

Educational Goals, Parenting Practices and Adolescents' Academic Achievement

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Abstract

The present study examined linkages between educational goals, parenting practices (school involvement and monitoring) of single-mothers and single-fathers, and the academic achievement of their school-going adolescents. Additionally, it sought to examine the differences in educational goals and parenting practices between the single fathers and mothers, as well the parents' differential treatments toward their male and female adolescents. Through Single Mother Associations, we recruited 60 single mothers and snowball 30 single fathers for the study. We found that the parents differ only in terms of educational goals where single fathers had significantly lower goals compared to single mothers. In zero order correlational analyses, we discovered positive relationships between (1) parenting practices and academic achievement of adolescents from both families; (2) fathers' educational goals and their monitoring behaviors; and (3) mothers' educational goals and their school involvement, and monitoring behaviors. Findings from this study accentuate the importance of an active educational socialization process in diverse family settings to promote adolescents' educational success.

Keywords: Single father, Single mother, Educational goals, Educational practices, Academic achievement

1. Introduction

Educational attainment is perhaps the most imperative meter for measuring adolescents' well-being. It is the marker for successful college/university enrollment, scholarship awards and future job success; it is also an indicator of adolescents' general adaptation to life. In Malaysia, fathers and mothers are observed to carry out distinct roles in fostering children's academic aspiration. For example, the duty of a Malay father during the British Colonization period was "to train a young Malay boy to become a better farmer or fisherman than his own father" (Mahzan, 2001), whereas a Malay mother was expected to care and support for her family members in return to her husband's provision of shelter, food and clothing (Ong, 1990). Today, the involvement of Malay fathers in

children's life, especially in academic matters continue to be valued albeit noticeable increment of Malay mother's participation in children's education decision. In Chinese and Indian families, similar parenting patterns are also observed. The Three-Character Classic stated that: "Rearing without education is the fault of the father" (Ho, 1987), hence most Chinese fathers have taken their educator role strictly to ensure children's academic attainment, and also serves as a honor-bringing instrument that enhances and maintains the family grace and status (Chao, 2001; Ho, 1987). Parenting in the Indian culture shares some extent of likeliness with Chinese parenting culture. Literatures show that both Indian and Chinese fathers assume great responsibilities in enhancing son's academic capital due to the expectation that sons will care for them in their old life (Ho, 1987; Pal, 2004). Documentation of educational aspirations in the three major ethnic groups in Malaysia generally show that fathers in Asian communities bear prime responsibility to promote children educational attainment whereas mothers usually play supplementary role to support the family aspiration.

From the structuralism view, a complete family structure with both parents playing prospective roles in everyday socialization would bring optimal development to a child (Pittman, 1993). Therefore, any single-parent family unit would be seen as posing threats to a child's development due to the vanishing of proper roles and functions in the family. Nevertheless, past studies found that children in single-parent family were able to obtain success in various developmental facets with good quality socialization (Lee, Kusher, & Cho, 2007; Werner, 1987). Single-parent family, thus, could promote educational success amongst offspring as competently as a normative family if the single parent heading the family is committed to provide the best parenting practices. Underlining the adoption of the socialization process approach in this study is the impetus provided by the increasing number of single parents in Malaysia. In the year 2007 alone, divorce cases in Malaysia were recorded as high as 24,864; while from the year 2000 to 2006, divorce cases rose from 15,149 to 27,166 (Ministry of Women Family and Community Development, 2008b). Although not all divorced-with-children parents remain single throughout their life course, still, the divorced parents need to single parent their dependent child before they remarry. Aside from the single parent figures, statistics show that the number of widowed women and men in the country in the year 2000 were relatively high, i.e., 549,745 and 129,012 respectively (Ministry of Women Family and Community Development, 2007). The growing number of single parents is so evident that we need to study how children develop in such family arrangements, and how best parents parent their children without the aid of a spouse.

Past studies have documented that living in a single household is unfavorable to adolescent's developmental outcome. Given that adolescence is a stage where children suffer from the 'storm and stress' symptoms (Arnett, 1999), the potential reduction of parental involvement in single-parent homes may negatively affect adolescents' developmental outcomes (Spera, 2005). Nevertheless, the negative impact of single parenting is inconsequential when quality care is provided by the caregivers. Evidence from the study by Zarinah, Rozumah, Krauss and Rumaya (2006) signifies that unfavorable living contexts such as single-parent family, lack of bedroom, and having family members with chronic diseases is less detrimental if parent possess responsive parenting behavior. Additionally, it is believed that parenting activities such as, nurturing and educating matters more to the child than the structural functions of the family (Hamner & Turner, 2001). In general, how parents behave is shaped by their goals and expectations. Parenting goals are a set of principles about what to aim for and what to avoid when raising children (Spera, 2006). Past research indicates a significant linkage between parental expectation and a child's academic achievement (Fan & Chen, 2001). Children from high aspiration families tend to be more successful regardless of socioeconomic backgrounds (Fan & Chen, 2001; Yan & Lin, 2005). More importantly, it has been noted that parents' educational aspirations play a critical role in how adolescents come to view school as well as their occupational future (Jodl, Michael, Malanchuk, Eccles, & Sameroff, 2001).

On the other hand, parent educational practices is a measure of parental involvement and monitoring of their child's schoolwork (Spera, 2005, 2006). Parent's school involvement includes taking part in activities to support, encourage, assist, help, recognize, and contribute towards the child's cognitive development (Begum, 2007). Other than in-school participation, such as attending parent-teacher conferences, children's extracurricular activities and serving on school boards, parental school involvement is also extended to the home environment, such as, helping children with schoolwork, listening and discussing the child's school problems. Children displaying positive parental love and care have parents who set limits in household behavior, encourage uptake of challenges, and are available for help in academic and personal affairs (Gonzalez-DeHass, Willems, & Doan Holbein, 2005). In addition, parental monitoring refers to parental actions in overseeing their children's whereabouts and activities. Parental monitoring in school-related activities involves monitoring the completion of homework, supervising activities with peers and checking on school progress. Against this background of literature review, the present study is conceptualized to predict that parent's school and monitoring behaviors are able to motivate and enhance adolescent's academic achievement.

We include both single fathers and single mothers in this study with the rationale that studies regarding single fathers in the Malaysian context are much fewer than those on single mothers. In Malaysia, social policies tend to be more focused on single mother than single father. Campaigns such as the *Wise Women, Happy Family* programs are designed to help single mother to increase their earning opportunities (Ministry of Women Family and Community Development, 2008a). Additionally, every state in Malaysia has a Single Mother Association; however, there are none for single fathers. Therefore, single fathers represent a unique group in this study as they are reported to have families with poorer adjustment than single mothers due to limited access to support networks as well as their lack of help-seeking behavior, which is consistent with the male socialization role (Hsieh & Shek, 2008; Shek & Lai, 2000). Despite its inadequacy, it was noted that single fathers are economically steadier than single mothers (Klein & Pellerin, 2004). Additionally, they tend to have a higher average family income and educational background compared to single mothers (Dufur, Anisworth, & Lapray, 2004). The socioeconomic status of a household has been observed as three times more influential than household type (Alderman-Swain & Battle, 2003). Barry (2006) found that children who come from families with a higher socioeconomic status are more likely to spend more hours on homework, and extracurricular activities, and are more likely to plan for future education. Furthermore, it has been shown that socio-economic status, particularly mothers' education, was predictive of parental investment on child's language/literacy stimulation and supportiveness (Mistry, Biesanz, Chien, Howes, & Benner, 2008). A study by Klein and Pellerin (2004) revealed that children from single-father families gained twice as much economic advantages compared to those from single-mother families. The findings lead to the prediction that adolescents living in a single-mother family may face higher academic difficulties due to relatively low household economic standing.

Nonetheless, the gender role perspective would view single-mother families as bringing more socio-emotional advantages to children. Mothers generally understand their children better than fathers. Research by Undegraff, Delgado and Wheeler (2009) revealed that mothers have greater tendency to demonstrate higher level of acceptance and warmth in their parenting, and to spend more shared time with their adolescents as compared to fathers. Subsequently, both males and females are inclined to have better relationships with their mothers. In a family, mothers often socialize and pass on interpersonal skills to children, whereas fathers are generally seen as being responsible for child disciplining (Dufur, et al., 2004). In comparison to paternal parenting, mother parenting posits greater influence over the adolescent's later development (McKinney & Renk, 2008). The uniqueness of mother-adolescent relationship is illustrated in a way that would promote good outcomes in children, such as high academic achievement and reducing adolescents' risky behaviors (Updegraff et al., 2009). Given different family arrangements and quality of care provided by single fathers and mothers, we predicted different parenting goals and practices in these family settings.

Other than differences in the single fathers' and single mothers' parenting goals and practices, we noticed that there may be differential treatments towards male and female children in single father/single mother households. The gender intensification perspective (Updegraff, Delgado, & Wheeler, 2009) draws our attention to examine whether or not single fathers devote more effort on socializing sons, and whether single mothers have a more salient role in socializing daughters. Additionally, we examined if a child's gender determines the educational involvement of the father and mother. Studies have shown that if the general trend of parenting is focused on a particular gender, we could assume that there exists parental construal of gender problem with regard to academic attainment, involvement and monitoring during adolescence.

2. Aims of the Study

Given the literatures on single parents' educational goals and practices on the academic achievement of adolescents, we noticed that there may be differences in single father's and single mother's households, which must be viewed separately from the two-parent household. Thus, in this present study we aimed to examine the following hypotheses: (1) there are significant differences in the parenting goals and parenting practices (involvement and monitoring) between single mothers and single fathers, (2) there exists significant differences in the parenting goals and parenting practices (involvement and monitoring) between single mothers and single fathers for male as opposed to female adolescents; (3) there are significant relationships between parenting goals and parenting practices (involvement and monitoring) and academic achievement of adolescents with single mothers or single fathers.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Sample and Design

Using purposive sampling, we obtained 60 mothers from selected Single Mother Associations and due to limited access to single fathers from the welfare associations; we used the snowball sampling technique to recruit 30 single

fathers. All the respondents were from Klang Valley, a metropolis area in the central region of Malaysia that has the highest number of single parents. In addition, it has more well-established Single Mother Associations to allow for sample drawing. Once permissions were obtained from the associations, all 90 respondents were given a survey pack which contained a consent form and questionnaire. The researchers personally delivered and collected the self-administered questionnaires from the respondents; thus gaining good cooperation and number of completed questionnaires returned.

3.2 Procedure and Measures

The questionnaires were divided into several sections, which measure different study variables. The sections are as follows:

Personal background of respondents and adolescents. Parents reported information on their age, ethnicity, education, marital status, monthly income, occupation and number of children. They also reported on the focal child's age, gender, and birth order.

Parental educational goals. Attributes of the Intelligence Scale (Okagaki & Steinberg, 1993) was used to assess the importance of educational goals of parents towards their children. There are a total of eight items in the measure, with a 5 point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). A high score obtained on this scale indicates a relatively high level of parental educational aspiration on the adolescents. This measure was reliable with Cronbach's alpha values of .66 for single fathers and .77 for single mothers.

Parental practices. Two measures, i.e. Parenting Involvement Scale, a subscale from High School and Family Relationships: Questionnaire for Teachers, Parents, and Students (Epstein, Connors, & Salinas, 1993) and Parental Monitoring Scale (Paulson, Marchant, & Rothilsberg, 1998) were combined to generate a total score for parental educational practices. The Parental Involvement Scale measures parents' involvement in adolescents' school activities through communicating, volunteering, helping learning at home, and making decisions. This instrument contains 26 items, rated on a 4 point Likert scale. A high score indicates a high level of parent's educational involvement. The Cronbach's alpha values yield coefficients of .98 and .97 for single fathers and single mothers, respectively. The Parenting Monitoring Scale measures parental knowledge of their children's whereabouts and activities in and out of school. There are five items in this 5 point Likert scale, spanning from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Reliability indices of the scales for single fathers and single mothers were .87 and .90, respectively.

4. Results

4.1 Demographic Profile

The single parent profile shows that there are 39 divorced, 35 widowed, 11 separated and 5 not married parents. The ethnicity distributions of the 60 single mothers is: 30 Malays, 25 Chinese and 5 Indians, whereas the 30 single father respondents consisted of 9 Malays, 17 Chinese and 4 Indians. The mean age is 48.5 (Sd. = 5.99) for single fathers and 42.2 (Sd. = 5.96) for single mothers. As expected, single father households show slightly better socioeconomic characteristics when compared to the single mothers. The level of education of the single fathers (mean = 10.80 years) and mothers (mean = 10.62) are almost similar, but on average the monthly income of single fathers [(mean = USD992.37)(1USD = 3.0861)] are nearly twice as high compared to the mothers' (mean = USD554.37). There was also lesser number of children in the single father households (mean = 1.97) in comparison to the single mothers'.

4.2 Differences in Single Fathers' and Single Mothers' Parental Goals and Parenting Practices (School Involvement and Monitoring)

Of all the variables investigated, a significant difference was found only for parental educational goals between single fathers and single mothers (see Table 1). The data suggests that single mothers are slightly more educational-goal oriented as compared to single fathers. The synthesis of the literature leads to the rationalization that socio-economic status of single mother headed families is lower compared to that of single father. Additionally, single mothers are inclined to socialize and have higher learning aspirations and expectations for their schooling adolescents. In the parents' eyes, a prospective education qualification is the key to greater opportunities, such as, further education, scholarships and better jobs. Also, parents generally believe that children with good education have the ability to alleviate the family's quality of life. This could lead mothers to set higher educational aspirations for their adolescent children.

4.3 Differential treatment of single fathers and single mothers on male and female adolescents

Results in Table 2 show that single fathers were less helpful towards their son's school activities but were more supportive towards their daughter's school functioning. The results contradict the notion of same-sex socialization behaviors in parents, in which fathers were said to be more likely to be involved in their son's development (Updegraff, et al., 2009). Instead, fathers in this study take more measures to encourage, support and assist their daughter's school-related activities. They are also more involved in their daughters' schoolwork. Perhaps, the cross-gender distance allow single fathers to exhibit role as a parent and coach as opposed to a friend, hence improve parental involvement in daughter's schoolwork (Lee, et al., 2007). Another possible explanation is, fathers are more concerned and protective over their daughter's survival skills and reputation (Crockett, Brown, Iturbide, Russell, & Wilkinson-Lee, 2009), while with sons, fathers adopt parenting practices to prevent their sons from involving in delinquency and behavioral problems. As a result, the fathers' involvement with their daughters is more directed towards enhancing their education capital.

In contrast to the single fathers, single mothers in this study tend to be more concerned with the male adolescents' educational attainment (Table 3). The single mothers would venture a significantly higher quality of educational practices for their sons when compared to their daughters. The findings revealed that the single mothers participate more in their sons' school activities. Based on the findings we suspect an opposite-sex parenting preference in the single parenting setting. The single parents may be well aware of the implications of the absence of the opposite-sex parent, thus resulting in them making extra effort to parent the opposite-sex adolescents.

4.4 Associates of adolescent's academic achievement in single father household

Results of correlation analysis (Table 4) showed that educational goals of single fathers correlated significantly and positively with their monitoring behaviors. Fathers' parenting practices are also found to relate positively with adolescents' academic achievement. Specifically, high educational involvement will contribute to greater academic milestones. The father's aspirations for adolescent academic success would lead to higher parental monitoring. It suggests that fathers see monitoring as a more effective way to ensure academic success compared to participating actively in school-related activities. This is somewhat consistent with the notion of the father as a 'disciplinarian' for their children (Ho, 1987). However, fathers' active involvement in school activities is very important to assist adolescents' academic success. Fathers who are dedicated to provide the best parenting practices will be more involved in school activities, hence motivating the child to attain academic rewards. In single father families, involvement is the key function to academic achievement.

4.5 Associates of adolescent's academic achievement in single mother household

The zero order analyses show that single mothers' educational goals are positively linked to parenting practices, educational involvement and monitoring behaviors (see Table 5). However, educational aspiration does not correlate directly to adolescents' academic achievement. Indeed, adolescents' academic achievement shows significant and positive relationships with parenting practice, parental school involvement and parental monitoring behavior. Overall, maternal parenting brings about a stronger impact on adolescents' school achievement, given that all statistical significant relationships have larger magnitudes when compared to paternal parenting.

5. Discussions

We observed an opposite-sex parenting orientation among single fathers and mothers in this study. Data revealed that single fathers tend to be more involved in their daughter's school development, whereas single mothers dedicate more parenting effort to their son's academic progress. The findings are inconsistent with the notion of "same sex" parenting orientation in the family context, that is, parents tend to be more involved in bringing up the same-sex child, and that the child will be better off if same sex parents raise him or her up. Also, in contradiction with past studies suggesting adolescents who live in the absence of a same sex single parent may have greater threats of developing alcohol and delinquency behaviors (Eitle, 2006), the present study finds that single parent families are as competent as two-parent families in facilitating adolescents' academic achievement. Perhaps, knowing the limitations of their family structures, single parent are likely to spend more time and effort on parenting the opposite sex adolescents. In other words, single fathers or single mothers try to compensate the lost of the other same-sex parent by devoting more parenting effort to the adolescents. Also, single parents may perceive that they face fewer risks in parenting the same sex adolescents, thus placing less emphasis on parenting them. These findings results in implications on the study of opposite-sex parenting in other family settings, given the demonstration of its potential buffering effects in high risk families .

The present study indicates that perceived educational goals are higher in single mothers than in single fathers. High learning aspirations in single mothers also direct greater parenting practices, such as, school involvement and

monitoring behaviors. However, single fathers tend to adopt higher monitoring measures when they possess higher educational aspirations. The differences suggest that quality of parenting goals and practices are distinct between single fathers and single mothers. The present study also provides implications that setting parenting goals is pertinent in parenting. Higher parental goals would lead to constructive parenting practices, and since single mothers set higher learning expectations on adolescents' academic achievement, they tend to be active socialization agents in adolescents' school activities.

In distinguishing the effectiveness of parental involvement and monitoring behaviors in the context of facilitating academic achievement, we find the magnitudes in the zero order relationships between involvement and academic achievement larger than monitoring and academic achievement. Overall, parental school involvement is linked stronger to academic achievement in single father families. This can be due to involvement in the form of active and responsive parenting behavior. While monitoring is also an active parenting, it is more demanding. Our findings suggest the importance of parental school involvement in obtaining academic success. We suggest that more attention should be given on efforts to increase school involvement of single fathers in the school context. As noted by Klein and Pallerin (2004), fathers are less likely to see themselves as a nurturer and they normally shy away from active involvement in "feminized" school environments (such as dealing with female school-teachers, and mother parents); thus involvement of fathers in school activities should be more encouraged.

In the conclusion of this study, we come to see the logical theoretical linkages between adolescents' development and specific socialization processes that involve the single parents. The internalized values that the parents hold for their adolescents' academic success establish a platform for what to expect, what to aim for, what to do, and what to avoid, in pursuing a better educational attainment for their schooling adolescent children. These parental perceptions about academic do's and don'ts are exemplified in the parents' school involvement and monitoring behaviors, and they facilitate actions to support the learning of children at home, school and community. While parental educational goals is postulated to play a fundamental role in the enactment of school support practices, this present study, however, does not derive a direct interaction between goals and adolescents' academic achievement. Instead, it is what the parents 'actually do' that matters the most to the adolescents' academic success. Both single father and single mother households provide evidence that appropriate parental involvement and monitoring are keystones to adolescents' academic performance. The structural limitations of single parent families can triumph over adversities perceived as limiting adolescents' development. Instead of the structural-functionalism approach, the present study adopts the family process approach that contributes a more dynamic view on the family unit and its plasticity for adaptation. Werner's (1987) study on resilient children reveals the importance of care-giving quality and support in overcoming children's life adversities. In the context of this study, the single parenting setting could be a risk factor to adolescents' development; nonetheless, parenting quality and practices play meaningful roles in developing adolescents' well-being in spite of the structural limitations.

The findings of this study must be viewed in the context of its limitations. Firstly, there are relatively few single father respondents in the study due to limited access and contact with single fathers. Secondly, we used parents' self-reports of their own parenting practices; therefore the information reflects the lack of a multi perspective of parenting practices and adolescents' well-being. Adolescents may be better informants of their own well-being and using adolescents' report could yield better results for the study.

Notwithstanding these limitations, findings from this study have important implications for families, particularly for single parents who are raising adolescent children. More importantly, the well-being of both single fathers and single mothers should be emphasized in national campaigns addressing the issue, with current understanding that healthy and resourceful parents are able to provide unvarying care and support for their adolescents in diverse family stages or circumstances.

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Table 1. Differences in parental goals and parental practices (involvement and monitoring) between single mothers and single fathers

Variables	Single Father		Single Mother		Df	t	P
	M (SD)	n	M (SD)	N			
Parental educational goal	30.90(3.94)	30	34.08(5.21)	60	88	-2.95	0.01
Parental practices	83.67(23.47)	30	75.65(24.80)	60	88	1.47	0.15
-school involvement	69.50(24.05)	30	62.57(21.27)	60	52.21	1.34	0.19
-monitoring	14.17(4.41)	60	13.08(4.59)	60	88	1.07	0.29

Table 2. Differences in parental goals and parental practices (involvement and monitoring) of single fathers towards male and female adolescents

Variables	Male adolescent		Female adolescent		Df	t	P
	M (SD)	n	M (SD)	N			
Parental educational goals	30.00(2.89)	13	31.59(4.56)	17	28	-1.10	0.28
Parental practices	74.08(21.85)	13	91.00(22.55)	17	28	-2.06	0.05
-school involvement	58.77(20.25)	13	77.71(23.99)	17	28	-2.29	.03
-monitoring	15.31(3.92)	13	13.29(4.67)	17	28	1.25	.22

Table 3. Differences in parental goals and parental practices (involvement and monitoring) of single mothers towards male and female adolescents

<i>Variables</i>	<i>Male</i>		<i>Female</i>		<i>Df</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>N</i>			
Parental educational goals	33.88(6.31)	24	34.22(4.42)	36	58	-.25	.80
Parental practices	67.04(18.86)	24	81.39(26.80)	36	-2.43	57.79	.02
-school involvement	54.54(15.66)	24	67.92(22.98)	36	-2.68	57.95	.01
-monitoring	12.5(4.08)	24	13.47(4.91)	36	-.80	58	.43

Table 4. Correlation results for single fathers' parental educational goal, involvement, monitoring and adolescents' academic achievement

Variables	1	2	3	4	5
1. Parental educational goal	1	-	-	-	-
2. Parental practice	.21	1	-	-	-
3. Parental school involvement	.13	.98**	1	-	-
4. Parental monitoring	.42*	-.04	-.22	1	-
5. Academic achievement	.16	.49**	.49**	-.08	1

note.*p<0.05; ** p< 0.01

Table 5. Correlation results for single mothers' parental educational goal, involvement, monitoring and adolescents' academic achievement

Variables	1	2	3	4	5
1. Parental educational goal	1	-	-	-	-
2. Parenting practice	.46**	1	-	-	-
3. Parental school involvement	.41**	.99*	1	-	-
4. Parental monitoring	.56**	.81**	.73**	1	-
5. Academic achievement	.24	.53**	.51**	.47**	1

note.*p<0.05; ** p< 0.01