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African American Blended Parent Strategies' and the Influence on Children's School Performance

Christine Li'Chele' Moore
Walden University

Walden University

College of Social and Behavioral Sciences

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Christine Li'Chele' Moore

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Walden University
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Abstract

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Performance

by

Christine Li'Chele' Moore

MS, Springfield University, 2012

BS, Springfield University, 2010

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Human and Behavioral/Social Services

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Abstract

Due to increasing divorce rates, the number of Americans living in blended family households have increased over the decades. Studies have revealed that some school-aged children who experience family structural changes due to blending families may experience stress that negatively affects their school performance. The purpose of this study was to determine what strategies African American parents in blended family units used to lessen the impact of family structure change on their school-aged children's school performance. Bowen's family system's theory was used to guide this research. A generic qualitative design was used to obtain data from eight participants residing in a blended family household. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with stepparents/biological parents. An inductive approach using Colaizzi's seven step method was used to analyze the data. Emerging themes were determined through thematic content analysis. Participants reported using strategies such as open communication with children and teachers, attending parent teacher meetings, attending school conferences, assisting with children with homework, and involving biological parents to address the changes in school performance. Human services professionals could use results from this study to promote social change by assisting parents in implementing strategies to address changes in their children's school performance as a result of family structural changes.

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my Mother and Father George Little-Miller and Maude Estelle Solomon-Miller who made blending a family unit appear unproblematic as they endured myriads of blended familial relational challenges. May you both rest in Peace….

This dissertation is also dedicated to the preschool/school-aged children and their blended families who patronized PhaZes Preschool/Enrichment Center from 2002 – 2010. May your challenges be few, may your life regrets, if any, be mitigated, and may your efforts not go unappreciated. Moreover, I would like to say thank you to my own blended family unit for accepting the things we could not change, and for changing the things we could as we strived to develop a high level of differentiation of self while fusing self into our unique blended family unit/culture. Thank you, for being you; and, because of you, I am me. Thank you.

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Isaiah 41:10 says "Do not fear, for I am with you, do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand." He did; and because He did, I am. Thank you, my God, for giving me the ability to follow the footpath you have set before me. To my husband Dr. Moore and my family, who will never forget the words "I am all most there," I am grateful! To my young adult children and my pet Solomon who demanded no attention from me while I was submerged in my coursework and the Dissertation process, I thank you. I would also like to thank my grands for developing into the intelligent, beautiful, caring, and talented young ladies while enduring a "mailbox" GrandC over the past several years. You all truly Rock! For those who allowed me to muse thank you, ありがとう，gracias, nagode, misaotra, and tatenda！

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

The blended family unit (BFU) is a unique family structure which is created when children are brought into a relationship by adult partners who remarry after divorce or death of a previous partner (Ryan et al., 2015). The BFU may operate under intense relational pressures and conflict (Lee & McLanahan, 2015). Researchers have revealed that some children in BFUs experience relational issues and conflict, which can negatively affect their school grades and behavior (Bryant et al., 2016; Lee & McLanahan, 2015). Adjusting to a BFU can be even more challenging for blended African American families due to the higher rates of poverty, racial discrimination, and academic challenges specific to this demographic (Parker 2015), which can negatively affect the behavior of their African American children (Parker, 2011). In 2016, data from the United States Census Bureau revealed that only 38.7% of African American minors lived with both biological parents (U. S. Census Bureau, 2016). In 2017, data from the US census revealed that 61% of African American children resided in blended/stepfamily households (U. S. Census Bureau, 2017). After a thorough review of the literature, I was unable to locate any research which addressed specific strategies that African American parents in blended families in the United States used to lessen the impact that family structural changes have on their children. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to determine what strategies African American parents in BFUs adopted to lessen the impact that family structural changes may have had on their children.

In this chapter, I present a brief discussion of the literature on how family structural changes impact children. Problems resulting from familial structure change and

the purpose of the study are also presented in this chapter. In addition, I identify the research question and discuss the conceptual framework that was used to guide the study. The nature of the study, the assumptions, limitations, and the significance of this study are also introduced in this chapter.

Background

Because of a high divorce rate and the likelihood of second marriages among couples who have young children, many children in the United States may experience living in BFU households where they are parented by a nonbiological parent (Bastaits & Mortelmans, 2017). Consequently, over the past several years, the BFU has become one of the most common family structures in the United States (Havermans et al., 2017). In 2017, results from the American Community Survey revealed that out of 4 million stepchildren in the United States, 2.4 million were younger than 18 years old (Census Bureau, 2019). Jensen (2017) asserted that one-third of American children will experience living in a stepfamily before their 18th birthday. Therefore, stepfamilies are becoming increasingly more common and may endure distinct challenges such as relationship issues, child loyalty binds between parents, stepparent child relations, and disagreements about parenting roles and or strategies (Jensen, 2017).

Over the past few years, research that has examined how changes in familial structure impacts children has increased (Doctoroff & Arnold, 2017; Bastaits & Mortelmans, 2017). For example, Jensen (2017) was among the first researchers to address the dyadic relational challenges such as stepfamily boundary ambiguity, role

conflict and societal stigmas that occur among stepmothers and stepchildren in residential stepfamilies. The author asserted that step-relations are important because the initial step-parenting strategies shaped the bonding foundation of stepparent/stepchild relations (Jensen, 2017). In another study, Jensen and Harris (2017) also addressed the effects of changes in family structure and the resultant impact on school-age children. The researchers found that young children who experienced changes in family relations involving stepfather/stepchild relations were more likely to result in social and behavioral problems in the child's early school years.

El-Sheikh et al. (2014) focused on the relational stressors experienced by school-aged children who resided in blended family households. Findings revealed that familial stressors interfered with the children's sleep and intellectual functioning, which negatively impacted their emotional well-being. Other researchers also found cognitive developmental delays in areas such as their ability to learn, reason, and think abstractly, as well as the children's ability to process their emotions (Kohlhoff et al., 2016).

Arnold et al. (2017) examined the impact that family structural changes had on the school performance among 995 military youth. Findings from the study revealed that children residing in stepfamilies and other disruptive family units reported poorer grades and challenges with depression than children residing in all biological family households (Arnold et al., 2017). The authors iterated that using parental strategies that promoted good parent-child relations and school involvement would lessen the negative impact that family structural change has on youth. The authors asserted that good

stepparent/stepchild relations would result in an increase in the stepchild's school performance (Arnold et al., 2017).

Metts et al. (2017) examined the emotional and communicative profiles of young adults who experienced living in stepfamilies during their childhood years. Using regression analysis, to determine if age made a difference in the impact that family structure change had on children, the authors examined stressful predictors such as negative emotions and the age of the young adult during parental divorce (Metts et al., 2017). Their findings revealed that some of the negative strong emotions' participants felt during their parent's initial divorce were anger and hurt, sadness and apprehension to blend into the new BFU (Metts et al., 2017). According to the authors, a child's negative emotions, no matter what age the child is at the time of stepfamily formation, lays the foundation as to how the child responds to their new step/blended family environment. Researched findings indicate that African American children residing with stepfathers endure more negative emotions resulting from family structure changes (Bryant et al., 2016). Overall, Browne and Battle (2018) asserted that African American children experience more familial related challenges due to living arrangement changes than other non-African American children. In another study, the authors examine the relationship between family stressors and outcomes relating to African American youth concerns such as low academic performance and juvenile justice involvement. Browne and Battle examined the family composition of 638 African Americans families, and the interpersonal family relations and stressors experienced by African Americans adolescents in low-income families to gain insight on how family stressors can influence

a child's overall behavior. Researched findings indicated that family stressors induced many risk factors to include lower school performance and juvenile justice involvement. (Browne & Battle, 2018)). Voisin et al. (2016) asserted that, as a result of the connection between familial stress and African American adolescent behavioral concerns, interventions which focus on familial stressors are warranted.

Statement of the Problem

Findings from past research has revealed that school aged children living in BFUs may endure familial relational conflicts, parenting style differences, stepsibling rivalry, and other stressors in the family unit (Jensen & Harris, 2017). According to Jensen and Harris (2017), stressors related to family structural changes which create a negative family relation can contribute to psychological distress among school-age children, which could negatively impact the children's cognitive functioning in their school settings. Findings from other studies have linked distressed/unhealthy familial relations in BFUs to negative adolescent outcomes such as poor school performance, impaired social skills, poor cognitive functioning, and physiological illness in school-aged children (Arnold et al., 2017; Browne et al., 2018; Crouch et al., 2019 & Kouros & Garber, 2014).

Findings from other past studies have further indicated that African American children residing in African American BFUs with African American stepfathers are more likely to experience complex family structural changes. The authors asserted that the complex family structural change result in disruptive households and can hinder a child's overall well-being (Bryant et al., 2016). Zaharychuk (2017) also shared that divorce and

remarriage has been connected to emotional and behavioral issues, which can lead to the inhibition of psychological development in young children.

Browne and Battle (2018) examined the impact of family structure and educational outcomes of African American children residing in BFUs. The authors compared child response to family structural changes between African American and non-African American children. Findings revealed that changes in family living arrangements due to the creation of stepfamilies disproportionately impact Black families more than non-Black families because of the lack of communal support during the new family formation (Browne & Battle, 2018).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this generic qualitative study was to determine what strategies African American parents in blended families adopted to lessen the impact that family structural changes had on their children's school performance. Participants were parents of school-aged children in grades K-12 residing in BFUs. Study participants resided in a two parent (male and female) BFU. In an effort to examine the impact in which family structural changes, during a child's school years, impacts a child's academic performance, and to examine the actions that parents took to lessen the effect, the school-age children of the parents in the study had experienced negative family structural changes and poor academic performance within the study year.

Research Question

What strategies do African American parents in blended family units adopt to lessen the impact that family structural changes have on their children's school performance?

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study was Bowen's family systems theory (FST). Bowen introduced the FST in 1975 during a symposium with his colleagues to explain why the mental status of some of his discharged patients deteriorated after returning to their home environments (Bowen, 1976). Bowen explained that family systems theory could be used to explain how the quality of familial relations affects the behavior of individuals in family units. In addition, Bowen (1976) addressed how family patterns of dealing with emotions and relationships could be connected to healthy and/or unhealthy relations within the family. Bowen's FST was used to explain how blended family structural change may affect children's school performance. Bowen's FST consists of eight concepts that are used to explain how individuals responds to their family system. Those eight concepts are triangles, differentiation of self, emotional cutoff, sibling positioning, family projection process, nuclear family emotional system, multi-generational transmission process, and societal emotional process. The principles from Bowen's FST were appropriate for guiding this research because the principles were used to describe how structural changes in BFUs could potentially affect African American children's school performance. Bowen's FST assisted in understanding why African American parents use familiar strategies to address their children's school

performance. Details regarding each the major premises of FST are presented in Chapter 2.

Nature of the Study

The nature of this study was a generic qualitative inquiry. Kennedy (2016) indicated that a generic qualitative inquiry should be used when researchers seek to examine the perspectives of a group of individuals related to a specific phenomenon. Recent U.S. Census reports revealed that, in 2017, 61% of African American children resided in blended/stepfamily households (U. S. Census Bureau, 2017). The report indicated that African American blended families may face unique familial related challenges. Therefore, a generic qualitative approach was used to determine what strategies African American parents in blended families used to mitigate the impact that family structural changes may have had on their children's school performance as it relates to poorer grades and negative behaviors.

Purposeful sampling was used to recruit 10–12 parents of blended family households. Guassora et al. (2015) indicated that purposeful sampling should be used to target a sample of individuals who meet the participant criteria for participating in the study. According to Guassora et al. (2015), the researchers' goal should be recruiting a sample of individuals with a shared experience, which would enhance the likelihood that the data will reach saturation. Saturation occurred once meanings of coded themes were exhaustive, and no new insight could be developed or shared.

Semi structured interviews were used to collect data from African American parents of blended family households. The criteria for the participants were that they

must have been married for a minimum of 1 year and no more than 5 years. In addition, participants must have either a biological and/or a nonbiological school-aged child living in the home who were experiencing or who had recently experienced poor school performance such as low grades and/or negative behavior. To achieve accurate transcriptions and to maintain confidentiality of data during data collection, the participant interviews were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim by me only. In addition, the transcribed data was verified through member checking by study participants for accuracy.

Operational Definitions

*Academic performance***:** the current level of Grade Point Average (GPA) based on a student's school performance (O'Malley et al. 2015).

African Americans: Black people living in the United States who are descended from families that originally came from Africa (Collins, 2019).

Blended family dilemmas (BFD): refers to the familial conflicts which may exist in a blended family unit (Moore, 2015).

Blended family population (BFP): denotes a group of people who reside in non-biological family units (Moore, 2015).

Blended family relational dilemmas: are the relational issues that are continual to the point that the dilemma disrupts the blended family unit (Moore, 2015).

Blended family unit (BFU): consists of a non-biological family structure that is created as the result of a second marriage where one or more partners in the marriage have at least one nonbiological offspring from a previous relationship (Moore, 2015).

Dyadic relationship: a familial relationship that exists between two people within a family unit (Bowen, 1976).

Family structure change: a change in a family's structure or living arrangement resulting from divorce or death of a married partner (Arnold et al., 2017)

Negative relational dilemma: relationship issues which cause havoc and/or ill feelings between two or more parties (DeGreeff & Platt, 2016).

School-aged children: A child who has entered the public-school system K thru12 (Moore, 2015).

School performance: the level/quality of participation exhibited by a student in a school setting relating to poor grades and or negative behavior (O'Malley et al., 2015).

Assumptions

This study was based on certain assumptions, which first included the assumption that African American parents who reside in a BFU would provide responses to interview questions that reflect honesty and truthfulness. Any dishonest responses given can negatively impact results from the study (Davidson et al., 2017). Another basic assumption was that I would be able to refrain from any researcher biases during data collection (in-depth interviews) and/or transcribing. To avoid researcher bias and to establish trustworthiness and validity in this study, I refrained from personal opinions and perceived judgements during interviews. In addition, I used reflexivity and bracketing to minimize researcher bias. Additional details on reflexivity and bracketing are presented in Chapter 3.

Another assumption was that the use of in-depth interviews can be used to elicit rich detailed responses from participants regarding the phenomenon of interest (Levitt, 2016). I therefore assume that by using open-ended questions during face-to-face interviews, I would be able to capture the diverse perspectives of participants regarding the strategies they used to address the impact of family structural changes on their children's academic performance.

Scope and Delimitation

The scope of this study included African American BFUs which had at least one nonbiological parental figure was recruited to participate in the study. Additionally, at least one of the school-aged children in the home had low school performance such as low grades and negative behavior at school in the year prior to the interview.

A delimitation in this study is that the focus of this study was only on how the African American parents in the Central West Florida region of Florida addressed the academic and behavioral challenges of their children. Therefore, other areas of the BFU dynamics were not examined.

Limitation

Connelly (2016) asserted that transferability is present in a study when others can reproduce a study using rich data that provides a detailed audit trail of a previous study. A limitation of this study was that participants sample size only represented a small number of the African American blended family parents and their children within Central West Florida region.

Another possible limitation of this study is that the face-to-face interview process may be intimidating to the participants and cause them to be hesitant in responding to the interview questions. During the interview process, the informed consent informed participants that they do not have to answer any questions they did not choose.

Another possible limitation to this study is that some challenges endured and presented by the BFU parents were not pertinent to this study because the primary focus is on how African American family structural changes impact a child's school performance. To minimize this limitation, during interviews, parents were reminded of the purpose of the study and given time to note pertinent details about family structural changes and their child's school performance surrounding time periods of negative child behaviors. A fourth possible limitation is that the frequent occurrences in which a blended family tolerates BFU dilemmas may cause the family unit to respond and accept some dilemmas as the norm for their BFU. Therefore, this may cause parent participants to not report pertinent rich information relating to the impact that family structural change has had on their child/ren. To minimize this limitation, blended family parents who had been united with their new family units for less than 5 years were recruited for the study. Participants drop out may be another external limitation to this study as it may interfere with establishing saturation. The findings only represented African American blended family parents and children in public schools residing in the Central West Florida region and who have fewer familial related resources. Therefore, a main limitation that was presented in this study is that African American school-aged children residing in BFUs, who are attending private or chartered schools, which may have more

access to familial-related resources such as family counseling were not represented in this study.

Significance

This study examined what strategies African American parents in blended families used to lessen the impact that family structural changes had on their children's school performance; and the actions that parents took to lessen the effect. This project was unique because it informed further research and increase the understanding of blended family dilemmas, and the actions that parents took to lessen the effect of those dilemmas. Results from this study were shared with pertinent local human services entities and national education officials. This study added to the existing body of literature that explores how family structure change, resulting in African American BFU's, impact children's school performance. This study also added to the existing body of literature that explores the actions that African American parents took to lessen the effect of that family structure change. Consequently, the secondary significance of this study is that human services professionals may be able to use the information from this study to present empirical evidence that supports the need for a more in-depth look into the challenges experienced by African American students who reside in a BFU. An implication in the study is that African American family structural changes can negative impact the academic performance in some African American school-age children who reside in a BFU.

Summary

The number of blended family households in the United States has increased over the past several years (Siebel, 2014). Suh et al. (2016) noted that the number of children residing in blended family households is expected to continue to rise. Lee and McLanahan (2015) asserted that there is a strong connection between family structural changes and a child's overall cognitive development. Researchers Doctoroff and Arnold (2017) also studied the cognitive performance of children who experienced familial related dilemmas, and they concluded as well that children who experienced stressed family structure changes have lower levels of school performance.

Therefore, the purpose of this study was to determine what strategies African American parents in blended families used to lessen the impact that family structural changes have on their school-aged child's school performance. A generic qualitative inquiry was utilized to conduct the study. Charmaz (2006) asserted that when seeking to understand a group or persons, it is best to use a qualitative inquiry. Therefore, an assumption regarding this study was that study participants will openly share pertinent details about their blended family dilemmas. This chapter is followed by a review of the pertinent literature in Chapter 2. Chapter 3 follows with a description of the study design; criteria for participants, procedures which were used to collect data, to include, how data obtained were assessed. In Chapter 4, I present the results and then in Chapter 5, I discuss the implications of those results.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Findings from past research has revealed that because of the high divorce rates among African American married couples with young children, the blended family household (stepfamily) has become a common family structure in the United States (Siebel, 2014). As mentioned, in 2016, data from the U.S. Census Bureau revealed that only 38.7% of African American minors lived with both biological parents (U. S. Census Bureau, 2016). In 2017, data from the U.S. Census revealed that 61% of African American children resided in blended/stepfamily households (U. S. Census Bureau, 2017). Researchers have indicated that family structural changes could result in distressed and/or triangulated relational dilemmas within blended families. The stress that school-age children experience when they endure family structural changes can interfere with the children's school performance (de Brey et al., 2017; Lacewell, 2016).

This chapter presents a review of past and current literature on how the impact of family structural changes can affect African American blended families and their children's school performance. The first two sections in this chapter consist of the literature search strategy and Bowen's FST which was the conceptual framework for this study. The remaining sections of this chapter present literature related to the complex challenges of blended family formation and the impact that family structure changes have on the school performance of African American school-aged children residing in blended family households.

Literature Search Strategy

I used sources within the Walden Online Library System to locate literature for this research. To search for literature related to the topic of interest for this study, I logged into the SocINDEX with Full Text, which is the world's most comprehensive sociological research database. Within the SocINDEX link, I selected additional databases such as Academic Search Complete, Education Source, ERIC, Military and Government Complete, Open Dissertations, Primary Search, PsycARTICLES, and PsycInfo search for literature related to topics of interest in this study. To obtain germane literature, I used terms such as *African American blended family, Black blended family, blended family dilemmas, stepfamily, Black stepmother, Black stepfather, school performance, education,* and *school dropouts*. To narrow the literature search to locate articles on African American BFU's with school-aged children, I used additional search terms and phrases such as *Black adolescence, Black step-parenting, child/alternative living arrangements, African American family structure/change, Black parents, Black children, Black step-parenting, and school achievement*. I also used various online websites such as the Department of Education's resource site, Springfield University's Library System, and Yale University's Library System.

I also searched for related literature at MacDill Air Force Base Library, the University of South Florida library, and various county-level public libraries. There was limited research that specifically focused on strategies African American blended family parents adopted to mitigate the impact that family structure change had on African American school-aged children's school performance. In addition, locating literature

which examined the strategies that African American parents used to mitigate the impact that family structural changes had on children's school performance were also limited. In the following section, Bowen's FST is presented as the conceptual framework for guiding my study. Bowen's FST was used to assist in examining strategies African American blended family parents adopted to mitigate the impact that family structure change had on their children's school performance.

Bowen's Family System Theory

Bowen introduced FST to his colleagues and the mental health community during a speaking engagement in 1975 (Bowen, 1976). Bowen studied behaviors of patients who were re-admitted for psychiatric care after being reunited with their families following successful mental health treatment. Bowen concluded that the heightened negative interactions within the family units were the probable cause of patient's readmittance to treatment (Bowen, 1975). Bowen proposed that family structural changes and the degree of human emotions among family members is important when attempting to determine how individuals develop within a family system/unit (Bowen, 1975). One of Bowen's main concerns was the heightened emotional disturbances that occurred among two parties in a family system (Bowen, 1978). He referred to such two-party systems as dyadic relationships.

Bowen asserted that there are eight interlocking concepts that affect familial relations (Bowen, 1976). The eight interlocking concepts are triangles, differentiation of self, emotional cutoff, sibling positioning, family projection process, nuclear family emotional system, multigenerational transmission process, and societal emotional process

(Bowen, 1978). Although there was a concern for the dyadic relationships endured by his clients after the client returned to home, Bowen argued that researchers must study the quality and/or relational make up of an entire family unit in order to understand individual behavior (Bowen, 1978).

Triangles

According to Bowen (1976), a triangle is a three-party relationship system that is typically created when one party of a dyadic relationship includes another party into the dyadic relationship. Bowen (1976) indicated that triangles mostly form within a family when people in a dyadic relationship have high anxiety. Although the third party may absorb some negative feelings from the people in the dyadic relationship, higher levels of tension may be created when the third party begins to take sides with one of the persons in the triangle (Bowen, 1978). According to Bowen (1978), as the new person becomes an insider to the dyad, which results in leaving one of the dyadic duos as an outsider, heightened tension in the triangle may lead to relational problems throughout the family. Bowen (1978) asserted that a family member who makes up the triangle may fight off becoming the "out" person in a three-party relationship. Bowen (1978) reiterated that a member in the triangle relation may attempt to distribute negative feelings throughout the family, and that distribution may be the family member's internal way of processing and solving a solution. As those negative feelings go unresolved, the resulting familial dilemmas may cause the negative feelings between blended family member dyadic and triangle relations to worsen (Bowen, 1978).

According to a study in 2017, school-aged children are more likely to have problems building new blended familial relations (Jensen et al., 2017). The authors also asserted that the construct period of the new BFU formation can be a stressful experience for young children. Therefore, the complexity in the formation of the BFU which includes building new dyadic (stepparent-stepchild or stepsibling) and triangular relations such as stepparent-biological parent and child relations can add stressors which interfere with the school-aged child's overall wellbeing (Jensen et al., 2017).

Differentiation of Self

Differentiation of self refers to a person's attempts to maintain personal beliefs and/or values while being emotionally connected to others in familial relationships (Bowen, 1978). Bowen asserted that when a person puts another's preferences/desires before his or her own preferences, that person's differentiation of self may be adversely affected. Bowen suggested that differentiation of self develops early during childhood. According to Bowen, if a child's differentiation is low, it could mean that the child has learned early in life to ignore self-preferences in deference to preferences of others in the family unit. A low differentiation might dictate how a child would later interact in other relations. Bowen (1978) shared that although a person's differentiation of self may be low, it can be altered later in life with much effort.

Bowen further shared that well-differentiated people experience higher conflict resolution during decision-making moments as they are able to handle conflicts in a more productive manner. With regards to decision-making, Bowen shared that well-differentiated people are less likely to react with fewer decision-making skills and are

more likely to acquire principles that increase decision-making skills. Whereas less differentiated people experience more guilt, conflicts, and unresolved familial related dilemmas (Bowen, 1978). Bowen (1978) asserted that poorly differentiated people depend heavily on the acceptance and approval of others.

In regard to the children in a BFU, their ability to adjust to family structural change is naturally lower simply because of their age maturity (Jensen et al., 2017). Moreover, when it comes to their desire to "fit" in their new family unit, their level of differentiation of self is lowered because of their level of emotional interdependence. Therefore, because children are unable to exert power in the new family unit, it is the level of emotional interdependence that lowers their differentiation of self which can negatively impact their school performance (Jensen et al., 2017).

Emotional Cutoff

Emotional cutoff occurs when a person disconnects from other family members in an effort to manage unresolved conflicts (Bowen, 1978). Bowen asserted that prior to emotional cutoff, people become emotionally trapped and may not be capable of expressing their inner feelings (Bowen, 1978). As a means of escape, and instead of causing confrontation with family members, the emotionally trapped family member may begin to distance themselves by moving away from the other family members. Bowen also noted that when a person becomes emotionally trapped and cut off from family, the individual may place unhealthy demands on members of the new family. Bowen (1978) concluded that individuals who endure continual negative familial emotions without any means of resolution are more likely to separate emotionally and cut off from family.

According to Bowen, family members may experience emotional stress as a result of contact with one who is emotionally cut off from family members (Bowen, 1978). According to Bowen, children are less likely to be able to handle family related stressors. Bowen asserted that a child's inability to handle stressors could lead to the child experiencing emotional cutoff. Bowen (1978) asserted that emotional cutoff simply shifts any unresolved familial related problems. In a BFU, parents who are exhibiting emotional cutoff, and continues to reside in the BFU household, can have a negative impact on children's academic performance. Researched findings indicated that stressful experienced endured by the children in the BFU, can negatively interfere with a school-aged child's overall emotional well-being (Jensen et al., 2017).

Family Projection Process

The family projection process occurs when parents project their conflicts onto their children by exposing the children to their arguments and other adult matters (Bowen, 1978). Bowen asserted that the problems that children inherit from parents mostly impact the children's needs for attention and approval. Because of the desired need for attention and approval in the child, the child may become vulnerable to behaviors that may escalate into chronic problems such as behavioral issues, medical issues, and anxiety (Bowen, 1978).

The family projection process occurs in three steps. In the first step, parents may start to focus on a child because of concerns that something is mentally or behaviorally atypical with the child (Bowen, 1978). Bowen asserted that during this first step, parents may become overprotective. During the second step, parents may start interpreting the

child's behavior as evidence that something is wrong with the child and they may start making anticipated/readily excuses for the child's behaviors to others. Finally, in step three, the parents may begin treating the child as if something is wrong with the child. Bowen (1978) asserted that the parents' involvement in the family projection process becomes an attempt to "fix" the child's "perceived" problem. Unfortunately, the more intense the family projection process is projected towards a child, the more the child may personify the perceived fears of the parent/s and embody the characteristics of the perceived problem (Bowen, 1978). According to current researched findings, children in a BFU who embodies the problematic characteristics and complexed networks during the family projection process can develop a lower differentiation of self, which could have a negative impact on their overall wellbeing (Jensen 2017).

Sibling Positioning

Bowen added sibling positioning to his family systems theory in 1976 after reading psychologist Tolman's 1961 work relating to sibling positioning. Bowen (1976) shared that sibling positioning refers to the order/position of a person in a family unit. Bowen (1976) asserted that having knowledge of the sibling position of a person can predict pertinent characteristics of that person. Bowen reiterated that "no single piece of data is more important than knowing the sibling positioning of people in their present or past generation" (p. 87). In regard to marriage and divorce, Bowen asserted that couples who marry a spouse which experienced the same or different sibling position, as a child, will have an impact on the union. Bowen asserted that when two persons who were the oldest sibling become married, they are more likely to battle over who is the decision-

maker in their family. Similar issues exist when two people become partners who were the youngest sibling in their family unit. However, according to Bowen, the youngest siblings will ponder over who gets to lean on whom (Bowen, 1978). In regard to sibling positioning, Bowen asserted that no matter which of the varied sibling positions couples are custom to, their level of differentiation of self would determine how they respond in their marital union (Bowen,1978). The sibling positioning concept is important to BFU parents as it reveals the "what, why and how" in why some of the parental challenges within the new union interferes with school-aged children's overall school performance. As an example, imagine a child who was the baby of their biological first family entering a new blended family formation where they are now propelled into the oldest sibling position. The expectation of that child is to take on the older sibling role during stepfamily formation. According to past research findings such post-divorce living arrangement challenges experienced by school aged children can induce relational stressors which could hinder their school engagement (Havermans et al., 2017).

Nuclear Family Emotional Process

Nuclear family projection process occurs when negative familial matters between family dyads are projected into relations with other family members. Bowen (1978) asserted that there are four patterns of behavior that govern the nuclear family projection process and cause stress in the family unit. The four patterns are marital conflict, dysfunction in one spouse, impairment of one or more children, and emotional distance. According to Bowen, any of the four patterns of behavior can cause anxiety in one family member and/or in one or more familiar relationships. Bowen (1978) shared that all four

patterns can be present in the nuclear family units. Bowen shared that the level of anxiety depends on the family's ability to adapt to the endured tension brought on by the stressors from one or more of the four patterns (Bowen, 1978).

According to Bowen (1978), the nuclear family emotional process explains how children may be impacted as they are coached by either parent to choose the side of a residential nonbiological parent versus the biological nonresidential parent during family structural changes (Bowen, 1978). School-age children who experience stress relating to parent-child relations such as this are more likely to develop a lower differentiation of self as they fuse self into the BFU. In addition, as a result of the emotional stressors experience by the school-age members in the BFU, they are more likely to have poorer school engagement than children who do not endure such stress relating to familial belonging in their new family unit (King et al., 2015).

Emotional Process in Society

Bowen (1976) asserted that the emotional process in society is the process that families use to govern unwanted familial behavior. Bowen (1978) asserted that short-term solutions to family dilemmas can become both progressive (gradual and ongoing) and regressive (relapsing and/or deteriorating). Bowen (1978) shared that he first discovered the link between familial and societal emotional processes while treating juvenile delinquents. Bowen (1978) shared that a family enduring delinquency in a child is considered to be experiencing societal driven regression. When Bowen uncovered those similarities between society functioning and family function, he asserted that similar challenges existed in other institutions such as schools and governing entities (Bowen,

1976). Bowen asserted that "the increase in problems children is experiencing is a part of emotional process in society as a whole" (Bowen, 1976).

In a BFU, the biological parent and/or nonbiological parent residing in a BFU, are more likely than all biological first family parents to mitigate a familial problem in an effort to make their BFU family unit appear as if it is functioning without any disturbances (Arnold et, al., 2017). Unfortunately, when the familial problem which is child-centered resurfaces after being mitigated by parents, the problem is most likely magnified 10-fold causing the child to endure high levels of familial stressors. It is hypothesized that these stressors are one of the main culprits that ends in academic challenges for school-aged children in BFU (Arnold et, al., 2017).

Multigenerational Transmission Processes

Bowen (1978) concluded that the multigenerational transmission process consists of parental differentiation of self being passed on to their offspring. Bowen shared how small differences of levels of low differentiation of self among parents and their children can crossover into generations (Bowen, 1978). He noted that marital instability, the ability to reproduce, health, and education accomplishments can become some of the major issues sparked by multi-generation transmission (Bowen, 1978). According to Bowen, people are sensitive to and react to the presence or absence of pertinent family relationships. Bowen argued that how one reacts to the presence or absence of relations stalks from one's genetic inheritance and is responsible for shaping the differentiation of self (Bowen 1978). Bowen (1978) asserted that the root of the generational transmitted issues can become so embodied in some families that family members may be prone to

experiencing chaotic lives. This concept is relevant to the BFU as well, because, fully understanding how the non-residential parent's adopted parental strategies have influenced the development of their offspring, can assist in the understanding of why a child innately respond to their parents' moods, attitudes, and actions (Forehand et al., 2015). Researched findings indicated that similar to residential blended family parents, non-residential blended family parental influences can have a negative or positive influence on a child's school performance (Forehand et al., 2015).

In my study, the premises of Bowen's FST were used to guide my research. The concepts in Bowen's theory assisted in explaining the how and why some African American children, who experience family structure change that ends in a blended family can have low school performance. Bowen's theory on triangles, emotional cutoff, sibling positioning and the family assisted in connecting BFU challenges endured by school-aged children to poor school performance.

Applications of Bowen's Theory

Over the past few decades, concepts within Bowen's FST have been used to examine family structures and how negative familial relations may impact members in a household. For instance, Kolbert et al. (2013) used FST in their qualitative study to determine the most appropriate way to help adolescents understand family dynamics. The researchers asserted that Bowen's concept of differentiation of self is an indicator of a child's ability to balance individuality while fusing in their family system (Kolbert et al., 2013). Findings from the study revealed that the degree of fusion dictated how adolescents respond to their family unit. The researchers found that adolescent's degree

of fusion brought on heightened stressors, from internalizing negative parental messages, were related to the adolescent's negative behavior in family and school settings (Kolbert et al., 2013). This research informed the study because it lends insight on how family structural changes can impact behaviors exhibited by school-age children.

Turunen (2014) examined data from the Swedish register of data from 1978 to 2007, that measured school performance in the educational settings of 9th graders who experienced the birth of maternal versus paternal halfsiblings. Findings from the author's quantitative study revealed that there was a difference in educational attainment, after the 9th grade, among children who experienced half-sibling relationships post-separation of their family system change (Turunen, 2014). The author examined data from 874,812 9th grade students to measure educational outcomes and well-being outcomes such as psychological and behavioral outcomes (Turunen, 2014). Key findings revealed that children who experienced sibling positioning changes due to a blended family structural change experienced lower school performance (Turunen, 2014). The authors concluded that the complexity in experiencing a change in sibling positioning was stressful for a child and can impact the ability to socialize and have successful school performance (Turunen, 2014). The findings from this study revealed the adolescents in postseparation with half-siblings had poorer school performance. Findings from this study supports Bowen's concept of how sibling positioning affects children in blended families. Results from the Turunen study informed my study by providing empirical data on how the experience of a blended family with half-siblings may affect a child's school performance as it relates to poor grades and negative behavior.

In another study, Palombi (2016) applied the principles of differentiation of self, multigenerational process, and the emotional cut off concepts of Bowen's theory to her own family. The purpose of the study was to examine how separation from the nuclear family system during her childhood later affected her emotional state. Palombi (2016) revealed that her health was impacted due to the emotional stressors as evidenced by her adult hospitalizations. She also indicated that her adult intimate relations were impacted because of mistrust she felt from the adults in her early childhood. Palombi asserted that her childhood experiences gave her a pre-perception of the adults in her life which contributed to her differentiation of self and resulted in emotional cut-off. After examining multiple accounts of being separated from her mother, father, and extended family members as a child, Palombi concluded that many areas of her social functioning were impaired due to the multiple familial separations. Palombi (2016) asserted that her negative internalized stressors caused her to carry over the emotions into her adult life (family projection process). Palombi's article shared insight on how principles of Bowen's FST could be used to explain how early childhood familial relations negatively impact a child's early development of the differentiation of self as it can cause family projection and emotional cut-off in adult years. She also shared that familial relations could have a negative impact on adult social relations, and an adult's overall health.

Literature Review Related to Key Constructs

Although there has been some earlier literature which revealed the complexity in stepfamily formation and a child's overall well-being, limited literature examined blended family parental strategies and the impact on their children's school performance.

Moreover, some studies did examine the child's perception of divorce, new blended

family formation (BFF) and parental knowledge of BFF. As an example, the following is

literature which examines child perceptions of divorce and new family formation. Jensen

and Shafer (2013) conducted a quantitative study to determine how family characteristics

influenced a child's perception of their stepfamily, and their overall well-being after

blending into a new family unit. Jensen and Shafer collected data from 1,088 10 to 16-

year-old children who were living with stepfathers. Jensen and Shafer (2013) concluded

that at the time of their study, early research conducted on the stepfamily system did not

report on the child's perception of the family system and the impact the new family

structure had on their overall well-being. The authors asserted that there is not a one-size-

fit-all method to assisting children in adapting to family structure change. Jensen and

Shafer's study provides insight into how a child's perception of family stressors relating

to the family structural change is important and can negatively influence pertinent areas

of their life if overlooked by the adults in their family. Now, Zartler et al. (2015)

conducted a study to examine the dynamics of family resulting from divorce and

separation. The authors asserted that the increase in divorce rates over the past few

decades has created new family structures which may create emotional challenges for

families and children. The authors also asserted that post-divorce children and parents

endure challenges such as legal custody arrangements and boundary issues that interfere

with a child's overall well-being (Zartler et al., 2015). Although many studies have been

conducted to examine familial related dilemmas resulting from challenges post-divorce

the authors asserted that "research from a life course perspective are still scarce" (Zartler

et al., 2015). The authors concluded that the constitution of family issues after separation can present challenges for all family members (Zartler et al., 2015). This study shares insight on how boundary issues can disrupt parental strategies post-divorce causing emotional cut-off and relation havoc in a blended family unit. Stressors relating to boundary issues can interfere with a school-aged child's school performance (King et al., 2015). Researchers van Eeden☐Moorefield and Malloy (2015) reviewed secondary data to examine the stepfamily members knowledge and their understanding of BFU formation, stepfamily member's relationships, stepfamily challenges as it relates to policy, practice, and the stepfamily's overall well-being. The authors examined decades of synthesized data on stepfamily formation, parenting and step parenting characteristics, boundary ambiguity, parent styles, and bidirectional effects. The author's findings revealed that family structural changes which requires children to create new biological relations (which demands sharing a biological parent/sibling with new non-biological family members) and new step-parent/sibling relations, promotes stress which negatively impact a child's cognitive performance and emotional stability (van Eeden-Moorefield & Malloy, 2015). van Eeden-Moorefield and Malloy (2015) asserted that as parents and children transition into new stepfamily relations, the inability of the child to feel a sense of stability may derive from a child's feeling of loss of loyalty for past biological family relations. It is those stressors which may interfere with the child's cognitive performance in their academic environments. This study also lends insight on the importance of seeking to understanding the complex challenges children experience post family

structure change. This study also lends insight on what causes internal stressors leading to emotional cut-off and a lower differentiation of self in school-aged children.

Blended Family Relations

DeGreef and Platt (2016) conducted a qualitative study to examine parental and child perceptions of familial relations. Findings from their study revealed that children in blended families often experienced stressful relational dilemmas because of feelings of competition and anger post the new blended family formation (DeGreef & Platt, 2016). The researchers asserted that the internal sad feelings regarding competition (among new family members) and anger (which stemmed from having to adjust to new living arrangements) experienced by children had a negative impact on a child's communal well-being (DeGreef & Platt, 2016). This study shares insight on how shifts in familial relations and stepparent implications can create a stressful home environment for school-aged children. As a result, school-aged children could begin to internalize familial related challenges that develops into a lower sense of differentiation of self. According to researched findings, a child's lower differentiation of self can lead to emotional cut-off with heightened anger issues which can impact their overall well-being and filter into school settings (Jensen et al., 2018). Washington et al. (2017) conducted a quantitative study utilizing secondary data published between 2003-2014 to examine characteristics and the relationships relating to family functioning to see if there was a significant correlation to reported anxiety or depression in school-aged children (Washington et al., 2017). The authors findings revealed that there was a significant relationship between anxiety and depression in school-aged children who experienced heightened stressors

during family structure change. Findings also indicated that positive family functioning and a healthy environment were important factors in preventing anxiety and depression in African American school-aged children (Washington et al., 2017). This study lends to my study because the findings indicate that family functioning is important to a child's overall well-being. The authors also assert that there is a need for additional studies on African American families.

Impact of Family Structural Change

The following literature review provides past and more current insight into how the challenges of family structure change which end in blended families may lead to poor school performance relating to grades and negative behavior. Many risk factors have been identified which causes high anxiety in children who experience family structure change. For instance, findings from an early study by Buehler et al. (2009) revealed that family structural changes and marital conflict could produce high stressors which lead to anxiety in young children. The authors also asserted that marital conflict can subsequently interfere with the children's overall well-being. The researchers utilized a 4-wave longitudinal research design to examine the impact that negative relational triangles could have on adolescents. Findings revealed that adolescent behavior problems were associated with negative familial triangles resulting from marital conflict and could interfere in pertinent areas of their early school years (Buehler et al, 2009). Two years later, researchers begin to take a closer look at the differences that family structure change had on children who experienced family structure change (FSC) versus those children who did not experience FSC. As an example, Sun and Li (2011) conducted a

quantitative study to compare the school performance of school-aged children who experienced negative family structural changes against the school performance of school-aged children who did not endure such changes (Sun & Li, 2011). The authors examined secondary data collected on 8,008 children from the Early Childhood Learning Study-Kindergarten (ECLS-K). After a review of the data, the researchers found that children who were exposed to negative familial structural changes such as parental conflict and poor new family relations also had a lower sense of stability which negatively impacted their overall well-being. Sun and Li (2011) study revealed that the children were less able to manage stress was weaker when compared to children who did not endure heightened negative familial structural changes. This historical research lends insight into early studies on family structural changes and informs the study because it lends insight into how family structural change can induce stressors that promote a lower differentiation of self and emotional cutoff in African American school-age children residing in blended family units. As mentioned, school-aged children who endure heighten blended family stressors can have lower academic performance.

Child Outcomes

Now, more recent authors selected to examine the influenced family structure change had on child outcomes later in life. In fact, Lopoo and DeLeire (2014) used a quantitative approach to examine how family structure influenced child outcomes later in life. The authors examined variables such as school attainment and family structure to examine a child's school performance in areas such as behavior, grades, and social interactions. The authors findings indicated that family structure change during a child's

early years have an impact on their economic well-being and education during childhood.

The findings also revealed that the overall well-being in adulthood is also impacted by

family structural changes during childhood (Lopoo & DeLeire, 2014). Lopoo and

DeLeire (2014) concluded that family structural change, during childhood, and the

change in parental marital status which creates a blended family, can increase or lower

children economic status. The authors asserted that if the family structure change lowers

the children's economic status, there would be a significant relationship/impact on a

child's behavior and overall school negative performance (Lopoo & DeLeire, 2014).

Impact on Children

From 2014-2015, through the examining of secondary data, a few authors chose

to seek a better understanding of the impact family structure change has on children. For

instance, researchers Ryan et al. (2014) conducted a quantitative study to determine how

family structural changes affected outcomes for children. The researchers analyzed

secondary data from the Children's National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (CNLSY),

which included data on 3,936 children between the ages of 3-12 years who had

experienced family structural changes and challenging cognitive behavior. The authors

findings indicated that children who experienced family structural changes had poorer

cognition and negative school behaviors (Ryan et al., 2014). This study informed my

study on how stressors such as negative stepparent-stepchild relations and sibling

positioning can hinder a child's academic performance and overall well-being in their

new family unit. Now, King et al. (2015) conducted a quantitative study of 2,085 students

in grades 7-12 to assess the children's sense of family belonging in homes parented by a

stepfather. Findings showed that some students who reported residing with a biological mother and non-biological parent experienced high levels of emotional distress, suicidal thoughts and behaviors and violence. Findings also indicated that teen sexual experiences; negative academic behaviors, such as poor attendance, negative behaviors, and use of cigarettes, alcohol, and marijuana where also behavioral issues resulting from a low sense of family belonging (King et al., 2015). This study lends insight to my study by revealing pertinent characteristic and predicators, such as, complex family dynamics. The complex challenges can cause stressors that negatively influence a child and lead to emotional cut-off and a lower differentiation of self-resulting in lower academic performance. Zeleznikow and Zeleznikow (2015) examined the complex family development issues which can exist in BFU's during blended family relationship building. Utilizing secondary data collected from case studies and their *Survival Strategies Workshop,* the authors found that the complex family development issues such as children learning to live with new siblings could interfere with the child's overall well-being during their early school years. Findings from their study also revealed that school-aged students residing in blended family units were more-likely to experience truancy from school as a result of the complex challenges. This research informs my study because it shares insight on how complex parental relations such as boundary issues, discipline roles and inconsistent parenting techniques and strategies could lead to truancy among school-aged children in blended family households.

African American Blended Family Challenges

Brooks (2015) conducted a qualitative study to examine the impact in which family stepfamily structural change had on African American students in their college years. The author solicited nine females and five males attending Historically Black Universities to examine the student's perception of family structure, relations, and parental support (Brooks, 2015). Findings revealed that there was a significant relationship between African American students' perceptions of their family and academic outcomes with their new family unit (Brooks, 2015). The authors asserted that familial relations influenced academic persistence and outcomes (Brooks, 2015). This article is important to this study because it shares how family structural change impact African American students' (AAS) academic outcomes in later school years. This study also heightens the need for further studies on African America students who endure family structural change in earlier school years. As time passed, the study of family structure changes on young children advanced to include a more in-depth examination of the complex challenges in African American blended families and the impact on their children.

Factors Impacting AAS Education

In the United States, in 2015, it was reported that 40% of those living in a family unit had at least one non-biological family member residing in their household (Kumar, 2017). In the past, the birth of the blended family unit resulted from death of a spouse or divorce (Kumar, 2017). Researched findings indicated that African Americans have higher rates of blended families than other racial groups (Parker, 2011; Parker, 2015).

According to Lacewell (2016), the complex blended family parental role presented a greater challenge for African American blended family parents than that of White blended family parents (Lacewell, 2016). In 2016, Lacewell decided to examine parental roles in the general population of African American and its impact on their children's academics to study the achievement gap among African American students and European students. The author's focus was to gain a clearer understanding of the effects of parental roles and the gap in education attainment of African American students compared to European students (Lacewell, 2016). Lacewell utilize qualitative methods to gain insight on the African American's perception on the achievement gap of African American students to better understand factors which contribute to challenges endured by children residing in blended family units. To better understand the challenges, data was collected from 3 focus groups consisting of six to seven African American community members (Lacewell, 2016). Findings revealed that African American parental roles were different than that of European parental roles and family structure mattered and is important factors in African American student academic achievement (Lacewell, 2016). The author also asserted that according to study participants, family structure such as blended/stepfamilies and communal support matters in the academic performance of African American students (Lacewell, 2016). Lacewell concluded that further studies which address the factors impacting school-aged African American student's academic achievement has been overlooked, therefore, understudied (Lacewell, 2016). This study also lends insight on the need of future studies on factors impacting blended family school-aged African American students' and their academic engagement.

In 2016, Jensen and Pace; Bryant et al. (2016), also asserted that the majority of children who reside in a stepfamily were step-parented by a stepfather. The authors examined stepfamily stability and children's well-being to understand the importance of African American stepfather parental roles. To understand how stressors such as conflicting expectations, loyalty binds and step-parenting roles impact children, Jensen and Pace (2016) conducted their qualitative study using 467 mother-stepfather families. Their researched findings indicated that child-stepfather relations, in predominately low-income stepfamilies, could negatively or positively impact a stepchild's behavior in pertinent early social settings/relations and overall well-being (Jensen & Pace, 2016). Jensen and Pace's study informs my study by highlighting the need of more studies on the complex adjustments within African American stepfamilies and the impact complexity can have on an African American child's academic performance and overall well-being.

Understanding the need to gain insight on the challenges which are impacting African American blended parents and their children, it appears that in 2016, various researchers continued to elect to examine pertinent blended family risk factors to include stepfather-stepchild relations, blended family climate, academic self-regulation (ASR), and school performance. Statistical reports indicated that among racial groups, it is more likely for African American blended family parental formations to consist of biological mothers and stepfathers (Kogan et al., 2016). Census rereports indicated that living arrangement in America has drastically change for Americans with African American families having more challenges due to higher divorce rate than other cultures

(census.gov, 2019). Census reports also indicates out of the 11,101 Black children in the United States 5,069 children reside with mothers only, whereas 566 children reside with fathers only (census.gov, 2019). These results suggest that remarriages among African American men and women are more likely to consist of blended family formations having more stepfathers than stepmothers (census.gov, 2019). Past researchers took notice to African American male blended step-parental relation. For example, Bryant, Futris, Hicks, Lee, and Oshri (2016) examined the importance of stepfather-stepchild relations and its impact on a child's well-being. In both qualitative studies, the authors examined the stepfather's depressive levels to gain an understanding of factors which had a negative impact on a stepchild's stability and well-being in an African American stepfamily. The authors collected data from 149 newly married stepfathers to examine stepchild relations, stepfather depression and pertinent aspects of marital quality such as intimacy, marital activities, and communication (Bryant et al., 2016). Findings indicated that the quality of a child's overall well-being depended on the quality of the stepfather's perception of marital interactions with the biological parent (Bryant et al., 2016). The authors asserted that stepfathers play an important role on a child's perception of self and family. This research lends insight to my study as it contributes to the knowledge on how lower perceptions of family and or well-being could end in poorer academics endured by African American stepchildren because such stress can lead to a lower perception of family belonging among African American adolescents/students who experience family structural change that led to the child residing in a stepfamily (King & Boyd, 2016).

African American Students

Xia et al. (2016) conducted their quantitative study to examine the relationship between blended family climate, academic self-regulation, and school performance. The authors used a 5-point scale completed by the students to measure school attachment and feelings of school belonging. The authors suggested that the effects on children's academic performance were directly related to the distraction's adolescents endure relating to familial conflicts. The authors also suggested that ASR strongly depended on adolescent's perception of feelings of school belonging which were present in students who had higher levels of involvement in school activities and positive relations with teachers and peers. The authors reiterated that adolescents without feelings of school belonging and positive blended family climate were more likely to have a lower GPA (Xia et al., 2016). To measure the students' academic performance (AP), the authors used a 9-point scale to measure GPA reports solicited from parents (Xia et al., 2016). The findings revealed that continual negative relationships, within a child's blended family household environment, hindered the children's ability to adjust to their new family and to regulate self in their academic setting (Xia et al., 2016). This research informs my study because it shares insight on how family stressors in the blended family environment can interfere with a child's overall well-being, school performance, and academic self-regulation. Although pertinent literature on African American blended families had increased by 2016, it appears that there was a gap in literature which examine the chronic school absences in African American students as it relates to family structural change and its impact on African American students' education.

BFU Familial Stressors and the Impact on Education

Therefore, in 2017 it appears that the focus on African American students and their families attracted the interest of family researchers. In 2017, the initial concern/focus appeared to be on risk factors relating to behavioral issues among African American students, a child's perception of post-divorce, parental relations and familial stressors endured by school aged children. As an example, In Van Eck et al. (2017) qualitative study, the authors examined 25,776 middle and high school students from 106 schools to gain an understanding of why African American students K-12 were experiencing chronic behavioral problems in their academic settings Van Eck et al., 2017). Findings revealed that 89% of the 25,776 African American students experienced chronic absences due to school climate; however, the authors suggest that there may be another main factor such as a school-aged child's familial related perception of his/her home environment, therefore, advanced studies on African American school-aged children are warranted (Van Eck et al., 2017).

In 2017, researchers also took notice to the complexity in stepfamily formation and its overall impact on children. Researchers Havermans et al. (2017) selected to focused on children's perception of their post-divorce living arrangements after family structural change and how it impacted a child's academic self-regulation/school engagement. In their quantitative study, the authors examined secondary data from the Leuven Adolescent and Family Study to gain a better understanding of parent relations, stress, and the impact on school engagement. Findings revealed that pre and post-divorce conflict impacts a child's school engagement; and school engagement is not only linked

to academic achievement, but also to non-academic overall well-being outcomes leading to low self-esteem (Havermans et al., 2017). This study supports the need of further studies to understand the impact that the formation of blended family units can have on stepchildren's school engagement and overall academic performance.

Pre and Post Family Structure Change Challenges

Now, Jensen et al. (2017) also conducted a quantitative study to determine the level of stress on children and their parents during stepfamily formation. The authors analyzed data from the Stepfamily Experience Project and the US National Quota that contained data on 1139 adults/children. Findings revealed that children who had continued contact with non-resident parents had less stress than children who did not maintain regular contact with the non-resident parent (Jensen et al., 2017). Findings indicated that the absence of positive normal behaviors (where developmental milestones such as good social skills, cognition and age-appropriate behavior were met on time) were not present in some school-aged children who endured blended family formations. Therefore, negative behaviors which included poor social skills, decreased cognition and behavioral issues were linked to poor academic (Jensen et al., 2017). In their study, findings also showed that when children experienced close relationships with residential parents, both biological and stepparent, the children's stress levels were mitigated during the stepfamily formation process (Jensen et al., 2017). Moreover, the authors concluded that stress during stepfamily formation affects the children's overall well-being and is linked to poorer health and academic performance (Jensen et al., 2017). This research informed my study because it shares insight on family structure change during pre and

post family structure change challenges that children can experience that can lead to emotional cut-off in blended family units. As a result of the emotional cutoff, children can exhibit low academic performance.

Summary

Research findings revealed that because of the high divorce rates, BFU's are becoming more common (Roehlkepartain & Syvertsen, 2014). Research findings also reveal that family structural changes, which result in a BFU, can negatively impact a child's overall behavior during the transitioning into a blended family unit (Lee & McLanahan, 2015). Bowen's family system theory was introduced as a guide to utilize during this research. Literature related to key constructs were reviewed to obtain a broad universal understanding of challenges experienced due to family structural changes. A historical study on African American family structural changes and outcomes for children was presented in this review. In addition, an overview of current African American blended family structural changes was reviewed to gain a better understanding of the characteristics of family functioning in African American blended family environments. Currently, the stress spillover into African American stepfamily challenges and the impact on African American school aged children has been understudied (Barton et al., 2018). Researched findings indicated that a child's ability to adjust to post divorce living arrangements is an important indicator of the child's ability to adjust to stepfamily dyads and internalize and externalize blended family challenges which can lead to poorer school engagements (Jensen et al., 2018). According to researched findings, there is an extensive

need for studies which examine the association among African American families and their children's academic achievement (Browne & Battle, 2018).

Although there was a gap in literature on African American blended families; and parental strategies used to mitigate the impact that family structural changes can have on their children's school performance, I utilized universal step-parenting researched findings indicating complex familial stressors/challenges for this literature review. I also utilized literature which revealed data on how family structural changes can negatively impact a child who experienced family structural changes which lead to the formation of blended family unit. The eight concepts in Bowen's family systems theory were introduced as a theory that was used to guide this research. The purpose of this study is to determine what strategies African American parents in blended families used to lessen the impact that family structural changes had on their child's school performance. In the following Chapter (3), I explain the research design and methodology for this study.

Chapter 3: Research Method

The purpose of this generic qualitative study was to determine what strategies African American parents in blended families use to lessen the impact that family structural changes have on their children's school performance. In this chapter, I describe the qualitative research method selected for this study. I also discuss the rationale for selecting the research design, the role of the researcher, and the methodology that was used in this study. Next, I discuss the population of interest, the sampling strategy, the participant criteria, and procedures for determining whether participants met that criteria for participation. The rationale for the number of participants to be recruited is discussed. The means for enhancing saturation and sample size is explained. I then describe instrumentation, the procedures for recruitment, data collection, and data analysis. The techniques that were used to enhance trustworthiness are also addressed. Last, this chapter discusses the ethical concerns that were addressed in this study.

Research Design and Rationale

The research question that was used to guide this research was: What strategies did African American parents in blended family units adopt to lessen the impact of family structural changes on their children' school performance?

This study was predicated upon a generic qualitative design. Aagaard and Matthiesen (2016) asserted that qualitative methods are used to capture personalized experiences and perceptions. Aveling et al. (2015) asserted that qualitative methodologies allow researchers to obtain multiple perspectives from participants on a

given phenomenon. Utilizing a qualitative approach in this study allowed me to collect data on the subjective and interpersonal perspectives of participants (Levitt, 2016).

Kahlke (2014) asserted that the generic qualitative method is not governed by clear set of theoretical assumptions. Therefore, the generic qualitative approach allows a researcher to use various means of data collection to obtain data that can in turn be used to describe participants' perceptions, views, and values of a phenomenon (Kahlke, 2014). I selected a generic qualitative methodology for this research because it allowed me to obtain rich information about what strategies African American parents in blended families used to lessen the impact that family structure changes had on their children's school performance.

I also considered other methods of qualitative inquiry such as ethnographic inquiry, grounded theory, and narrative inquiry for this study. An ethnographic study is used to study a phenomenon within a culture and would therefore focus more on observing patterns of behaviors of a group/culture (Crampton, 2015). Ethnographic inquiry was not selected for this study because data for this study came from individual parent reports of strategies that used to improve their children's school performance. The grounded theory methodology is used to initiate or develop a new theory (Lawrence & Tar, 2013). Grounded theory was not chosen for this research because the purpose of this is not theory building. Narrative studies require researchers to interpret narratives provided by study participants (Loh, 2013). Although narrative inquiry may potentially reveal pertinent data on familial dilemmas endured by children, the experiences shared by participants would require researcher interpretation, which could increase the possibility

of researcher biases while transcribing and analyzing the collected data (Levitt, 2016). In addition, narrative inquiry is considered to be a personalized account of experiences where a participant represents themselves (Levitt,2016). In this study, although the children were the main focus of this study, they did not participate in the study because the parents represented their BFU as a whole and shared pertinent data on the school-age children in their household. Therefore, a narrative approach was not selected for this study because the school-aged children did not have an opportunity to share their perceived narratives of how the structural changes of becoming part of a BFU affected their school performance. The final method of qualitative inquiry considered for this research was the case study. A case study usually focuses on a single individual, organization, event, program, process, or a specific and uniquely bounded system (Bugge et al., 2017). Although a blended family system could be considered a uniquely bounded system, this method of inquiry was inappropriate for guiding this research because the focus of this study was on the parents' shared perceptions of how African American blended family dilemmas can negatively impact school-age children.

According to Kim-Spoon, Maciejewski and Grimm (2019) quantitative research methods are used to gather statistical data to quantify a perceived problem. Although both qualitative and quantitative research methods allow the use of surveys or face-to-face interviews, quantitative means require larger samples, and can be cross sectional. Whereas qualitative research methods require smaller samples in order to gather rich descriptions of a phenomenon from participants (Kim-Spoon et al., 2019). Therefore, a quantitative approach would not be suitable for conducting this study because it is used to

test numerical data and/or to find correlations; whereas, in this study I sought to gather information to describe individualized human experiences.

Role of the Researcher

A researcher in a given study can serve in different roles such as interviewer, observer, and observer participant (Chenail, 2011). My role in this study was interviewer-observer. I obtained data by conducting interviews with participants. According to Berger (2015), it is important that researchers are mindful of any biases that they may have regarding the phenomenon or topic which is the focus of the research. Therefore, I was sure to bracket my personal experiences of residing in a BFU as a biological and non-biological parent with school-age children who presented with school performance issues relating to poor grades and negative behaviors. Past researchers have suggested that there are several techniques that can be used to minimize research bias. Some recommended techniques for minimizing researcher bias in qualitative studies includes reflexivity, bracketing, and peer debriefing (Astedt et al., 2015; Foster et al., 2018; Peters & Halcomb, 2015; Sorsa, 2015). In this study, I used reflexivity, bracketing, and peer debriefing to manage researcher bias.

Darawsheh (2014) asserted that reflexivity in research is a continual self-monitoring strategy used by researchers which improves transparency, validity, and credibility in a study. Reflexivity can be used as a guide to help a researcher build self-awareness of personal feelings and bias throughout the study (Darawsheh, 2014). Therefore, during the interview data collection process, and during the data analysis process of the study, I conducted continual self-reflection by monitoring self-implicit and

explicit biases. During the self-checks, I monitored items such as preconceived conclusions regarding parental strategies and best practice and societal inherited preconceived notions regarding challenged stepchildren.

Throughout the study, I also used bracketing which required me to monitor my own presuppositions about BFUs. I was also aware of my own personal biases and influences on the participant response (Peters & Halcomb, 2015). Bracketing is defined as a tool used to ensure descriptions of participants' experiences surrounding the phenomenon under study are documented without any distortions (Sorsa et. al., 2015). Bracketing also requires researchers to be nonjudgmental by acknowledging any previous experiences they may have had with the phenomenon to be researched (Sorsa et al., 2015). Sorsa et al. (2015) reiterated that bracketing should be initiated early during the research planning phase and not just while collecting and/or transcribing data. Bracketing consisted of the researcher declaring all bias about the phenomenon and recalling and noting all preconceive opinions regarding the phenomenon so that I was more likely to notice if my personal thoughts during data analysis are not being injected into the data analysis process.

Peer debriefing is another technique used to enhance rigor, validity, and credibility in a study (Hoover et. al., 2018). To minimize researcher bias through the use of peer or expert debriefing, I sought expert reviews during pertinent phases of the study (Sorsa et. al., 2015). For example, I checked-in with my dissertation committee during the pre-planning phase of the study. My dissertation committee was asked to conduct a final review of the plans for the proposed study. I also initiated expert reviews with my

dissertation committee after data has been coded and transcribed. Lastly, before submitting my final report for dissertation approval, a final copy of the dissertation was forwarded to my dissertation committed for peer debriefing so that they can conduct the expert review.

I did not have any personal or professional relations with participants who are recruited for the study. In addition, I did not solicit participants from subordinates in my current workplace. Moreover, I did not share any personal thoughts and/or make any verbal or nonverbal comments or gestures while engaged in the data collection process with study participants. If, at any time, I believed that I had violated my role as researcher, I would have terminated the interview and discard the collected data.

Methodology

Participant Selection Logic

Participants for this study were African American parents living in blended family units and residing in the Central West Florida area. The inclusion criteria for participants was as follows: a) participants must reside in the blended family home; b) participants must be a partner in a married, heterosexual relationship for a minimum of 1 year and a maximum of 5 years, which would have allowed ample time for participants to have experienced blended familial related challenges that may have interfered with a school-aged child's school performance; and c) one or more of the school-aged children in the blended family unit must be enrolled in school where they have experienced or are currently experiencing poor school performance such as poor grades and negative behaviors after experiencing a family structural change. To determine whether those who

respond to the call for participants meet the inclusion criteria, they were asked to answer several questions during the initial prescreening process. See Appendix A for a list of the questions that were used to screen participants to determine whether they meet the criteria for participation.

Sampling Strategy

Purposeful sampling and snowball sampling were used to recruit participants for this study. Purposeful sampling is used to recruit participants with common experiences regarding a phenomenon of interest in a study (Palinkas et al., 2015). Green, Wisdom, and Duan (2015) noted that purposeful sampling is also used to identify a specific group of people, whereas snowball sampling occurs when participants in a study solicit others with similar experience for the study. Therefore, purposeful sampling was an appropriate strategy for recruiting African American parents in blended families who could provide information about the strategies they used to mitigate the impact that family structure change had on their children's school performance. Snowball sampling is highly probable in this study because of the nature of the study as it was proposed. According to Griffith et al. (2015) snowball sampling occurs when study participants recruit and refer friends for the study that meet the inclusion criteria.

Sample Size

Boddy (2016) asserted that when a qualitative study is being conducted with a homogenous population of individuals, a sample size of 12 or fewer participants would be an appropriate sample size to potentially reach saturation of data. While deciding on the number of participants to interview during this study, it was also important to

consider the phenomenon of interest and the number of participants needed to provide

rich personalize data/experiences on the phenomenon to be studied (Malterud et al.,

2015). Reaching saturation means that one has exhausted the data to a point where no

additional knowledge can be obtained from the data being collected or analyzed (Boddy,

2016). For this study, I anticipated recruiting a sample size of 15 African American

parents from areas of Central West Florida who meet the inclusion criteria for

participating. The rationale behind recruiting 15 African American blended family

parents is to have enough participants to reach saturation of data (Hennink et al., 2017).

Instrumentation

Canals (2017) asserted that instruments used to gather data in a qualitative study

should be based on the type of research questions and the objectives to be met within the

study. There are several methods for collecting data in qualitative studies such as

interviews, narratives, questionnaires, and recorded observations (Canals, 2017).

According to Bevan (2014), when seeking to understand a phenomenon, open-ended

semi-structured interview questions can be utilized to collect data from participants. In

this study, data was collected using semi-structured interviews. The data was audio

recorded with participant permission, to ensure accuracy of participant's response. Based

on the purpose and research question in this study, I have developed a general list of

open-ended questions to guide the interviews. A list of the interview questions is included

in Appendix B. To establish content validity in this study, I ensured that all research

questions are relevant to the phenomena to be studied. One technique to be utilized to

enhance content validity is to request my dissertation committee to conduct an expert review of research interview questions.

Procedures for Recruiting Participant

After obtaining IRB approval from Walden University to conduct the proposed research, I began the participant recruiting process. Simultaneously, I recruited via social media and neighborhood online groups such as www.nextdoor.com. In addition, I recruited participants through the local newspaper and through local community television advertisements. The advertisements were posted as a public service notice on the local community network. See Appendix C for a copy of the recruitment script that was aired and printed. The same printed materials were placed in neighborhood community centers, churches, and other public places where families visit. The advertisements provided information on how potential participants can contact me via telephone to leave a message expressing their interest to participate in the research. Additional mediums which were used as an alternative is Facebook, Twitter, and IG.

Possible participants were prescreened via telephone by the researcher. During the telephone prescreening call, participants were asked to respond to the prescreening questions. After I had verified individual eligibility to participate, I asked potential participants to give three dates and times in which they could meet with me face-to-face, in a private meeting room at the local library, for a more in-depth interview. If meeting face-to-face presents a challenge for participants, meetings via Video chat were used as an alternative.

Data Collection

During the data collection process, I conducted interviews to obtain data from African American parents in blended families to determine the strategies African American blended family parents used to mitigate the impact that family structure change had on children and their school performance. To obtain accurate representation of the data collected from participants during interviews, I obtained permission from participants to audio record the interviews. To implement and audit trail, I audio recorded all interview sessions where permission was given, maintain detailed notes of the study process, and maintain a self-reflective journal. Details on the audit trail process are explained in detail later in this chapter.

Interviews

Data collection consisted of one session of 30 - 60 minutes. All interviews were conducted face to face, whereas video chat was utilized if needed. The individual interviews were conducted during 30 – 60-minute session in a private room at a library convenient for study participants. During the interviews, participants may become stressed or hesitant to respond to certain interview questions. If a participant becomes stressed or upset, I halted the interview and give the person a chance to compose themselves. Then I asked any stressed participant/s if they would like to continue the interview. If the participant cannot continue, I ended the interview. If a participant should become emotionally upset during the interview, a referral to BCOTB Brandon was made free of charge. Participants were only asked to participate in answering follow-up questions if clarity was needed on previously answered questions.

At the beginning of each interview, I explained the nature of the study, and the participants were given the opportunity to present any questions/concerns they may have about their participation in the research. Next, I went over the high points of the consent form before asking the participants to review on their own and sign. Consent forms were signed before study participation is allowed. After the consent forms have been signed, participants were given a copy of their signed consent form for their records.

If a participant failed to follow through with a scheduled meeting, I made three attempts to reschedule the interview. If the rescheduling process was unsuccessful, other eligible persons were contacted via telephone and asked if they are still interested in participating in the study. The participant/s who agree to participate were asked to complete all procedures involved in the participant selection process. The initial meeting was the only scheduled physical contacts with participants. If additional contact was needed for clarity of collected interview data, it took place via telephone. The individual interviews lasted approximately 30 - 60 minute. Throughout the data collection process, participants were reminded that they can opt out of participating in the study at any time. I audio taped and transcribed all interviews. I also ensured that all recordings and files are kept confidential and secured by a locking mechanism or password protected device in a private location.

Audio-Recording

I audio recorded all interviews. After obtaining participant consent to audio tape their interviews, I placed a handheld voice recorder on a table between myself and the participant for the duration of the interview. At the beginning of the recording process, I

verbally identified date and time, self, and the participant's unique identification coder for this study. As an example, each participant was assigned a unique pseudonym to match transcripts to participants during member checking. In addition, I also solicit/record a verbal agreement from participants at the beginning of each recorded interview session. At the end of each recorded interview session, I exited the recording by ending with "This is the end of interview with (fictitious name) and current time.

Exit Strategy

Participants were able to exit the interview process at any time. I ended the sessions by giving each participant a Thank You card and a $25 Walmart Visa card for their time involved in the study process. I asked each participant if he or she has any questions or concerns about the research. If a participant appeared distraught as a result of participating in the study, I referred them to BCOTB Brandon where they can seek formal blended family counseling free of charge.

If a follow-up with participants were needed, it was conducted via telephone. Where additional meetings were needed, it was executed in the same manner where the initial meetings took place. Once the final review of notes obtained during the interview process were conducted, if clarity was still needed, I contacted participants via telephone or by email to request a member-check on data.

Audit Trail

Krippendorf (2012) recommended that researchers should create files on research participants to keep the data organize for each participant. The file folders facilitated the data analysis process. To protect the privacy of study participants, I created an

unidentifiable file for each participant in which I was the only person that can connect the

file with the study participant. The purpose of the file(s) was to keep all collected data

from each interview in one central location. The files include the following hard copy

documentation:

- Consent form

- Notes from each interview

- Any notes made during data analysis.

- Draft of interview transcript.

- Any correspondence from the parents about the accuracy of the data.

- Any general correspondence between me and the study participants.

- Observation notes: what happened during the interview

- Reflective notes: derives meaning as the researcher thinks and reflects on the

  process

- Methodological notes: reviewing techniques of the researcher

- Analytical memos: summaries and progress notes.

All collected data was stored on the researcher's laptop. The laptop was password

protected and stored in a secure location in my home office when not in use. When

collecting data using legal pads all handwritten notes were kept in a handheld file case

with locking mechanism.

Data Analysis Plan

I used an inductive approach data to extract categories of ideas and relevant

themes and categories while analyzing the raw data. Specifically, I used Colaizzi's 7-step

method to analyze the data collected from the face-to-face interviews. Colaizzi (1978) shared that to detect significant statements from study participants regarding a specific phenomenon, the following seven steps to data analysis should be considered. I provided a detailed discussion of actions that were taken in each step of the data analysis.

Step 1: Familiarization. I read each transcript several times to gain a sense of participant's responses to the interview questions. During this stage, I bracketed in my reflexive journal any thoughts, feelings, and preconceived notions about the data because of previous experiences of being in a blended family unit.

Step 2: In this stage of analysis, significant statements and phrases pertaining to BFU parenting strategies, BFU dilemmas and poor school performance such as poor grades and negative behavior exhibited by the school-age children in the home were extracted from each transcript; color coded and numbered. The color-coded statements were written on separate sheets and logged based on their transcript, page, and line numbers.

Step 3: Meanings were formulated from the significant statements. Each underlying meaning pertinent to the phenomenon to be examined was separated and color coded into categories as they reflect an exhaustive description. Researcher compared the formulated meanings with the original meanings in an effort to maintain the consistency of descriptions.

Step 4: The process of grouping all formulated meanings into categories that reflect a unique structure or cluster of ideas were grouped together so that themes can be formulated. Each cluster of themes were coded to include all formulated meanings related

to the cluster of themes. After that, groups of clusters of themes that reflect a particular dilemma and outcome were incorporated together to form higher order themes or meta-themes. Next, researcher compared clusters of themes and checked the accuracy to ensure that formulated meanings have been placed in the proper cluster of themes. Lastly, I sought assistance from an expert researcher in qualitative research.

Step 5: During this stage of analysis, all themes were classified into an exhaustive description. After the development of an exhaustive description all themes, themes pertinent to the research question "What strategies do African American parents in blended families adopt to lessen the impact that family structural changes have on their children's school performance" was extracted. Next, I initiated a review of the findings to evaluate the level of richness, completeness, and that a sufficient description was provided. During the review, I also confirmed that the exhaustive description reflects the perceptions of African American BFU participants, and the parenting strategies used to mitigate the impact of family structure change on African American school-aged children.

Step six: In this step, to emphasize on the fundamental structure, a reduction of findings was done in which redundant, misused, or overestimated descriptions were eliminated from the overall structure. New descriptions were applied to generate clear relationships between clusters of themes and their extracted themes. This included eliminating some ambiguous structures that could weaken the whole description of the findings.

Step seven: This step involved validation of the findings using the "member checking" technique. I returned pertinent portions of the research findings to the participants in a secured pdf file via email and discuss the results with them. Participants' views on the study results were obtained via email or via phone calls. However, if another meeting with participants was needed, it took place in the same location as the initial interview meeting. This step was done by the researcher only.

To assist with the data analysis process, I utilized Microsoft Office to organize data and assist in the coding process. I used open/axial coding and selective coding to analyze data at varying levels (Nowell et. al., 2017). Selective coding was utilized in step 2 of the seven-step process of Colaizzi's 7-step method of analysis. Open coding was used during the 3rd step and Axial coding was utilized during the 4th step of Colaizzi's 7-step method.

Issues of Trustworthiness

Quality and trustworthiness in data are essential in all studies (Levitt, 2016). Nowell et al. (2017) noted that it is important to demonstrate to readers that the data collection and analysis were conducted in a precise and exhaustive manner. Because researchers who conduct qualitative studies do not use metrics to establish validity and/or reliability, the researchers must establish trustworthiness in qualitative studies by addressing the concepts of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Nowell et.al., 2017).

Credibility

Stewart et al.(2017) asserted that credibility is the assessment of researcher findings to ensure data is a true interpretation of collected data. Levitt (2016) asserted that member checking, reflexivity, and peer-debriefing are a few checking processes that can be used to establish credibility and trustworthiness in qualitative research. In this study I used member checking, reflexivity, and audit trail to enhance the credibility of the findings from this research (Birt et al., 2016). In this study, to enhance trustworthiness, member checking allowed participants to review transcriptions of their interviews and was initiated by the researcher during the interview process and at the end of the data analysis process. At the end of the data analysis process, each participant was emailed, via pdf, their transcribed data so that they can validate its accuracy (Birt et al., 2016).

Reflexivity is important in qualitative research because it lessens the impact of researcher bias within the study (Stewart et al., 2017). Reflexivity also requires the researcher to be self-conscious of all actions, behaviors, and personal biases during the study. Reflexivity requires a researcher to acknowledge, recall and understand pre-exposure to the phenomenon to be studied (Stewart et. al., 2017). To enhance reflexivity in this and to reduce the impact of personal bias I journaled my reactions to participant response. I also took detailed notes of all observations throughout the study. In addition, to improve credibility, I requested committee member debriefing.

Another method I used to enhance confirmability is an audit-trail. Stewart et al. (2017) suggested that an audit trail is created when the researcher keeps detailed records of the entire research process. To implement an audit-trail, in this study, I maintained

detailed step-by-step accounts of the entire data collection process. Items which were included in the audit trail consisted of, times and dates of interviews, interview notes on participant participation during interviews and detailed characteristics of the study. Additional details of the items that were a part of the audit trail are outlined in the section of this chapter labeled audit trail.

Transferability

Transferability is achieved when external readers/viewers can associate findings from a study with their own research or intended research (Connelly, 2016). To enhance transferability of the results from this study, I used an audit trail, thick rich descriptions of the collected data, and purposeful sampling. Connelly (2016) proposed that to enhance transferability of findings from a study, researchers should keep track of all steps taken so that they can document a vivid picture of the research process. The details of the audit trail have been presented earlier in this chapter. Green et. al. (2015) asserted that purposeful sample is a method that can be used to enhance transferability of a study. Purposeful sampling is used to identify a specific group of individuals who are knowledgeable about the phenomenon under study (Green et. al., 2015). In this study, during the participant selection process, I selected African American BFU parents who meet the participation criteria for this study.

Dependability

Birt et al. (2016) noted that dependability is defined as the stability of findings over a period of time. Nowell et. al. (2017) explained that dependability is achieved in a study when the data is logical, traceable, and clearly documented. A technique that was

utilized to ensure dependability is member checking (Nowell et. al., 2017). Birt et al.

(2016) asserted that member checking consists of returning all transcribed data back to

the participants for respondent validation. To implement member checking in this study,

after the data analysis has been completed, I asked participants to review the transcribed

data to check for accuracy of shared response. In addition to member checking,

triangulation of collected data was used to enhance dependability. Researched findings

revealed that triangulation is a means of examining research data by an examination of

multiple sources with the study (Nowell et. al., 2017). Triangulation was conducted at the

end of the data analysis process in Chapter 5. In Chapter 5, I compared all notes

accumulated from interviews and observations (Nowell et al., 2017).

Confirmability

Confirmability is an approach to establish trustworthiness and rigor in a study and

is met when the study can be confirmed by other researchers (Connelly, 2016). Connelly

(2016) asserted that confirmability of interpretations and findings is achieved by using

methods such as an audit-trail, triangulation, reflexivity and/or peer-debriefing. In my

study, reflexivity, audit-trail, and triangulation were used to promote confirmability.

Nowell et al. (2017) asserted that to ensure confirmability researchers must ensure that

interpretations of data are without bias. In this study, researcher reflexivity was utilized to

accomplish confirmability. In a qualitative study, reflexivity can be achieved by

researchers recognizing self's ontology. This requires one to be knowledgeable of

personal experiences and positioning on the topic to be studied (Nowell et al., 2017). In

this study, I utilized a reflective journal to note pass experiences and be aware of personal

bias. This increased my ability to gain an understanding of participant views and or opinions without personal biases. The reflexive journal was referenced throughout the study to ensure bracketing, and reflexivity is achieved. Another method I used to ensure confirmability is an audit-trail. I implemented the same audit trail process described in the section on credibility to establish dependability.

Ethical Procedures

I did not recruit potential participants until after I have received proposal approval from Walden University's IRB. To ensure fair treatment of human participants, I have obtained a National Institutes of Health (NIH) Human Subjects Protection certification. In addition, this research design and interview questions were peer-reviewed by the IRB during the proposal approval process. Participation in this study was voluntary.

Participants who fully completed the study was offered a $25 gift card as a "Thank you" for participating in the interviewing process. All participants were informed in writing of the length of the study and their rights to confidentiality. To ensure participant confidentiality, all personal identifiers, such as, names, dates, and/or locations of participant residence were omitted from participant contact information sheet and replaced with unidentifiable labeling. To maintain privacy throughout the study, participants were identified only as BFU 1-15. During initial contact with prospective participants, participant expectations, researcher's role in the study, and the purpose of the study was shared by the researcher. During the initial contact, the participants were informed that if they are selected for the study, before participating in the study, they were required to review and sign the Consent form located in Appendix E.

To ensure security of data, only the researcher and committee members have access to raw and/or transcribed data. All data was secured in a locked file cabinet in the researcher's home office along with any audio tape recordings of the individual interviews for a minimum of 5 years. Data transported from one location to another was secured in a locked portable file case while in public areas. To make certain the well-being of all study participants is safeguarded throughout the study, all participants were reminded that their participation is voluntary and that all discussions are confidential.

Summary

This chapter described the generic qualitative approach that was used to examine the strategies used by African American blended family parents to lessen the impact that family structural change had on their children. This chapter highlighted the research rationale for selecting the research design. The role of the researcher was also addressed in this chapter. In the methodology section of this chapter, population, sampling strategy, participant criteria, how participants are known to meet the criteria, and how the rational for the number of participants selected were identified. In addition, specific procedures for how participants were identified, contacted, and recruited were clarified. Clarification of data collection, data analysis strategies were also provided in this chapter. Procedures to establish to issues of trustworthiness, which included credibility, transferability, dependability, and conformability were addressed. Ethical issues were also identified in this chapter which addressed myriads of ways Walden University's IRB would assist in protecting participants during the study. The findings of this study are presented in Chapter 4 and the interpretation and discussion follows in Chapter 5.

Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this study was to determine what strategies African American parents in blended families used to lessen the impact of family structural changes on their children's school performance. The research question that guided this study was: What strategies do African American parents in blended family units adopt to lessen the impact that family structural changes have on their children's school performance? In this chapter, the setting, participant demographics, data collection process, data analysis process, and evidence of trustworthiness will be described. In addition, the results of the study are presented, followed by a summary.

Settings

There were no personal or organizational conditions which influenced participant's reporting on issues with their school-aged children's school performance. In addition, there were no personal or organizational conditions presented by participants which influenced their participation in the study. Participants were able to complete their individual interviews via Facetime and telephone.

Demographic

Data were collected from participants who had one or more school-age children who had previously exhibited poor school performance after entering into a BFU. Table 1 shows the demographic background information of the participants. Five of the participants were females and three were males. The age range of participants was between 30-49 years. Results showed five participants were employed and three were unemployed at the time of the interview.

Table 1

Demographic Information for Participants

Participant	Sex	Age	Employment Status
1	Female	30-39	Employed
2	Female	40-49	Unemployed
3	Female	30-39	Employed
6	Male	30-39	Unemployed
10	Female	30-39	Unemployed
11	Male	30-39	Employed
12	Female	30-39	Employed
13	Male	30-39	Employed

Data Collection

Data was collected from individuals during facetime and telephone interviews that lasted between 30-60 minutes. The interviews were recorded via computer. The only change in data collection was due to the Coronavirus pandemic. Instead of holding face-to-face interviews with study participants, the interviews were held via facetime on the computer and or telephone. In addition, a $25.00 gift card was mailed to participants after their telephone interviews instead on being given at the end of a face-to-face interviews.

Data Analysis

Colaizzi's seven step method was used to analyze the data. I used an inductive approach to extract categories of ideas and determine the emergent themes. The first step of the data analysis was familiarization. In this step, I familiarized myself with the data by reading through all the transcripts of the interviews' multiple times. In the second step,

I separated all statements in the transcripts that were significant to the phenomenon under investigation. Next, I separated, and color coded into categories of ideas and statements related to the phenomenon of interest. In the fourth step which is clustering, I grouped related statements into clusters that were common across all participant responses to an interview question. Each cluster of ideas were analyzed to formulate meanings among the clusters of ideas. After that, groups of clusters of ideas were combined to form higher order themes or meta-themes. I then reviewed and compared the themes to reduce redundancy and duplicate themes compared the themes. Next, I sought assistance from an expert in qualitative research. In the fifth step which was to develop an exhaustive description, I wrote a detailed and inclusive description of the phenomenon by incorporating all the themes to answer the research question: What strategies do African American parents in blended families adopt to lessen the impact that family structural changes have on their children's school performance?

I used Microsoft Word Tables to organize the data and to facilitate the coding process. I also used open/axial coding and selective coding to analyze data at varying levels (Nowell et. al., 2017). Open coding was used during the third step and Axial coding was utilized during the fourth step of Colaizzi's seven-step method.

The final step of Colaizzi's seven step process of data analysis, is seeking verification of the fundamental structure. This step involved validation of the findings by using the member checking technique. I returned a summary of the findings to the participants in a secured pdf file for member checking via email for their review and

validation. After the participants reviewed their individual responses of the transcribed data, no modifications to the transcribed data were needed according to participants.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

Quality and trustworthiness in data are essential in all research (Levitt (2016). Nowell et al. (2017) noted that it is important to demonstrate to readers that the data collection and analysis were conducted in a precise and exhaustive manner. Because researchers who conduct qualitative studies do not use metrics to establish validity and/or reliability, the researchers must establish trustworthiness in qualitative studies by addressing the concepts of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Nowell et al., 2017).

Credibility

Stewart et al. (2017) asserted that credibility is achieved when a researcher's interpretations of data collected from participants accurately reflect participant comments. I conducted a transcript review to enhance the credibility of the findings from this study. The transcript review allowed participants to review transcriptions of their interviews before the data was analyzed and summarized. At the end of the data analysis process, each participant was emailed a pdf of their transcribed data so that they could validate whether the transcript accurately reflected their comments during the interview (Birt et al., 2016). Participants had 24 hours to notify me of any changes and or clarity needed. If either were needed, participants were asked to notify researcher via telephone. During this process, no changes to the transcripts were requested.

Another method I used to enhance credibility was the audit trail. Stewart et al. (2017) suggested that an audit trail is created when the researcher keeps detailed records of the entire research process. To implement an audit-trail, in this study, I maintained detailed step-by-step accounts of the entire data collection process. Items which were included in the audit trail consisted of the procedures used to collect and transcribe data such as audio recordings, documents outlining Colaizzi's seven step data collection process and recruitment criteria such as pre and post interview questions. Purpose of study notifications (to ensure the participants were informed of the type of study) and consent forms were also included in the audit trail. In addition, times and dates of interviews, interview notes and detailed characteristics of the study were included in the audit trail.

Transferability

Transferability is achieved when external readers/viewers can associate findings from a study with their own research or intended research (Connelly, 2016). To enhance transferability of the results from this study, I used an audit trail, thick rich descriptions of the collected data, and purposeful sampling. To implement an audit-trail, in this study, I maintained detailed step-by-step accounts of the entire data collection process. Items which were included in the audit trail which enabled a thick rich description of the collected data have been presented earlier in this chapter under the credibility section**.** Green et al. (2015) asserted that purposeful sample is a method that can be used to enhance transferability of a study. Purposeful sampling is used to identify a specific group of individuals who are knowledgeable about the phenomenon under study (Green

et al., 2015). In this study, to implement purposeful sampling, during the participant selection process, I recruited African American parents of BFUs who met the following inclusion criteria for participating in this study as outlined in Chapter 3**.**

Dependability

Nowell et. al. (2017) explained that dependability is achieved in a study when the data is logical, traceable, and clearly documented. A technique that was utilized to ensure dependability is member checking. Birt et al. (2016) asserted that member checking consists of returning all transcribed data to participants for review. In this study, as noted, I returned a summary of the findings to the participants in a secured pdf file for member checking via email for their review and valid. Participants' views regarding the findings captured their experiences as a blended family parent parenting a school-aged with school performance issues were obtained via email and via phone calls. In addition to member checking, triangulation of collected data was used to enhance dependability. In Chapter 5, I compared all notes accumulated from interviews and observations (Nowell et al., 2017). In this study, I triangled interview question topics, prominent themes produced from responses, and subthemes, which described parental actions/steps, to develop an interpretation of findings relative to the literature in Chapter 2 of this study. To describe the relations between the findings in the study and theoretical concepts within Bowens family systems theory, I triangled Bowens eight concepts, parent interview questions and parent reported strategies to develop an interpretation of findings. A triangulation of data consisting of handwritten notes from each interview, reflective notes and transcribed data was conducted at the end of the data analysis process in Chapter 5.

Confirmability

Connelly (2016) asserted that confirmability of interpretations and findings is achieved by using methods such as an audit-trail, triangulation, reflexivity and/or peer-debriefing. In this study, reflexivity, audit-trail, and triangulation were utilized to promote confirmability. Nowell et al. (2017) asserted that to ensure confirmability researchers must ensure that interpretations of data are without bias. In a qualitative study, reflexivity can be achieved by researchers recognizing their own ontology. This requires they be knowledgeable of personal experiences and positioning on the topic to be studied (Nowell et al., 2017). In this study, I utilized a reflective journal to note past experiences and be aware of personal biases. This increased my ability to gain an understanding of participant views and/or opinions without personal bias. During this study, I noted any personal thoughts and opinions that presented during each interview with the participants. Then as needed, during the transcribing of data, I could review the journal to ensure that my own personal bias was not included. The reflexive journal was referenced throughout the study to ensure bracketing, and reflexivity were achieved. Another method I used to ensure confirmability is an audit-trail. I implemented the same audit trail process described in the section on credibility to establish dependability.

Results

Participants in this study represented a sample of African American parents from blended family units. Table 2 presents background information on the blended family units. Results show that across the eight participants, single mothers with biological children were the most common initial family structure that changed after a blended

family unit was formed. However, stepfathers who entered the family unit during the

family structural change brought 1-3 biological children into the blended family unit.

Participants reported being married between 2 to 6 years. Participants reported having

one to five children in the BFU. Males were the predominant gender of the children with

school performance issues**.** The school-aged children who were noted to have school

performance issues were between the ages of 6 and 12 years old.

Table 2

Blended Family Background

Participant	Initial Family Structure	Family Structure Change	Years in blended family	Number of children in home	Gender of child with school issues	Age of Child with School Issues (years)
1	Mother and son	Stepfather and son	5	2	Male	9
2	Single woman	Stepfather and three children	2	3	Male	9
3	Mother and four children	Stepfather and son	5	5	Male	6
6	Father and son	Stepmom and two sons	4	3	Male	8
10	Mother and two children	Stepfather and daughter	2	3	Female	7
11	Father and son	Stepmom with stepson	6	2	Male	9
12	Single woman	Father and daughter	3yr 5mo	1	Female	12
13	Father and daughter	Stepmother with no children	3	1	Female	12

Table 3 presents background information related to the changes in the child's school performance issues. Data in the table reveals that most families began to see changes in the child's school performance within 1 year of the family structural change. All families noted changes in the child's school performance within 2 years of the change in family structure. The data also reveals that biological parents primarily handled the school performance issues. There was an equal number of biological mothers and biological fathers who addressed the school performance issues. Only two participants reported involvement of stepparents.

Table 3

Changes in Child's School Performance

Participant	Onset of changes in school performance	How long to improve school performance	Parent who mostly addresses school performance issue
1	Beginning of family structure change and at the beginning of first grade	Within 2 months after the family structure change	Biological mother
2	One year after family structure change	6 months to 1 year	Biological mother
3	Almost 2 years after family structure change	3 to 6 months	Biological dad
6	About 1 year after family structure change/First grade	1 to 2 years	Biological dad
10	About 6 months to 1-year of family structure change	Around 6 months	Biological mom
11	Within the first year of family structure change	A couple of months	Biological mom
12	Two years after family structure change	Within two weeks of school starting	Stepmom and Biological dad
13	Almost two years after family structure change	Within 2 weeks	Biological dad and stepmom

Emergent Themes Across Interview Questions

Participants were asked to respond to seven questions regarding changes in their

children's school performance after their family structure changed. The emergent themes

from the results are presented in Table 4. The table shows the topic of each interview

question, the emergent themes for each interview question as well as the codes/key words

and phrases that were coded to each theme.

Figure 1

Emergent Themes Across Interview Questions

Topic	Theme	Codes/Key phrases
Types of changes in Behavior	Negative behavior in school	Fighting with peers
		Seeking approval from teachers
		Misbehavior in class
	Negative behavior at home	Fighting with siblings
		Toilet training issues
		Inappropriate touching
Parent interactions with school to address school behavior	Parent-teacher meetings	Check daily and weekly reports
		Get ideas on how to help child from teachers
	School conferences	Regular visits to school/classroom
		I.E.P. meetings
		Request smaller class size (per child's request)
		change classrooms
Parent interactions with child to address child's behavior	Rewards	Spend more one-on-one time studying
		Give chance to earn more free time
		Reward charts
		Provide special treats
	Provide/reinforce structure	Reinforce Routines
		Review/reinforce school rules
Specific actions parents used to help lessen impact of family structural changes on school-aged children	Open communication	Discussions with child about behaviors and or concerns
		Talk about negative things child may hear or see with other stepfamilies
		Have child identify issue
		listen to child's point of view
	Promote BFU family time	Fun walks in the evening
		Regular weekend cookouts
		BFU movie night/treats
	Engage biological parents	Allow non-residential parent to continue regular visits with child.

		Have biological parent participate in rewarding good behavior.
	Improve sibling relations	Structure positive interactions with siblings
Child's perception of school performance	Negative self-talk	He/she says he is just bad/negative behavior
		He/she cannot do classwork/negative classroom behavior
Advice for addressing school performance issues	Allow time for adjustment	Engage stepparents in parenting
		Spend one-on-one time with each child
		Allow visits with absent biological parent
	Communication-with teachers	Effective communication with schools
		Both parents should meet with teacher
		Constantly talk with child and teachers
	Family meetings	Gather input from child input on family matters
	Administer appropriate Discipline	Take things away
		Before discipling your child make sure the school performance issue warrants a discipline

Types of Changes in Behavior

Participants were asked to describe the change in the child's school behavior after the change in family structure. The two themes that emerged were negative behavior in school and inappropriate behavior at home. Participant 6 described how the family structural change affected her son's behavior with his school peers. This participant stated. "Well, my son doesn't like to share, so he was always in trouble for not sharing and I think he took his anger out on his teachers and classmates." Participant 1 indicated that the changes in school performance were mostly shown in behavior aimed at seeking attention from the child's teachers at school. The following statements reflects Participant 1's description of her son's change in behavior at school consisted of the following "The youngest child showed a lot of insecurity in school. He was making bad choices. The

youngest child also looked for a lot of validation. The teachers felt the youngest child looked for their approval." Participant 3 stated the following regarding her son's performance at school, "He was really bad in kindergarten. They [the school Administrator] called me every day to come pick him up from school." Participant 13 also commented on the changes in his daughter's behavior at school by sharing, "Daughter's school behavior worsened throughout the years. She was getting in trouble daily for picking with other students at the school. I became aware of the degree and frequency of issues from my wife and school staff." Participant 3 described how her son began fighting with siblings at home. According to Participant 3 "He started fighting a lot with his brothers when they would not give him their stuff." Participant 12 described how the change affected her stepdaughter both at home and at school. This participant indicated the following:

> Our daughter resided with her biological mother fulltime from April 2015-July 2020, with my husband being the time-sharing parent. During that time, our daughter's behavior worsened throughout the years. Shortly after residing with her biological mother, she began hitting classmates. Over time, these behaviors further regressed to toilet training issues, sexual inappropriate touching others, sexual inappropriate touching herself, elopement, and de-robing in public. These behaviors mainly occurred whenever she was under the care of her biological mother, with my husband or myself seldom witnessing these behaviors.

Interactions with School to Address Behavior

When participants were asked to discuss how they engaged with the schools to address their child's school performance, two themes emerged. The first theme was through parent teacher meetings and the second theme was attending school conferences. Several participants indicated that they talked with the teachers and attended I.E.P and 504 meetings to gather ideas on how to help their children improve their behavior at school. Participant 1 described her interactions with the child's school to address the school performance issues as follows: **"**To address the school performance, it was discussed with the school during an in-person 504 conference. Discussions with the teacher include requesting smaller peer groups during reading and math". Participant 2 reported the following interactions with the child's school to address the school performance issues:

> I have to check daily and weekly reports then sign them for the teachers, so they know I seen them. I went to all the meetings with the teachers and principal, and sometimes I just go to the school and hangout there for a couple hours.

Participant 6 stated that the following actions were taken with the child's teacher to address the school performance issues "I talk to his teachers to get some ideas to help him improve at school". Participant 12 stated the following interactions with the child's teacher: "I was not able to participate in addressing the school regarding my daughter's school performance. My spouse [biological father] stayed in touch with teachers".

Interactions with Child to Address School Performance

Participants were asked how they and their spouses interacted with their children to address school performance issues. Providing rewards and reinforcing structure were the prominent themes that emerged from their responses. When Participant 1 described their family meetings to reinforce structure, the participant stated, "My spouse and I interact with or son by sitting him down and discussing the importance of hard work and seeing if there was anything bothering him or distracting him during school". Participant 2 indicate that they used communication and seeking the child's input to address the school performance issues. The participant stated, "We talk to him and see do he know where he went wrong. Then we ask him to tell us how he will make it right next time if the same issues come up". Participant 6 reported the following actions taken to interact with their child on school performance issues, "We both do homework with him and extra reading every night. I set a specific schedule for him because he seems to do better when he has a schedule." When Participant 11 described the use of family meetings as addressing school performance issues, Participant 11 stated, "We talk to our son and ask if something bothering him. And figure ways to improve his performance and let him know we are behind him in being the best". Participant 13 reported using one-on-one time with the child, creating new BFU memories, and using appropriate discipline with their child to address school performance issues, the themes reflected were one on one time with child creating new BFU memories and appropriate discipling. Participant 13 reported the following:

We sit down with her and assist her with her schoolwork. We also spend quality

time with her. Although she is currently non-verbal, our daughter fully

understands what she is doing and as such, we hold her accountable for her

actions and if needed we will discipline her.

Actions Taken to Lessen Impact of Family Structural Change

Parents were asked to describe the actions taken to lessen the impact that blended

family structure change had on their school-aged children's school performance. The four

themes that emerged were open family communication, promoting BFU family time,

engaging the biological parent, and improving sibling relations. When Participant 1 was

asked to share their actions taken to lessen the impact, they stated the following on

effective communication, engaging biological parent and creating new blended family

memories:

My spouse and I have daily discussions with our son, and we try to take our son to

his biological fathers' home to spend time with him. We also try to create new

family memories by doing things together, like road trips, video calls when apart,

sports events, etc. We participate in things our son is interested in.

Participant 2 shared that promoting blended family time such as creating new memories

were important to lessen the impact of family structural change on their child. Participant

2 stated, "We take the kids for a little fun walk in the sun and sometimes we have a little

fun family cookout. Sometimes we have movie night with popcorn and their favorite

treats." Participant 6 described the use of improving sibling relations as a way to lessen

the impact the blended family structure change had on their child's school performance.

Participant 6 stated, "Man, we try to reward him as much as we can for helping his younger stepbrothers. I think if they get along better he will not go to school already heated some mornings". Participant 10 shared that to lessen the impact of family structural change on their child, they use open parent-child communication. This participant stated, "We talk a lot about things she may hear or see with other stepfamilies. We let her know that she can just pull one of us aside to discuss anything about our new family".

Child's perception of School Performance Issues

When participants were asked about their children's perceptions of their school performance, the prominent theme that emerged was the children internalized negative self-talk about their behavior, Participant 1 responded to the question about their children's perceptions of their school performance by stating, "His perception of his school performance is he reported/felt he wasn't working hard enough, and that he wasn't taking his time." Participant 2 reflected examples of the negative self-talk in the following comments about her son's perception of his school performance, "He used to say that nobody loves him, so he was being bad. Now he talks things out more, but sometimes it's too late because he is already in trouble". Participant 6 also shared some the negative self-talk used by her son. This participant stated the following: "He tells us that he is just bad, but he is going to be good". Participant 10 responded to the question about the child's perceptions of school performance by stating that, "Last year she just told us that she just doesn't understand her teacher. So, she probably thinks her behavior in class is because she is bored because she cannot do some of the work." Participant 11

shared the following when asked question about the children's perceptions of their school performance:

> My stepson really wants to be the best. He wants an A+ on assignments and tests. He realized he has to work hard to get A's. He gets mad when he does not make A's and he thinks his bad behavior when he gets low grades is his issue.

Advice for Addressing School Performance

Participants were asked what advice they have for blended family parents to address school performance issues. The themes which emerged were allow time for adjustment, engage in effective communication with schools and family members, and administer appropriate discipline, Participant 1 shared how they used effective communication and allowing time for adjustment to address the children's school performance:

> Communication has been the main thing we have done with our family. We are constantly talking with both kids and getting their input on things they would like to see within our family. I would suggest allowing time for adjustment with a party' involved.

Participant 2 also recommended that parents should use effective communication to address school performance issues. Participant 2 stated the following: "Always make sure they listen to the child as well as the school and give them a way out of the issue. Because you do not want them to grow up thinking they are just bad and cannot change". Participant 6 shared the following advice on communication with family and meeting with teachers for blended family parents:

I have a couple of things, first, the stepfather has to be active with all the kids. Second, both parents should meet with teachers so they will be on the same page and not getting secondhand reports about the child because when things get shared sometimes the true meaning gets messed up. I think parents need to spend one-on-one time with all of the kids as much as possible, and one thing I think is very important is that you need to get help for your kids if you have tried what you know, and it do not work.

When Participant 3 responded to the question regarding advice for blended family parents, Participant 3 shared the following in regard to using appropriate discipline to address school performance issues: "Take things away from him that he loves or like doing". Participant 6 responded to the question regarding advice for blended family parents by sharing how they used prominent themes such as allowing time for adjustment by inclusion of stepfather. Participant 6 also shared that effective communication with school to obtain help with school issues, and effective communication/time with child was important. Participant 6 stated the following on advice for blended family parents:

I have a couple of things, first, the stepfather has to be active with all the kids. Second, both parents should meet with teachers so they will be on the same page and not getting secondhand reports about the child because when things get shared sometimes the true meaning gets messed up. I think parents need to spend one-on-one time with all of the kids as much as possible, and one thing I think is very important is that you need to get help for your kids if you have tried what you know, and it do not work.

Participant 10 also gave comments related to using effective communication with the child and with the child's school to address school performance issues. Participant 10 gave the following advice for parents:

> Take as much time as you need to pray and talk with you kids about school and family. Parents should also check in with their kids' teachers at least once a month to make sure they on following all rules and on track with their learning.

Participant 11 shared advice for communicating with family by stating, "I believe communication is the key to getting an understanding about school, and value their input." Participant 12 shared advice for other blended family parents on effective communication with schools by stating, "Effective communication with all parties (school, therapy center, other parents) is key. Also, all parties involved need to understand that the child is priority number one".

Composite Summary

The research question which guided this study was: What strategies do African American parents in blended family units adopt to lessen the impact that family structural changes have on their children's school performance. Participants indicated that within 2 years of the changes in family structure, they began noticing negative changes in behavior that were manifested at school and at home. The negative behaviors at school consisted of things such as fighting with peers, seeking approval from teachers, and misbehaving in class. The negative behaviors at home consisted of things such as fighting with siblings, toilet training issues, and inappropriate changes in behavior.

Participants indicated that they engaged in a number of interactions with the school to address the school performance issues. The interactions with the schools consisted of parent teacher meetings where the parents talked with teachers to get ideas of how to address the school performance issues. Other interactions with the school involved checking daily behavior reports and weekly progress reports. School conferences were other interactions with the schools. The conferences consisted of IEP meetings and frequent visits to the child's classroom.

The participants indicated they engaged in a number of interactions with their school-age child to address school performance. The actions consisted of rewarding good behavior and creating detailed schedules for the child to follow. Participants reported that the specific actions they used to help lessen the impact that blended family structure change had on their school-aged child's school performance was open communication. The open communication consisted of daily communication with their child about behaviors and concerns, talking to the child about things they may hear or see with other stepfamilies, and allowing the child to discuss anything. Allowing the child to maintain contact with their absent biological parent and creating new blended family memories were also actions taken to lessen the impact of family structure change on school-aged children. To address the children's perceptions of their school performance issue, participants indicated that they used open communication to allow the children to identify the issues and express concerns about themselves.

Advice for blended family parents on addressing school performance issues consisted of allowing time for adjustment, which would consist of engaging stepparents

in parenting. Advice also consisted of, spending one-on-one time with each child, allowing visits with absent biological parent, and taking time to think before reacting to your child's school performance. Participants also recommended the use effective communication with children and the schools, conducting family meetings, and using appropriate discipline to address school performance issues. Lastly, participants recommended the use of rewards to address children's school performance issues. Participants stated that allowing their children to earn free time/rewards, spending more one-on-one time studying with their child, placing their child in smaller classes, and parent-teacher teleconferences were strategies used with their child to address behavior and school performance.

Summary

The introduction describing the purpose of the study, the setting, participant demographics, data collection process, data analysis process, evidence of trustworthiness and results of the study were described. The purpose of the study was to explore what strategies do African American parents in blended family units adopt to lessen the impact that family structural changes have on their children's school performance. Eight participants responded to eleven parent participant questions and ten demographic questions during individual interviews. Participant demographics consisted of five females and three males between the ages of 30-49 years (see Table 1). Data was collected via computer and email during the interview process. Generic qualitative methods with Colaizzi's seven step process were used during the data analysis process. To promote evidence of trustworthiness in this study, measures were taken to establish

credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. To establish credibility and

trustworthiness in qualitative research, in this study I used member checking, reflexivity,

and audit trail to enhance the credibility of the findings from this research. To enhance

transferability of the results from this study, I used an audit trail, thick rich descriptions

of the collected data, and purposeful sampling. To ensure dependability member

checking was utilized and to enhance confirmability, In addition, a composite summary

that presented the strategies African American parents in BFUs used to lessen the impact

that family structural changes have on their children's school performance is included. In

Chapter 5, I will present an interpretation of findings, limitations of the study,

recommendations, implications and a conclusion.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Data from the 2019 US census revealed that 276,686 American children resided in blended/stepfamily households (U. S. Census Bureau, 2019). Findings from Bryant et al. (2016) revealed that adjusting to a blended family unit formation can be even more challenging for blended African American families. The challenges, such as the formation of new relations and step-parental roles, can negatively affect the school-aged children causing negative behavioral issues (Bryant et al., 2016). The purpose of this generic qualitative study was to explore what strategies African American parents in blended families use to lessen the impact that family structural changes have on their children's school performance. Findings from this study indicated that African American blended family parents are highly involved with their child's academic performance and needs. The themes that emerged from this study supported past research that indicated that the stressors school-age children experience when they endure family structural changes can interfere with the children's school performance (de Brey et al., 2017). Findings from this study presents new literature which focused on strategies adopted by African American blended family parents to lessen the impact which family structure change can have on their school-aged children.

Participants responded to several topics related to changes in their children's school performance after becoming part of a blended family. The first topic addressed types of changes in behavior. The two themes that emerged from the first topic consisted of negative behavior in school and negative behavior at home. Participants indicated they attended parent-teacher conferences and other school meetings to address the school

behavior When asked about actions they with the child to address the school behavior, participants revealed that they gave the child rewards and provided/reinforced structure. Participants further revealed they used several other strategies to lessen the impact of the family structural changes on their children's behavior. The themes which emerged from the fourth topic were using open communication, providing BFU family time, engaging biological parents, and taking action to improving sibling relations. The fifth topic participants responded to was the child's perception of school performance. The theme that emerged from the fifth topic was negative self-talk. The sixth topic participants responded to was advice for addressing school performance issues. The themes that emerged from the sixth topic were allow time for adjustment, communication with teachers, family meetings, and administer appropriate discipline.

Interpretation of Findings Relative to the Literature Review

Lee and McLanahan (2015) asserted that there was a connection between family structural changes and a child's overall cognitive development. The author noted that a family structural change challenges can negatively impact a child's behavior and overall well-being (Lee & McLanahan, 2015). Finding from this study are consistent with findings reported by Lee and McLanahan. The following sections address how results from this study are aligned with findings from previous results. The findings are presented by topic.

Changes in Behavior

Participants were asked to describe the changes in their child's school performance. The two themes that emerged from this first topic consisted of *negative*

behavior in school and negative behavior at home. The themes which emerged this topic

are consistent with results presented in the literature. For instance, Jensen et al. (2017)

found that children who experienced family structural changes were more likely to have

negative behaviors in school. Participants in this study indicated that the changes in their

children's school behavior consisted of things such as taking anger out on teachers and

peers at school, making bad choices in school because of feelings of insecurity, getting in

trouble every day for picking on classmates, and hitting classmates. Kolbert et al. (2013)

also reported that adolescents exhibited negative behaviors in school and home in

response after experiencing structural changes in their family units. Comments from

participants in this study were consistent with findings reported by Kolbert et al. (2013).

The participants in this study indicated that their school aged children began fighting with

siblings at home after the change in family structure.

Interactions with School to Address School Behavior

Participants were asked to discuss the interactions they had with their children's

school to address the children's school performance. The two themes that emerged were

engaging in parent-teacher meetings and school conferences. Participants reported

strategies such as meeting with teachers and principals, requesting smaller classes,

checking, and signing daily reports, and attending school conferences such as I.E.P. and

504 meetings. Results from this study align with suggestions from Doctoroff and Arnold

(2017) who found that school involvement on the part of parents could lessen the

negative impact that family structural change has on youth. The use of strategies such as

having parent-teacher meetings and school conferences were consistent with suggestions presented in the literature for addressing children's school performance issues.

Interactions with Child to Address Behavior

Parents were asked to discuss the interactions they had with their children to address school performance. Two themes which emerged from this third topic were the use of rewards and providing/reinforcing structure. The themes that emerged were consistent with finding from previous researchers. For instance, Lopoo and DeLeire (2014) found that interactions such as spending more one-on-one time studying, giving the child a chance to earn more free time, creating reward charts, providing special treats, reinforcing routines, and review/reinforce school rules to reinforce structure. The authors asserted that if the family structure change lowers the children's economic status, there would be a significant relationship/impact on a child's behavior and school performance (Lopoo & DeLeire, 2014).

Actions to Lessen Impact of Family Structural Changes on Child

Participants were asked to discuss actions taken to lessen the impact on their children. The four themes which emerged from the fourth topic were open communication, promote BFU family time, engage biological parents, and improve sibling relations. Participants reported strategies such as discussions with child about behaviors and or concerns, talking about negative things child may hear or see with other stepfamilies, have child identify issue, and listen to child's point of view. Participants also reported strategies such as fun walks in the evening, regular weekend cookouts, BFU movie night with food treats, engaging nonresidential parent and stepparents, and

structuring positive interactions with stepsiblings. Participants reported actions/strategies such as the findings were consistent with results presented in previous literature. For instance, Jensen et al. (2017) revealed that children who had continued contact with nonresident parents had less stress than children who did not maintain regular contact with the nonresident parent (Jensen et al., 2017). In their study, findings also showed that when children experienced close relationships with residential parents, both biological and stepparent, the children's stress levels were mitigated during the stepfamily formation process (Jensen et al., 2017). Researched findings in this study are consistent with elements that continual negative relationships, within a child's blended family household environment, hindered the children's school performance (Xia et al., 2016). As noted, the emerged themes from this study which supports the literature are communication, promote BFU family time, and engage biological parents.

Child's Perception of School Performance

Findings from past research revealed that blended family structural changes could affect children's school performance (Doctoroff & Arnold, 2017; Fosco, 2018). Participants were asked to discuss their child's perception of school performance. The theme that emerged from this fifth topic was that the children engaged in a lot of *negative self-talk*. Participants reported child negative self-talk such as he says he is just bad/negative behavior, and he/she cannot do classwork/negative classroom behavior. Negative self-talk indicated the children did not feel good about self. The negative self-talk may have been an indication of poor self-esteem and/or poor self-concept. The theme from this study, negative self-talk, supports Havermans et al. (2017) literature regarding

how family structure change can affect low self-esteem and school engagement of school-aged children.

Advice for Other Parents

Participants were asked what advice would they give to other parents in BFUs to address the impact of family structural change on children's school performance. The four themes which emerged from this topic were allowing time for adjustment, communicating with teachers, family meetings, and administering appropriate discipline. Participants suggested using strategies such as engaging stepparents in the parenting process. According to participants, engaging stepparents in the parenting process aids in allowing the child time to adjust to the new family structure. Participants also suggested that family meetings such as spending one-on-one time with each child, constantly talking with child, and gathering input from child on family matters were additional strategies used to address the impact of family structural change on children's school performance. Effective communication with schools where both parents meet with teacher were strategies used to ensure that both parents were understanding the needs and or issues with their child's school performance. Participants reported that before disciplining your child make sure the school issue warrants a discipline. If discipline is warranted, administering appropriate discipline can consisted of taking things away that the child enjoys doing. The themes from the advice given by participants were consistent with suggestions for addressing children's school performance presented in previous literature. Jensen et al. (2017) asserted that when children experienced close relationships with residential parents, both biological and stepparent, the children's stress

levels were mitigated. Findings from this study were consistent with Jensen's recommendation of allowing time for adjustment during the family structure change as a strategy to address children's school performance issues. Jensen et al. (2017) study aligns with the findings in this study regarding the importance of allowing time for adjustment using strategies such as family meetings to ensure positive blended family climate (Jensen et al., 2017). Doctoroff and Arnold (2017) shared that children who experienced familial structural changes tended to have lower levels of school performance. The author's indicated that school involvement on the part of parents would lessen the negative impact that family structural change has on children's school performance. The use of strategies such as communicating with teachers were consistent with suggestions presented in the literature by Doctoroff and Arnold (2017) which suggest that parental school involvement would lessen the negative impact that family structural change has on children's school performance.

Interpretation of the Findings and Bowen's Family Systems Theory

According to Bowen (1975), family structural changes can impact how individuals develop within a family system/unit. Findings from this research were related to two of Bowen's eight concepts. Themes which emerged from the data analysis for this this study can be linked to Bowen's principals of triangles and differentiation of self.

Triangles

Bowen (1976) defined a triangle as a three-party relationship system that is typically created when one of a dyadic relationship includes another party into the dyadic relations. Findings from this study can be linked to the four triangles such of parent-

child-step parent, parent-child-absent biological parent, parent-child-teacher, and parent-child-school. The first triangle was indicated when participants were asked to describe the actions they had taken to minimize the impact that blended family structure on their children's school performance. The specific theme that emerged was to engage non-residential parent, which created the parent-child-absent biological parent triangle. Participants interacted with biological parents for the overall well-being of the school-aged child. Participants shared that they allowed the child to spend time with the biological parent. Participants also involved the biological parent by having the biological parent participate in rewarding the child for positive behavior in school.

The second triangle, parent-child-stepparent triangle, was revealed when participants were asked what actions they took to lessen the impact of family structural changes on the school-aged children. The two themes which emerged were open communication with child and promoting BFU family time. The two themes created the parent-child-stepparent triangle. Participants reported actions such as discussions with child about behaviors and or concerns, talking about negative things child may hear or see with other stepfamilies, having the child identify issue, and listening to child's point of view. Participants also reported that promoting BFU time consisted of fun walks in the evening, regular weekend cookouts, BFU movie nights and engaging stepparents, and creating structured positive interactions with siblings. Participants shared that including the stepparent in the dyadic relations of the parent-child relationship may be one of the most important actions to help mitigate the negative impact on school-aged children during family structure change.

The third triangle, parent-child-teacher triangle, was indicated when the participants discussed their interactions with children to address the school behavior. Participants reported actions such as parent teacher conferences, getting ideas from teachers on how to help their child teachers.

The fourth triangle was evidenced when the participants' indicated they participated in school conferences to address their children's school performance issues. Participants reported engaging in strategies such as attending regular school conferences such as I.E.P meetings, checking daily and weekly reports and, making regular visits to school/classroom. Participants reported some improvement in their child's school performance after using the strategies.

Differentiation of Self

The second concept of BFST that was illuminated in the findings from this study was differentiation of self, which refers to a person's attempts to maintain a sense of self while being emotionally connected to others in familial relations (Bowen, 1978). Bowen (1978) asserted that poorly differentiated people may depend heavily on the acceptance and approval of others. The concept of differentiation of self-emerged in the participants' responses to the question that asked the children's perceptions of their school performance. The theme primary theme which emerged was that the children engaged in negative self-talk when asked about their school behavior. Participants indicated the children shared that were just bad, so they displayed negative behavior at school. Some children informed parents that nobody loved them, so they engaged in negative behavior. To improve the child's behavior and school performance, participants reported utilizing

open communication which consisted of daily discussion with the child about school issues and any other concerns to mitigate the negative self-talk presented by the child. Open communication with the child would increase the child's sense of self and improve his/her perception of self, which could result in the child exhibiting a higher differentiation of self.

Limitations of the Study

There are several limitations of the findings from this study which may affect the transferability of results. The first limitation is the small sample size of eight African American parents from blended family unites who reported on their school-aged children's school performance and behavior. The smaller sample size limits the transferability of the results because the blended family population has increased over the past decade and is a unique union with unique challenges during the formation of the blended family unit. A smaller sample size limits the transferability to a broader population of African American blended family parents. Connelly (2016) asserted that transferability is present in a study when others can reproduce a study using rich data. A larger sample size would examine the phenomenon studied across a larger population which might produce a richer knowledge of strategies adopted by parents to lessen the impact of family structure change on their school-aged children.

The second limitation is that initially, the participant interviews were to be held face-to-face, therefore, the geographic location of participants was limited to the Central West Florida region to gain an understanding of African American blended parent strategies use in the specific region. In regard to the Covid 19 pandemic, participant

interviews were held via Facetime and telephone. The initial geographic restriction on participants in this study limited the transferability of the results to a broader population. Geographic restriction on participants may have hindered obtaining rich detailed responses on the phenomenon, and the transferability of the study (Levitt, 2016). Including participants from various geographic backgrounds and ethnicities would increase the transferability by providing an all-inclusive insight on strategies used to mitigate the impact that family structure change has on school-aged children's school performance relating to negative behavior and poor grades.

A third limitation to this study was that participant participation was limited to African American blended family units only, which also limited the transferability of the study results. The African American blended family parent population was not an all-inclusive representation of all parents residing in a blended family unit. Inclusion of non-African American parents might lend additional insight on what strategies blended family parents adopt to lessen the impact that family structure change has on school-aged children's school performance relating to negative school behavior and poor grades.

The fourth limitation in this study is that participants reported on the school performance of one school-aged child. Whereas all children in a blended family household could experience behavior issues resulting from changes in family structure and the formation of a blended family unit. Only focusing on one child's school performance limits the transferability of the results to a broader population of school-aged children who may have experienced family structural changes as a result of residing in blended family units. Focusing on all children in a blended family household may

increase the transferability of the results by extending the bounds to a larger population of school-aged children who have experienced family structural changes by residing in blended family units.

Lastly, a limitation of the research was that the participants' responses only addressed behavioral change in school and at home. Responses focusing only on school behavior limits the transferability of the results as it did not address other aspects of school performance such as grades or participation in school activities. Not getting information about the broader domain of school performance limits the findings to focus on behavior, with is mostly physical in nature. Follow up questions from the researcher to ask more broadly about school performance may have enhanced the transferability of this study.

Recommendations

Based on the limitations in this study, I recommend future qualitative studies on a larger sample size of African American blended family parent households. The purpose of the larger sample size is that it would improve transferability to a higher number of African American blended family parents reporting on what strategies adopted by African American blended family parents to lessen the impact that family structure change can have on their school-aged child's school performance. Future qualitative research which includes a study on the impact that family structure change has on a school-aged child's overall school performance is recommended. Additional qualitative studies would provide a more in-depth review of how a child's behavior is impacted after experiencing family structural changes after the formation of a blended family unit.

I would also recommend that additional research on African American blended family parents and their school-aged children the be conducted. The purpose of additional studies would be to determine the impact that external factors such as racial and or ethnic issues has on African American school-aged children who experience family structure change. I also recommend that participant solicitation be extended to a broader population of individuals outside of the Central West Florida region. The purpose of extending the geographics outside of Central West Florida will be to determine whether the findings in this study are consistent for children in BFUs in other regions.

In addition, this study focused on African American blended family school-aged children exhibiting negative school behavior. Therefore, it is recommended that future studies be conducted to examine children from various ethnic backgrounds. Such studies will add additional insight into how family structural changes experienced can impact a school-aged child's school performance across various racial and ethnic backgrounds.

Furthermore, a recommendation including a qualitative study which focuses on a more in-depth view of school performance issues such as grades, academic and overall school participation exhibited by children residing in blended family households is recommended. The purpose of such studies would add additional insight into how family structural changes resulting in the formation of a blended family unit can impact a school-aged child's school performance.

Implications for Positive Social Change

The unique contribution of this study is that the study focused only on African American blended family parents reporting on the strategies they adopted to lessen the

impact that family structure change had on their school-aged children's behavior in the home and school settings. The findings from this study showed that African American families use the same types of strategies to address school performance issues that that are presented in the literature. Results revealed several strategies for addressing changes in school aged children that occurred after entering a blended family unit. Participants also gave advice for blended family parents to utilize with their school-aged child to address school performance issues.

Bowen's family system theory was used to gain insight on how and or why the new BFU familial relations may have impacted the child's school performance. It is recommended that Bowen's family systems theory be utilized in future studies which examine the relationship between family structure change ending in a blended family unit and a child's overall school performance. Human services professionals could use the topics and themes from this study as a guide in blended family programs and policies that create positive social change for school-aged children and their parents residing in a blended family. In addition, human services professionals can use this current research to create blended family focused seminars, workshops and television programs that are blended family focused.

Summary

Family structure change which promotes a blended family unit can be challenging for a school-aged child. Children maneuvering through various new relations such as parent-child-step parent, parent-child-absent biological parent, parent-child-teacher, and parent-child-school, because of the family structure change, can become stressful.

Continual stressors during the formation of a blended family have been linked to negative

behavioral outcomes and low school performance relating to poorer grades (Arnold et al.,

2017). Findings in this study indicated that participants adopted myriads of strategies to

lessen the impact that family structure change have had on their school-aged child's

school performance. Results of this study indicated that strategies such as open

communication with child and teachers to include school conferences, rewards for the

child, providing structure, engaging biological parents, and allowing time for the child to

adjust to the new blended family environment would be beneficial to the child, and assist

in improving the child's academic performance. This warrants further study to gain a

better understanding of additional strategies that can be adopted by blended family

parents to lessen the negative impact that family structure change can have on a school-

aged child's school performance.

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Appendix A: Prescreening Interview Questions

Date: _____

Time: _____

Respondent: _____

Contact Information: _____

Contact attempts: _____

    1). Are you a married African American parent residing in a blended/stepfamily unit?

    2). Are you a born male or female who is either a biological or non-biological parent to at least one school-aged child in a blended/stepfamily unit? (must be less than 3 years)

    3). On a scale of 1-10 where 10 is the highest quality, what is the quality of your current blended family environment?

    4). What is the past and/or present behavior of the children residing in your blended family household? (at home, public school or other social settings)

    5). The purpose of this study will be to determine what strategies African American parents in blended families used to lessen the impact that family structural changes have on their child's academic performance. Therefore, what other pertinent data relating to your blended family's experienced family structure change do you believe would be relevant to this study.

Accepted: Yes or No

Participant on Reserve: Yes or No

Appendix B: Parent Participant Questions

Date: _____   Time: _____

Participant: _____

Contact Information: _____

Contact attempts: _____

All answers are confidential

1). What specific occurrence/s caused the development of your blended family unit?

2). What is the quality of your current marital status?

3). How do you and your spouse handle marital related conflicts?

4). How do you and your spouse handle familial related conflicts?

5). What is the quality of the stepparent/child relationship/s in your blended family household?

6). What is the quality of the sibling relationship/s in your blended family household?

7). What is the past and/or present behavior of the children residing in your blended family household? (at home, school or other social settings)

8). What are some of the personal unique blended family dynamics/challenges for you and/or a family member?

9). What are some of the specific parenting skills and/or strategies you or your spouse use to help mitigate the impact that family structure change can have on your child's overall well-being?

10). The purpose of this study is to determine what strategies African American parents in blended families used to lessen the impact that family structural changes have on their child overall well-being and behavior. Therefore, what other pertinent data relating to your blended family's experienced family structure change do you believe to be relevant to this study.