way forward on the phenomenon of single parenting and its antecedent effect on students' academic performance was the motivation for this study. With this study we addressed the direct effect of single parenting on students' academic performance, while also accounting for the indirect effect of personal achievement motivation and the moderating role of perceived community support. A sample of 379 secondary students from 12 schools in 6 states in Nigeria participated in the survey. The partial least square structural equation model was used for the analysis of the study data through the aid of SmartPLS. We found that single parenting does not have a significant negative effect on students' academic performance. We also found that personal achievement motivation mediates the relation between single parenting and students' academic performance; community support was also found to moderate this relationship. When compared to 2-parent homes, single parenting has the greatest effect on students' academic performance. We support the Self-determination Theory as a contribution to knowledge.

**Keywords:** academic performance; community support; single parenting; students

### Introduction

Scholars have linked the family as the first point of call for understanding students' academic performance because the family provides the avenue for learning, communication and growth for a child (Laura & Saracosti, 2019; Lyu, Li & Xie, 2019). This explains increased research focusing on the role of family structure in improving students' academic performance (Lin, Washington-Nortey, Hill & Serpell, 2019; Sun & Li, 2011). However, the phenomenon of single parenting has attracted scholars' attention with most of the studies comparing two biological parent homes, single-parent homes and step/relative homes (Cheung & Park, 2016; Tartari, 2015), with most of the studies concluding that single parenting has a negative effect on students' academic performance (Anyakoha, 2016; Azuka-Obieke, 2013).

However, with the growing trend of single parents in society, there is no gainsaying this trend has come to stay. As such, emphasis should shift towards identifying factors that could help reduce the negative effect thereof or strengthen the capacity of parents to drive increased student performance. This has become necessary because the increased generalisation has rather led to stereotyping students from single-parent homes and moralising parents for having children out of wedlock, which has not helped the situation or society.

Hence, taking a distinct approach from extant literature, we assessed the role of single-parent homes on students' academic performance not necessarily with the aim of comparing them with two-parent homes, as comparison takes us back to stereotyping, but to provide a forward-driven approach to the role of single parenting on students' academic performance. Besides, studies on single-parent families and students' academic performance have focused more on the role of the parent, school and social ties (Marschall & Shah, 2020; Sota & Agi, 2020) with limited studies assessing the role of the student in their academic performance. This has become necessary since an individual can be self-motivated either intrinsically or extrinsically to pursue whatever they hold valuable. Therefore, our approach of a more nuanced examination of the link between personal achievement motivation and students' academic performance and its mediating role in single-parent students' academic performance relation is justified.

The mechanisms that underlie the influence of family structures on specific outcomes have remained unclear and lack new insight (Kroese, Bernasco, Liefbroer & Rouwendal, 2021). Prior studies that assessed the relation between single-family structure and students' academic performance have been limited in that they typically sampled completely or predominately developed societies (Kroese et al., 2021), which is a gap that we attempted to close with this study by presenting a developing society perspective. In a limited number of studies an attempt was made to examine factors that could strengthen or weaken the relationship between single parenting and students' academic performance. In this article we propose perceived community support based on the premise that single parents need some level of support, as it could reduce the negative consequences of residing with single parents and alleviate the effect of lower levels of parental support (Taylor, 2010).

The role of perceived community support in students' academic performance has remained under-researched and inconclusive as difficulty in measuring perceived community support has led to varying perspectives, thus, leading to limited empirical knowledge on the construct and its influence on students' academic performance. It is on this premise that we explored the link between single parenting, personal achievement motivation, and students' academic performance and the moderating roles of perceived community support.

## Literature Review

### *Theoretical development and hypotheses development*

The Self-determination Theory was used to underpin this study. The theory connects attitude, drive, and optimal functioning as major assumptions. Its assumption presupposes that motivation is inherent (intrinsic) or propelled by external events (extrinsic) and is potent in moulding individuals and their behaviour (Ryan & Deci, 2019). Intrinsic motivation includes basic ethics, interests, and individual standards that propel us to act in a pre-defined way. Intrinsic motivation arises from an innate quest for one's own self-achievement (Ryan & Deci, 2019). It happens when an individual connects with something of interest to them and supports it since it is in line with their sense of worth and identity (Ryan & Deci, 2019).

Extrinsic motivation arises from outward controls or guidelines, rising from the need to meet expectations or fear of punishment. Extrinsic motivation can be in the form of ranking style, appraisals, prizes, compliments, and the esteem and approval of others. The external can regulate behaviour by making an individual conform to the rules of others for fear, accept them even when they disagree with them, show understanding to them and integrate them into one's values known as integrated regulation (Ten Cate, Kusurkar & Williams, 2011). The theory supports the need for separating intrinsic from extrinsic motivation while upholding the intrinsic as a better form of motivation, even though one can also be self-determined and extrinsically motivated (Ryan & Deci, 2019).

In relating this theory to our study we propose that promoting behaviour that supports students' higher academic performance starts with first identifying the relevance of higher academic performance (change in behaviour), which allows for building competence and self-efficacy to handle their academics on their own and feel a connection with their single parent and the community. So, when such students fail, they do not blame others for their failure; instead, they set the course in motion for adjustments where needed to achieve a much desired outcome and they put in all the work needed to have the desired results.

### *Single parenting and academic performance*

Presently there is a fast and radical surge in the number of single-parent families in the world, even in Nigeria, where it was initially considered foreign to our culture. The new reality is the existence of single-mother homes and single-father homes. Single-parent families are gradually gaining acceptance in developing societies, unlike in the past when the phenomenon was an anomaly and believed to be a sign of the collapse and failure of the family unit. This has led to the stigmatisation of

single parents and is attributed to students' poor academic performance. Meanwhile, academic performance is usually linked to calculated test results corresponding to the student's degree of intelligence, excluding other subjective features.

A number of arguments exist on the roles of educational establishments in ensuring academic performance. While some believe that schools should concentrate on students' academic preparation (Ogboro & Nwadiani, 2017), others believe that the efforts of the school should be combined with those of other social establishments like the family and the community (Boyes-Watson, 2005). Ojo (2019) argues that single parenting has a negative effect on children's performance and that it can lead to children being denied their right to education and increase criminality.

Based on the Self-determination Theory, we argue that single parenting as a family structure does not affect student's academic performance, as the attention given to the academic performance of a child is not a function of the family structure. When parents can properly communicate affection and discipline and pay attention to their children, it helps in building self-esteem and confidence and helps positioning such a child on the way to success, but when they fail in their roles, it may likely endanger the future of such a child – irrespective of the family composition. Anyakoha (2016) found that single parents who were well-read helped their children with academic activities. Nwachukwu (2011) found that children from single-parent families performed well academically when their parents helped them. Hence, we propose the following:

*H<sub>1</sub>: Single parenting affects students' academic performance*

### *The mediating role of personal achievement motivation on single parenting and academic performance*

Individuals can be self-motivated and driven to perform academically, even when they are from single-parent families (Leung & Shek, 2018). Students are affected by their desire to succeed and it pushes them to succeed at whatever challenge they take on. The desire to achieve supersedes other limiting elements that may botch their ambition. Atkinson (1999) revealed that students put effort into activities in which they do not desire to sustain a high-class rank, which shows a student's attitude towards success. Hence, students who are naturally inclined towards academic success exert more effort – irrespective of the requirements (Accordino, Accordino & Slaney, 2000). Therefore, if we embrace the idea of innate motivation, that means that we all have a commanding prospect for self-actualisation, irrespective of family background. Self-motivated students engage in academic undertakings for their

own sake and contend with the fact that the knowledge gathered will be useful in the future.

Students with personal achievement motivation are ambitious and driven with tendencies to set objectives (Singh, 2018). Ambition makes students pursue academic success (Rayner & Papakonstantinou, 2018). Meanwhile, students who set goals are more inclined to take up tasks and they possess a sense of purpose. Personal ambition is essential, as it has the capability of affecting choices and academic accomplishment (Goodman & Gregg, 2010). Students with increased academic ambition possess higher motivation and academic accomplishment, irrespective of their family background (Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003). Based on the Self-determination Theory, ambition can be the determinant and resultant factor of academic accomplishment that accounts for the link between family structure and students' academic performance.

Since children from single-parent homes are not likely to always get the required attention from their parents (Carlson & Corcoran, 2001), it is most likely that they will develop some level of independence that will allow them to make some personal academic decisions, and over time, this will build confidence and resilience in them to take on greater challenges that would be beneficial to them. When this happens, the child makes choices and exerts efforts in academic activities, with achievement as their primary focus and motivation. Parents are observational models that guide behavioural change; a child from a single-parent home is most likely to develop some level of personal belief to undertake tasks independently, and this could lead to stimulating desires to succeed at an early stage, which will be helpful to shape the child/children towards personal achievement motivation and success in their academic pursuit. Hence, we also propose:

*H<sub>2</sub>*: Personal achievement motivation has a significant influence on students' academic performance.

*H<sub>3</sub>*: Personal achievement motivation mediates the relation between single parenting and students' academic performance.

*The moderating role of perceived community support in single parenthood and academic performance*

Perceived community support is the collective structure of care that surrounds the family, ranging from extended family, friends, neighbours, social institutions offering services and care, comprising official and social service providers and community-based organisations. Eccles and Wang (2012) posit that when an individual is being supported, directed, and counselled, it makes such an individual feel self-assured and determined to achieve while enjoying the process towards

success. The community plays a major role in stimulating academic success, as communities provide a nurturing environment for students, fostering a sense of belonging and emotional well-being (Tondeur, Kershaw, Vanderlinde & Van Braak, 2013). When students feel supported by their community, they are more likely to be emotionally resilient, motivated, and engaged in their academic pursuits. Also, communities often contribute resources and funding to schools, which can enhance the overall quality of education. This support may include books, learning aids, technology, funded scholarships, and infrastructure improvements. These resources can positively affect students' learning experiences and academic achievement.

Furthermore, there is a general belief that many single parents may not be financially stable to provide the best form of education for their children, which may affect their children's performance (Carlson & Corcoran, 2001; Kalil & Ryan, 2010; Martin-West, 2019). Studies have shown that single parents often rely on help from social ties although literature acknowledges and describes this kind of support as social support (Martin-West, 2019; Sota & Agi, 2020). However, scholars have stated that it is reciprocal and can be used up, meaning that it may not be available forever (Desmond, 2012). We align with the scholarly position of Herrero and Gracia (2007) on perceived community support, which has a broader perspective on social support than just close and intimate relationships.

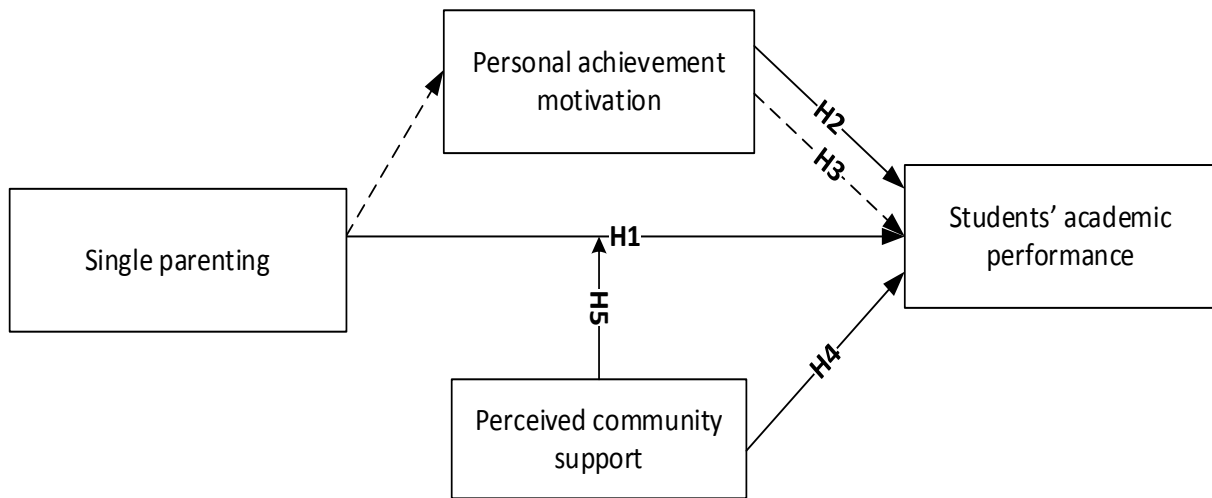
Peer groups are part of the community where students receive help. By becoming a member of a group they can share ideas, counsels, and views about decisions to be taken as well as strategies to be used. Friedlander, Reid, Shupak and Cribbie (2007) assert that peer support fosters motivation and active engagement in academic endeavours. Also, academic institutions establish structures that facilitate and enhance learning activities within the institution, thereby directly influencing the academic performance of their students (Furrer & Skinner, 2003). There are religious bodies and community agencies within the community that help parents and single-parent families cope with stress and give financial assistance to help them carry out their responsibilities (Redmond, Spoth & Trudeau, 2002).

Community support is not just a useful system of handling pressure; it also helps in accomplishing academic fulfilment, as perceived community support enhances drive and subsequent commitment to learning activities. Ballen and Moles (2013) revealed that the participation of parents and the community in the academic system enriches the value of students' academic experiences and accomplishments, especially at the primary and secondary levels. When community

participation in the educational system is well defined and utilised, it will yield valuable results for the academic system in that community and overall student performance. Hence, we propose:

*H<sub>4</sub>*: Perceived community support affects students' academic performance

*H<sub>5</sub>*: Perceived community support moderates the relation between single parents and students' academic performance.



**Figure 1** Theoretical model

### Research Methodology

We used a survey design in this study because it was the most suitable choice when effort is geared towards gathering data from a large sample. A sample of 379 secondary school students was drawn from 12 schools in six states in Nigeria. We ensured that at least two schools were selected from each of the six geopolitical zones in the country. Convenient and purposive sampling were used for the study. The techniques were chosen as not all students would take part in the study and not all students were from single-parent homes, which is the major interest of the study. A questionnaire was used for data collection. Analysis of the data was done with ANOVA and partial least square structural equation modelling with the aid of SPSSv23 and SmartPLSv3.9 respectively. Ethical considerations were taken into account as written approval was obtained from the schools, parents, and the State Ministry of Education for the study to be conducted. After having obtained approval and permission from the State Ministry of Education, we informed the students and their parents on the purpose of the study. Afterwards, we provided a 4 week window for them to re-evaluate their decision before allowing them to take part in the survey.

### Measures

A categorical question that required students to respond to the family structure in their home was used. The items were worded clearly for the students to select between single-father families (where the student lives alone with the father), single-mother families (where the student lives alone with the mother), and others (two-parent

homes). Single parenting was measured as a first-order construct. We transformed the data using the Statistical Packages for Social Sciences (SPSS), creating main effect dummies with a root name "family structure", thereby allowing us to have a complete, equal and single dataset on each of the variables (single-father families, single-mother families and two-parent homes). To avoid the single matrix problem, the two-parent family was used as the reference variable, while the data from single-mother and single-father families were used to form a composite scale in the model. This was done because the focus of the research was on single parenting. We used the students' test scores obtained from the school authorities for two different subjects (mathematics and English language) undertaken in three different terms in the 2019/2020 academic session. The choice of three terms was to avoid bias in scores and the two subjects were chosen because they are compulsory subjects that students need to pass before they are promoted. The scale for personal achievement motivation was adapted from the Mehrabian Achievement Motivation Scale (Mehrabian, 1993) with 12 items. The Perceived Community Support Questionnaire (PCSQ) designed by Herrero and Gracia (2007) was adapted with 14 items, all designed on a 5-point Likert scale (see Figure 1 for theoretical Model).

### Research Result

The preliminary analysis of the data showed that 290 of the 379 survey questionnaires were suitable for further analysis, which is about 77% of the distributed instruments. The remaining survey

instruments were dropped because of issues such as mutilation and incomplete responses. Hence, the high response rate provided justification for

including the surveys for further analysis (see Table 1 for demographic distribution of respondents).

**Table 1** Demographic distribution of respondents

Variable	Single-father	Single-mother	Two-parent	Total	<i>p</i>
Family structure	120(41%)	150(52%)	20(7%)	290	.001
Gender					
Male	59(49%)	65(43%)	6(30%)	130	NS
Female	61(51%)	85(57%)	14(70%)	160	NS
Class					
SSS 1	35(29%)	33(22%)	8(40%)	76	NS
SSS 2	39(33%)	50(33%)	6(30%)	95	NS
SSS 3	46(38%)	67(45%)	6(30%)	119	NS
Parent education					
SSCE	15(13%)	46(31%)	5(25%)	66	NS
Diploma/NCE	41(34%)	68(45%)	5(25%)	114	NS
HND/BSC degree	36(30%)	29(19%)	6(30%)	71	NS
Postgraduate degree	28(23%)	7(5%)	4(20%)	39	NS
Occupation/Career					
Full-time employment	26(22%)	32(21%)	6(30%)	64	0.00
Part-time employment	18(15%)	13(9%)	2(10%)	33	0.00
Self-employed	76(63%)	105(70%)	12(60%)	193	0.02

Note. SSS = Senior secondary school; NS = Not significant; SSCE = Senior Secondary Certificate Examination, NCE = National Certificate of Education; HND = Higher National Diploma; BSC = Bachelor of Science degree.

The results show that 120 (41%) of the students were from single-father homes, while 150 (52%) were from single-mother homes and 20 (7%) were from two-parent homes. Furthermore, we tested whether there was a significant difference in student academic scores for students from single-father, single-mother and two-parent homes using one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA). The results show that there was a significant difference, as the  $p < .05$  for the family structure groups ( $F$ -value (290) = 4.2,  $p = .01$ ) where  $F$ -value is the  $F$ -value distribution. However, the difference in mean score between the groups was quite small, as the effect size was 0.11. Next, the results show that 59 (49%) male students were from single-father homes, 65 (43%) from single-mother homes while six (30%) were from two-parent homes. Sixty-one (51%) female students were from single-father homes, 85 (57%) from single-mother homes while 14 (70%) were from two-parent homes. Parent education was also assessed for significant differences among the family structures and the results show that there was no statistically significant as  $p > 0.05$ . Finally, we accounted for whether there was a significant difference in parent occupation as a means of economic resource, which has been found to affect students' academic performance. Our results show that there was no

significant difference among the family structures  $p > 0.05$ . This implies that there is no economic disadvantage for students from single-parent homes, most especially single-mothers, as our result confirms that they were more self-employed compared to the others.

**Measurement Model**

The questionnaire was divided into sections and we conducted Harman's single-factor test. This was done to avoid the challenge of common method variance that is associated with questionnaire instruments. The factor analysis results show that none of the factors accounted for over 50% of the variance in the factors (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee & Podsakoff, 2003); hence, it implies the absence of bias. We assessed the factor loadings, and the results show that all items loaded sufficiently, as all the items had a loading value above 0.70 and the outer loadings were significant with  $t$ -values greater than 1.96 for all the loadings (Hair, Howard & Nitzl, 2020). Next, we assessed the reliability of the model. Hair et al. (2020) recommends that Cronbach's alpha, composite reliability and  $\rho A$  (rho A) should be  $>.70$ . Given the model results presented in Table 2 it implies that the instruments were reliable.

**Table 2** Reliability result

	Cronbach's alpha	$\rho A$	Composite reliability	Average variance extracted (AVE)
Perceived community support	0.898	0.906	0.915	0.644
Personal achievement motivation	0.842	0.855	0.875	0.516

Furthermore, AVE was used to determine the convergent validity. Hair et al. (2020) recommend

that the AVE should be  $>.50$ . The results from Table 2 show that this criterion has been satisfied.

Criterion validity was determined using the Fornell-Larcker criterion. Hair et al. (2020) state that this criteria is satisfied when the AVE is greater than the correlation values.

#### Structural Model Result

The significance of the path was assessed, and the  $p$ -value was used to accept or reject a hypothesis. (see Table 3 for a summary of the outcome). The results show that there was a positive relationship between single-parent homes and the students' academic performance ( $\beta = 0.532$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ). The results confirm that there was a positive relationship between living in two-parent homes and student's academic performance ( $\beta = 0.421$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ), although the coefficient was low. Hence, comparing the strength of the relation between single-parent and two-parent homes on students' academic performance, the results reveal that single parenting has the most positive effect on students' academic performance. The outcome of the analysis shows that there was a positive relationship between personal achievement motivation and students' academic performance, as the beta value produced was ( $\beta = 0.157$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ). Furthermore, perceived community support linked with students' academic performance also showed a positive relationship with a beta value of ( $\beta = 0.635$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ).

Personal achievement motivation partially mediates the relation between single parenting and

academic performance ( $\beta = 0.512$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ). Personal achievement motivation partially mediates the relation between living in two-parent homes and the students' academic performance, although it was lower compared to the single-parent homes ( $\beta = 0.398$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ). Finally, the results show the moderating effect of perceived community support on the academic performance of students living in single-parent homes and two-parent homes, which was found to be positive ( $\beta = 0.416$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ) and ( $\beta = 0.285$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ) respectively. Perceived community support better strengthens the relation between single-parent homes and students' academic performance when compared to two-parent homes. Thus, it implies that higher levels of community support are required for students from single-parent homes.

The model in sample fit was determined using the coefficient of determination. The results show that the predictors explained the outcome variable. This is clear from the  $R$ -value (which is the multiple correlation) of the model at 0.673 (67.3%) changes in students' academic performance, which is high. It is safe to conclude that the family structure strongly predicts students' academic performance in school. However, an  $R$ -value of 0.590 (59%) was obtained for personal achievement motivation, which implies good predictive accuracy of the model when the variable is included in the model.

**Table 3** Summary of hypotheses results

	$t$ statistics	$p$	Decision
Single parent -> Academic performance	4.989	0.000	Accept $H_1$
Personal achievement motivation -> Academic performance	3.362	0.012	Accept $H_2$
Single parent -> Personal achievement motivation -> Academic performance	3.144	0.021	Accept $H_3$
Perceived community support -> Academic performance	2.181	0.000	Accept $H_4$
Single parent*Perceived community support -> Academic performance	3.109	0.000	Accept $H_5$

The goodness of fit of the model was assessed and we relied on the standardised root-mean-square residual (SRMR). Hair et al. (2020) state that SRMR values less than 0.08 show a model fit. The result shows that the model was fit, as an SRMR coefficient of 0.021 was obtained. We got a Q2 value of 0.197, thus showing that the exogenous construct of single parenting had a moderate predictive relevance to students' academic performance (Shmueli, Sarstedt, Hair, Cheah, Ting, Vaithilingam & Ringle, 2019).

#### Discussion of Findings

With this study we assessed the effect of single parenting on students' academic performance and attempted to link the relationship with personal achievement motivation and moderated the same with perceived community support. The results confirm the growing number of single-mother

homes, which is consistent with the studies of Ekpenyong and Lawrence (2016) and Wajim and Shimfe (2020) who also highlight the growing trend of single-mother homes.

In addition, the results show that living with a single parent does not negatively affect students' academic performance, as the relationship is positive. This result is similar to the studies of Adesokan and Makura (2020) and Chiu and Ho (2006). The results show that student achievement motivation has a significant effect on their academic performance. This is consistent with the findings of Steinmayr, Weidinger, Schwinger and Spinath (2019).

It was found that personal achievement motivation mediates the relationship between single parenting and students' academic performance. This agrees with the views of Sanders (1996), who states that students have a role in their

academic success despite the family structure that they may be living in. Similarly, Alhassan (2000) also states that personal achievement motivation mediates the link between single parenting and academic performance relationship. We also found that perceived community support affected students' academic performance. This result is consistent with the views of Furrer and Skinner (2003). This result affirms the view that the community provides the needed support, especially when the parents are not around to monitor their children's activities.

When used as a moderator, the results show that perceived community support strengthened the relation associated with living with a single parent and the students' academic performance. This aligns directly with the position of Haxton and Harknett (2009) on the relevance of kinship support for students. The findings also agree with the views of Debell (2007), who holds that the negative effect of single parenting could have less effect on students' academic performance when certain factors are controlled.

### Conclusion and Implication of the Study

We conclude that single parenting does not negatively affect students' academic performance. The academic performance of children from two-parent households did not fare better when compared to children from single-parent homes, thus changing the narrative that children from two-parent homes would perform better than children from single-parent homes. Hence, the family structure may not be the first point of call for poor student academic performance. It also means that a single-parent home may not be bad after all, as it now depends on the relationship fostered between the parent and the child in the home. Social workers should thus focus more on strengths-based systems that allow for improving the parent-child relationship, as this will help in identifying key parental behaviour that would be beneficial to the child's academic performance.

Our study further supports scholars that advocate that studying single-parent influence on students' academic performance may not be as conclusive and direct as we have been made to believe, as it is cogent to consider the student as a major factor in exploring this relationship. With this study we provide a view that explains the phenomenon and saves us from the sweeping overarching generalisation that, irrespective of the students' efforts, living in single-parent homes would affect their academic performance negatively. Drawing from the Self-determination Theory, we confirm that personal achievement motivation is vital – irrespective of the student's family structure. Hence, there is a need for social workers to refocus their efforts towards considering the role of the students in their own success and

stimulating factors that would motivate students to take their academics seriously.

Furthermore, since student from single-parent homes require higher community support and personal achievement motivation to achieve higher academic performance when compared to students from two-parent homes, it is necessary that teachers be supportive in their interactions with the children from single-parent households. However, this process must begin with teachers engaging professionally with every child, recognising them as unique individuals, and addressing their individual needs. Teachers' ability to do this could serve as a source for extrinsic motivation to the student, which would positively affect the student's academic performance.

The societal implications of this study hinge on the outcome that community support moderates the relationship between single parenting and students' academic performance. There is a need to support children from single-parent homes and not stereotype them. There should be an effort to provide for them in areas where deficiencies are immediately observed because an African adage says: "When a child performs well, the glory is both to the parents and the community." In view of the growing economic and social challenges that parents face in our society, there is a need for communities to rise to the occasion and be the support mechanism that single-parent students need to improve their academic performance. Finally, we present an integrative model on single parenting and students' academic performance, capturing factors that are the students themselves and then their external environment, which is a clear departure from previous scholars' approach to the relationship between the constructs.

### Authors' Contributions

MAH and AC wrote the introduction; all authors developed the literature review section and MAH and EB conducted all statistical analyses. All authors reviewed the final manuscript.

### Notes

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