Exploring the link between school supports and child adjustment outcomes among children growing up in single-parent families: A scoping review

Lyndsey Blake Johnson

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Committee:

Melissa Martinson

Emiko Tajima

Joy Roos

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University of Washington

Abstract

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Lyndsey Blake Johnson

Chair of the Supervisory Committee:

Melissa Martinson

School of Social Work

When considering a child's development, the family structure in which they are raised remains an integral part of their growth. Beyond research that focuses on the impact and prevention of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) among children who are raised in complex family structures (e.g., single-parent families), literature has more recently focused on the impact for children in these households to engage in opportunities that promote positive child adjustment and resiliency. As children spend a large portion of their development within schools, understanding the ways in which these environments provide supports that promote positive child adjustment within single-parent families is pertinent. While there has been a contemporary shift in research as it now examines pathways to resilience among children in single-parent families, that research has not been integrated or summarized for the purpose of action or future

directions of the field. To address this gap, the current scoping review aims to synthesize past research conducted on school supports and the promotion of positive child adjustment among single-parent families. With consideration for risk and resiliency and socio-ecological theories, the following research questions are addressed: 1) *In what ways do school supports promote positive child adjustment, particularly among those raised in a single-parent household?* and 2), *What are the gaps in existing literature that may guide future research to continue supporting children and single-parent families within their schools and households?*

Utilizing PRISMA analysis and a systematic search process, results of the final research study sample (n=4) indicate that schools supports, specifically positive school climates, do positively impact academic adjustment and risk and socio-behavioral adjustment among children living in single-parent homes. Overall, one study utilized targeted interventions to explore child engagement with risk and antisocial behaviors, one study used a multimodal digital literacy curriculum to explore child social behaviors, and two studies utilized school climate reports to determine academic achievement. From the synthesis of studies conducted on this topic, this review suggests the need for further research to explore topics including specific prevention/intervention strategies, potential changes in school environments and staffing structures, and targeted psycho- and socio-emotional education within schools.

Exploring the link between school supports and child adjustment outcomes among children growing up in single-parent families: A scoping review

Throughout a child's rearing, the influence of the family structure— the composition of the household and the make-up of the parental/caregiver unit— in which they were raised may drastically impact many elements of their development. Indeed, literature conducted on single and neither biological parent households suggests that children raised in these environments often face a greater number of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), and ultimately may have less access to resources that support them throughout their development (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), 2022). In addition, research on ACEs suggests that prevention decreases the likelihood of mental illness, risky behaviors, and intergenerational trauma, and positively impacts education and employment potential among children (CDC, 2022; Matajsko et al., 2022).

Beyond the prevention of ACEs, research suggests the importance of children living within complex family structures (i.e., single-parent and neither biological parent families), to adequately access opportunities that promote positive child adjustment and resiliency (Murry & Brody, 1999). As children spend a large portion of their development within schools, it is necessary to consider the ways in which these environments specifically provide children from single-parent families with the support systems that promote positive child adjustment outcomes. To this end, the present study aims to synthesize past research conducted on school supports and the promotion of positive child adjustment among children in single-parent families.

Single-Parent Family Structures and Adjustment

Family structures are defined by whether a child lives with two-parents (dual), one parent (single), or neither biological parent (adoptive, foster, or grandparent families, institutionalized children, etc.) (Pasley & Petran, 2015). A single-parent structure may consist of a single mother, a single father, a single parent because of divorce, death of a spouse, separation, or unplanned pregnancy, or single by choice (Lindwall et al., 2011; Stack & Meredith, 2018; Van Gasse & Mortelmans, 2020). In 2019, approximately 23% of children under the age of 18 in the United States (US) were living in a single-parent household, more than any other country in the world. By 2022, nearly 30% of US households were headed by single parents, including nearly 80% of these being single mothers (Pew Research Center, 2019; United States Census Bureau, 2022). While the number of parents in a home does not capture the complexities of families and family structures, extant or considerable research has been conducted on family structure(s) as a predictor of child outcomes.

Early research into single-parent families explored a "family deficit model," specifically focusing on the ways in which children growing up in these families were often more likely to experience maladaptive behaviors within cognitive, emotional, and behavioral development (Marsh, 1990). Moreover, past research focused on how children growing up in these family structures are more likely to experience ACEs and overall risk factors that may lead to maladjustment (Murry & Brody, 1999). For example, single-parent families often experience lower incomes, less parental involvement, and increased barriers to access of community resources (McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994).

Past data and research have also concluded that family structure does indeed play a role in a child's educational outcomes, indicating that children who are raised in a nuclear, dual-

parent family structure have greater educational outcomes than their peers who are raised in a single-parent or neither biological parent households (Brown, 2010). For example, as single parents experience countless demands related to working and caregiving, these parents are often less available to commit time, support, and investment to their child's schooling than those in two-parent households (Jeynes, 2005). In addition, single parents may be less able to offer academic encouragement, guidance, and financial support to their children in any further educational endeavors (Astone & McLanahan, 1991; Amato et al., 2015). Taken together, single-family structure has important implications for child outcomes across social, behavioral, and academic domains.

Single-Parent Family Structures and Protective Factors

Given the above data presented on overall adjustment within single-parent families, researchers have become particularly interested in understanding protective factors for single-parent homes (Chavda & Nisarga, 2023). Furthermore, past research in this field has often focused on showcasing the negative outcomes that children experience when raised in a single-parent home, rather than inquiring about the ways to protect and promote resiliency among these families (Chavda & Nisarga, 2023).

Within research on children and adolescents, researchers have studied resilience in relation to patterns of positive adaptation during or after exposure to adversities or risks that could harm their development (Luthar, 2006; Masten, 2007). When considering the many systems (e.g., home, school, peers, community) that children interact with during their development, it is necessary to understand the ways in which the intersections of these systems influence a child's capacity to be resilient (Masten et al., 2008; Masten, 2003). Furthermore, from a socio-ecological perspective, it is helpful to consider the interaction between family

structure(s) and the education environment as the home and school remain as two prominent microsystems within a child's development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). As children spend most of their time growing up within these immediate environments, it is necessary to understand how a child's interactions with home and school, as well as the individuals within, can influence outcomes.

Within single-parent households, recent research suggests that some of the most intensive promoters of resiliency for children begin with the parent-child relationship itself. Furthermore, as research has suggested that single parents often struggle to engage with their children through effective communication, boundary/expectation setting, support, and warmth, it is imperative that these parents have access to effective education and coaching on how to provide the utmost care (Chavda & Nisarga, 2023; Hetherington & Elmor, 2003; Baer, 1999).

For children raised in homes with one parent, there is an increased likelihood to drop out of school before graduation, have poorer grades, and have decreased overall academic performance (Anderson, 2014). Thus, research indicates that it is vital for a child's wellbeing that they receive adequate support and engagement within school environments. Moreover, scholars and practitioners assert that schools that provide ample partnership and service for children and their single parents can empower these families and therefore foster resiliency (Noguera, 2004).

School as a Protective Factor

In the United States, children spend about 40 hours per week in a school environment. Thus, research has been dedicated to exploring how these settings protect child outcomes as they serve as a crucial system influencing development. Masten (2018) suggests that regardless of adversities that children face, school contexts foster resiliency for children as they can

experience success, achievement, intrinsic motivation, self-efficacy, and persistence in the face of failure. Overall, schools help to ameliorate risk factors that students face when they provide supportive educators, relevant curriculum, and opportunities for meaningful participation (Benard, 1991).

As children spend less time with family compared to their school colleagues (including teachers, instructional assistants, friends, peers, etc.), there is increased importance in the connection and function of schools (Larson & Richards, 1991). Furthermore, it is imperative that children feel supported and connected to their school environment, as this setting is formative in a child's development and exploration of the self (Bandura, 2005). Engaging children in a "positive school environment" (also referred to as "positive school climate,") is crucial to supporting and promoting positive development, wellbeing, and resiliency.

The National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments (NCSSLE) defines *positive school climates* as, "…the product of a school's attention to fostering safety; promoting a supportive academic, disciplinary, and physical environment; and encouraging and maintaining respectful, trusting, and caring relationships throughout the school community no matter the setting—from Pre-K/Elementary School to higher education," (NCSSLE, 2023). Beyond supporting school success issues (i.e., attendance, academic achievement, and retention), positive school environments are also fundamental in supporting the child, overall, including elements of their mental and physical safety, cultural competence, and relationship development (Cohen, 2013; NCSSLE, 2023). Cohen (2013) argues that when schools aim to measure and improve their school climate, the entire school community and the whole child benefit from this process. Furthermore, Brooks and Goldstein (2001) assert that when children can develop social,

emotional, and civic competencies within school environments that remain safe and supportive, they are likely to in turn develop behaviors that promote resiliency.

Generally, schools provide students with opportunities to develop healthy adult relationships, especially for children who identify as "at-risk" or come from a more complex family structure (Masten, 2018). More specifically, researchers have been exploring the ways in which positive student/teacher relationships are a protective factor for children, regardless of the child's family structure (Finn, 1993; Marks, 2000). Wentzel (1999), Murdock (1999), and Bowen (2000) discovered that when students perceive teachers as supportive and/or caring, they also report greater levels of motivation, academic success, and positive school behavior compared to students who perceive negative teacher support. In addition, Johns (2001) and Woolley & Bowen (2007) suggest that supportive adults in schools are also particularly important for racially or ethnically diverse children, as well as children who may be exposed to "environmental risk." Thus, this research suggests that regardless of family structures, schools that provide positive, student/teacher relationships are positively impacting child academic and social outcomes.

Current Study

While a large body of research has been dedicated to investigating the ways in which schools positively support child adjustment and promote resiliency among children in single-parent families, it is important to note how most research conducted has not been integrated or summarized for the purpose of action or future directions within the field (Huang et al., 2017). To better understand areas of conducted research in this field and literature gaps, this scoping review will explore and synthesize literature on how positive school supports promote positive child adjustment among students within single-parent families.

This review aims to answer the following research questions: 1) *In what ways do school supports promote positive child adjustment, particularly among those raised in a single-parent household?* and 2) *What are the gaps in existing literature that may guide future research to continue supporting children and single-parent families within their schools and households?*

To better understand the ways in which positive school environments impact a child's adjustment, it is imperative to first explore existing literature regarding this topic. Furthermore, by synthesizing past research conducted on factors in schools that promote positive adjustment among children in single-parent households, researchers will be more readily prepared to conduct future research that can focus on increasing positive child adjustment within schools and home.

Methods

Scoping Review

To achieve the aims of the present study, a scoping review was deemed appropriate for the following reasons. First, as literature addressing school supports and child adjustment spans social science disciplines, there is often ambiguity in definitions. Because of the ability to examine broad areas of knowledge, scoping reviews are useful in bringing clarity to concepts and definitions (Lockwood et al., 2019). This scoping review will follow PRISMA analysis and reporting guidelines. Second, scoping reviews are considered exploratory projects that summarize data and evidence (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005). To the author's knowledge, no other existing work has reviewed literature on school supports and child adjustment outcomes within single-parent families. Furthermore, for this area of study that has not been comprehensively reviewed before, a scoping review will allow for identification of future research opportunities

(Arksey & O'Malley, 2005). Finally, scoping reviews have enhanced methodological rigor as they are systematic for replicability.

Arksey and O'Malley (2005) describe the following guidelines for scoping reviews: (1), identifying the research question; (2), identifying relevant studies; (3), study selection; (4), charting the data; and (5), organizing, summarizing, and reporting results. The approach within the current review is detailed below.

Search Strategy

To identify a final sample of articles for this review, a systematic search of databases was conducted. Preliminary searches and consultation with a subject area librarian resulted in a comprehensive search string using Boolean logic and truncation. The string was entered into two databases, including ERIC and Web of Science. The search was confined to peer-reviewed literature in English, and no grey literature or dissertations were considered. A date limit of 20 years was selected, excluding literature prior to 2004. After this step, the author manually scanned the references of each article included in the final sample (i.e., backward search), as well as the list of articles that have since cited each publication (i.e., forward search). One additional article was deemed relevant to the current review (see Figure 1).

To address all variables of the research questions, including school supports, school-aged children, children from single-parent homes, and resiliency/positive childhood adjustment behaviors, the search strings included:

> ***ERIC:***
> *(DE ("Junior High School Students" OR "Middle School Students" OR "Early Adolescents" OR "Latchkey Children" OR "Migrant Children" OR "Minority Group Children" OR "Preadolescents" OR "Adolescents" OR "Young Children" OR "Children") OR TI("boy" OR "boys" OR boyfriend OR boyhood OR girl* OR kid OR kids OR child* OR preadolescen* OR pubescen* OR puberty OR adolescen* OR juvenil* OR children* OR teen* OR "minor" OR minors OR "under age*" OR "under the age*" OR schoolchild* OR "school-age*" OR K-12* OR K12 OR "1st-grade*" OR "first-grade*"*

OR "grade 1" OR "grade one" OR "2nd-grade" OR "second-grade*" OR "grade 2" OR "grade two" OR "3rd-grade*" OR "third-grade*" OR "grade 3" OR "grade three" OR "4th-grade*" OR "fourth-grade*" OR "grade 4" OR "grade four" OR "5th-grade*" OR "fifth-grade*" OR "grade 5" OR "grade five" OR "6th-grade*" OR "sixth-grade*" OR "grade 6" OR "grade six" OR "7th-grade*" OR "seventh-grade*" OR "grade 7" OR "grade seven" OR "8th-grade*" OR "eight-grade*" OR "grade 8" OR "grade eight" OR "9th-grade*" OR "ninth-grade*" OR "grade 9" OR "grade nine" OR "10th-grade*" OR "tenth-grade*" OR "grade 10" OR "grade ten" OR "11th-grade*" OR "eleventh-grade*" OR "grade 11" OR "grade eleven" OR "12th-grade*" OR "twelfth-grade*" OR "grade 12" OR "grade twelve" OR schooler* OR preschooler* OR kindergartener* OR "primary school*" OR "elementary school*" OR "middle school*" OR "junior high*" OR "secondary school*" OR "high school*" OR highschool* OR pediatric* OR paediatric* OR peadiatric) OR AB("boy" OR "boys" OR boyfriend OR boyhood OR girl* OR kid OR kids OR child* OR preadolescen* OR pubescen* OR puberty OR adolescen* OR juvenil* OR children* OR teen* OR "minor" OR minors OR "under age*" OR "under the age*" OR schoolchild* OR "school-age*" OR K-12* OR K12 OR "1st-grade*" OR "first-grade*" OR "grade 1" OR "grade one" OR "2nd-grade*" OR "second-grade*" OR "grade 2" OR "grade two" OR "3rd-grade*" OR "third-grade*" OR "grade 3" OR "grade three" OR "4th-grade*" OR "fourth-grade*" OR "grade 4" OR "grade four" OR "5th-grade*" OR "fifth-grade*" OR "grade 5" OR "grade five" OR "6th-grade*" OR "sixth-grade*" OR "grade 6" OR "grade six" OR "7th-grade*" OR "seventh-grade*" OR "grade 7" OR "grade seven" OR "8th-grade*" OR "eight-grade*" OR "grade 8" OR "grade eight" OR "9th-grade*" OR "ninth-grade*" OR "grade 9" OR "grade nine" OR "10th-grade*" OR "tenth-grade*" OR "grade 10" OR "grade ten" OR "11th-grade*" OR "eleventh-grade*" OR "grade 11" OR "grade eleven" OR "12th-grade*" OR "twelfth-grade*" OR "grade 12" OR "grade twelve" OR schooler* OR preschooler* OR kindergartener* OR "primary school*" OR "elementary school*" OR "middle school*" OR "junior high*" OR "secondary school*" OR "high school*" OR highschool* OR pediatric* OR paediatric* OR peadiatric)) AND (DE("One Parent Family" OR "Fatherless Family") OR TI("single parent*" OR "single mother*" OR "single father*" OR "one parent" OR "lone parent*" OR (children W1 divorce*)) OR AB("single parent*" OR "single mother*" OR "single father*" OR "one parent" OR "lone parent*" OR (children W1 divorce*))) AND (DE ("Childhood Needs" OR "Student Needs") OR TI("school needs" OR "educational needs" OR "school support*" OR "educational support*" OR ((child* OR "adolescent*" OR teen* OR student*) N2 needs) OR "special need*") OR AB("school needs" OR "educational needs" OR "school support*" OR "educational support*" OR "school climate*" OR "classroom*" OR ((child* OR "adolescent*" OR teen* OR student*) N2 needs) OR "special need*"))*

Web of Science:

TS=("boy" OR "boys" OR boyfriend OR boyhood OR girl OR kid OR kids OR child* OR preadolescen* OR pubescen* OR puberty OR adolescen* OR juvenil* OR children* OR teen* OR "minor" OR minors OR "under age*" OR "under the age*" OR schoolchild* OR "school-age*" OR K-12* OR K12 OR "1st-grade*" OR "first-grade*" OR "grade 1" OR "grade one" OR "2nd-grade*" OR "second-grade*" OR "grade 2" OR "grade two" OR "3rd-grade*" OR "third-grade*" OR "grade 3" OR "grade three" OR "4th-grade*" OR "fourth-grade*" OR "grade 4" OR "grade four" OR "5th-grade*" OR "fifth-grade*"*

OR "grade 5" OR "grade five" OR "6th-grade" OR "sixth-grade*" OR "grade 6" OR "grade six" OR "7th-grade*" OR "seventh-grade*" OR "grade 7" OR "grade seven" OR "8th-grade*" OR "eight-grade*" OR "grade 8" OR "grade eight" OR "9th-grade*" OR "ninth-grade*" OR "grade 9" OR "grade nine" OR "10th-grade*" OR "tenth-grade*" OR "grade 10" OR "grade ten" OR "11th-grade*" OR "eleventh-grade*" OR "grade 11" OR "grade eleven" OR "12th-grade*" OR "twelfth-grade*" OR "grade 12" OR "grade twelve" OR schooler* OR preschooler* OR kindergartener* OR "primary school*" OR "elementary school*" OR "middle school*" OR "junior high*" OR "secondary school*" OR "high school*" OR highschool* OR pediatric* OR paediatric* OR peadiatric)*

AND

TS=("single parent" OR "single mother*" OR "single father*" OR "one parent" OR "lone parent" OR (children NEAR/1 divorce*))*

AND

TS=("school needs" OR "educational needs" OR "school support" OR "school climate*" OR "educational support*" OR ((child* OR "adolescent*" OR teen* OR student*) NEAR/2 needs) OR "special need*")*

AND

TS=(school OR education* OR teacher* OR principal* OR pupil* OR student*)*

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Given that the current paper focuses on supports within schools that promote resiliency or positive childhood adjustment, inclusion and exclusion criteria were included throughout the search process for gathering the final study sample.

The following represents inclusion criteria for articles: (1) quantitative and qualitative studies; (2) studies conducted in the United States; (3) studies written in English; (4) studies with an age range of kindergarten through 12th grade; (5) studies published after 2004; (6) and studies that address resiliency and/or positive child adjustment behaviors.

Studies were excluded if they were: (1) not conducted in the United States; (2) written in a language other than English; (3) did not address resiliency and/or positive child adjustment; (4) published before 2004, and (5) not relevant to single-parent families.

After conducting the searches using the terms above, results were imported into Rayyan, a web application for systematic and scoping reviews (Ouzzani et al., 2016). The initial 229 search results were input into Rayyan, and 12 duplicates were removed using Rayyan's automatic deduplicate tool. The remaining 217 articles were reviewed utilizing inclusion and exclusion criteria against titles and abstracts. Of the 217 articles, 29 articles were considered necessary for full-text review, where 26 articles were further excluded. This left three articles to be included in the final sample. Finally, forward and backward searches yielded 799 potential articles, of which one article was fit for inclusion. During this stage, a secondary coder collaborated with the author to discuss article eligibility, the coding of research, and to reconcile any discrepancies within the coding process to establish reliability and avoid error in data entry.

Results

Four articles met the inclusion criteria. Figure 1 (see Appendix A) is a PRISMA flow diagram which shows the total number of articles screened after the search strategy was finalized and characteristics of the final study sample. Table 1 (see Appendix B) highlights the sample characteristics for the studies included, while Table 2 (see Appendix C) highlights each study's characteristics.

The following sections summarize (1) participant characteristics, (2) methodologies, (3) how single-parent family structures were measured, (4) how child adjustment was measured, (5) the outcomes of child adjustment, (6) definitions of school support, (7) how school supports were measured, and (8) relevant findings.

Methodologies

Three of the four studies were quantitative (Connell et al., 2007; O'Malley et al., 2015; Huang et al., 2017), while one study was qualitative (Yuan & Grant, 2023). Two studies were longitudinal (Connell et al., 2007; Yuan & Grant, 2023), while two studies were cross-sectional (O'Malley et al., 2015; Huang et al., 2017). Two studies administered self-report, online survey questionnaires across relevant measures; 902 California public high schools utilized the California Healthy Kids Survey (O'Malley et al., 2015) and 415 Virginia public middle schools utilized the Virginia School Safety Audit survey (Huang et al., 2017). One longitudinal case study utilized classroom observations, informal student conversations, author reflections, and digital artifact collections of two second-grade students (Yuan & Grant, 2023).

One longitudinal study was experimental and incorporated a randomized control trial (RCT) using universal and targeted school intervention programs (Connell et al., 2007). Within this experiment, students were assigned to a control trial (n = 498) or intervention trial (n = 500) during their sixth-grade year. In addition, a select number of students (n=115) from the intervention trial were also placed into a targeted intervention group, known as the "Family Check-Up," (Connell et al., 2007). In sixth grade, all students participating in the study were asked about "deviant peer involvement," (e.g., student reports of the number of times they engaged with peers who get into trouble, fight, steal, and/or smoke tobacco) and family conflict. In addition, in grades 6-9 and 11, all students were surveyed on drug use and antisocial behaviors (paid $20 per assessment), and with parent permission, court records were searched for students between ages of 11-17. In addition, teachers of the sixth-grade students were given a 16-item questionnaire on the students' risk behavior. At age 19, students were given The Composite

International Diagnostic Interview to identify lifetime substance abuse diagnoses (Connell et al., 2007).

Participant Characteristics

Within the sample, studies were conducted in the Northwest, Southwest, Southeast, and Northeast of the United States, and included representation from both urban and rural areas. Two out of the four studies included minoritized samples (Yuan & Grant, 2023; O'Malley et al., 2015), while the remaining two studies had predominantly White American samples (Connell et al., 2007; Huang et al.). One study's sample included second-grade, male students (n=2) who were both identified as low-income/low-socioeconomic status (SES) based on family reports (Yuan & Grant, 2023). Of the remaining three studies, samples included children in middle adolescence. One study (n = 998) included children between the ages of 11-17 (no mean age available), with a gender makeup of 526 (52.7%) male and 427 (47.3%) female students. No SES measure was included within this study (Connell et al., 2007). Another study (n=305,956) included students from 9th (61.6%) and 11th (38.4%) grades with a recorded M_{age} = 15.06 years. SES was not reported within this study, and the gender makeup incorporated 52.4% female students (O'Malley et al., 2015). The final study (n=56,508) focused on sampling 7th (50%) and 8th (50%) grade students (no mean age available), with a gender makeup that was 51.7% female. This sample incorporated a measure of SES (M_{SES} = 3.42), utilizing child scaled reports of their parent's highest level of education, where '1' indicated "did not graduate from high school," and '5' indicated "graduated from postgraduate program" (Huang et al., 2017). Among the four studies, it is important to note the large range of sample sizes present.

Measurement of Single-Parent Families

In three out of the four studies, single -parent families were determined by student reports within a survey (Connell et al., 2007; O'Malley et al., 2015; Huang et al., 2017). In one study, children reported whether they had a biological father present during their sixth-grade year. Results indicated that 585 (58.6%) families had biological fathers present (Connell et al., 2007). In another study, children were asked, "How many parents live with you?" Response options were categorized into three groups: living with two parents, one parent, or no parents. Students living in a single-parent family represented 24.8% of the sample (Huang et al., 2017). In the third study, children were asked, "What best describes where you live?" Twelve total response options were classified into four categories: living with two parents, one parent, foster-care, or homeless. 26.6% of students identified that they live in homes with one parent (O'Malley et al., 2015). Within the fourth study, the assessment process and reporter of single-parent families is unclear (Yuan & Grant, 2023).

Definition and Measurement of School Supports

School Climate

The definition and measurement of school supports varied across all four studies. For two of the four studies (O'Malley et al., 2015; Huang et al., 2017), researchers utilized the following definition of 'school climate' within their investigation: "The quality and character of school life," which is derived from "patterns of people's experiences of school life and reflects norms, goals, values, interpersonal relationships, teaching, learning and leadership practices, and organizational structures," (Cohen et al., 2009). To measure school climate, O'Malley et al. (2015) evaluated and averaged student reports of school connectedness, relationships with adults at school, opportunities for students to meaningfully participate in school, and their perceived

school safety. Huang et al. (2017) measured school climate by evaluating and averaging student reports of disciplinary structure (e.g., items related to perceived fairness and strictness of school rules), academic expectations (e.g., items related to student perceptions of how much teachers expect in work), and student supports (e.g., items related to overall perceptions of supportiveness of student-teacher relationships).

Family and Student Services

In another study, the defined school support was a universal intervention program for both middle schoolers and their parents to (1), support parents' supervision, involvement, and management of their children, and (2), identify and motivate the parents of high-risk children to engage in an active family management process (Connell et al., 2007). In addition, researchers utilized a targeted intervention ("Family Check- Up") to motivate parents to improve their parenting practices as needed. These interventions were designed to combine services provided within schools and the community that promote the wellbeing and improved behavior of children (Connell et al., 2007). Within the middle schools, a Family Resource Center (FRC) was established to provide SHAPe Curriculum to students on the topics of school success, healthy decision-making, positive peer relationships, respect, coping with stress and anger, and problem-solving. The universal intervention was six in-person sessions facilitated by a parent consultant, and incorporated activities for parents and students (Connell et al., 2007). The intervention, known as the "Family Check-Up," incorporated three lessons of motivational interviewing and was specifically offered to families of high-risk children in seventh and eighth grades, with "high-risk" being determined by teacher reports (Connell et al., 2007). Families attended an initial interview, an assessment session, and a feedback session based on parent-child interactions. Families then decided with a parent consultant on further services that may be

appropriate for the family (Connell et al., 2007). Of the 115 families participating in the “Family Check-Up," only 88 families continued with further services.

Curriculum and Classroom Instruction

In the final study, school support was in the form of an altered version of a state-mandated curriculum on balanced literacy (e.g., phonics, comprehension strategies) and holistic literacy (e.g., reading of authentic literature, composing in response to text) where the teacher engaged students through multimodal (digital) literacy experiences (Yuan & Grant, 2023). Researchers aimed to deviate from today’s “standardized, print-centered, and bodily restricted” practices occurring within urban public schools by increasing multimodal, digital literacy experiences (Dyson, 2015, 2020; Yuan & Grant, 2023). Furthermore, Yuan and Grant (2023) believed that this could reduce the amount of suppression BIPOC children may experience with standardized learning curricula, and rather increase the opportunity for creativity and meaning making.

Within the study, the digital literacy curriculum was focused on students studying personal narratives and then utilizing multimodal communicative practices for students to "publish" their written stories. This support was measured through classroom observations, informal student conversations, author reflections, and obtaining digital artifacts. Researchers then utilized an open/axial coding process, followed by reapplying theoretical constructs to interpret student identities and experiences (Yuan & Grant, 2023).

Measurement of Child Adjustment

Child adjustment was measured in various ways. In two studies, child adjustment was referred to as academic achievement of students. Within these studies, students reported their grades after being asked, “What were your grades like on your last report card?” Students were

given multiple response options using letter grades (e.g., “all As,” “mostly As and one B,” “mostly Bs,”), which were then converted into Grade Point Averages (GPA) by researchers (O’Malley et al., 2015; Huang et al., 2017). Another study utilized both student and teacher reports, arrest records from ages 11-17, and any diagnosis of a substance-use related disorder(s) as assessments of child adjustment factors (Connell et al., 2007). Within this study, students were asked to report substance use, antisocial behaviors (e.g., lying, skipping school, staying out at night without permission, stealing, panhandling, and carrying a weapon), deviant peer involvement (e.g., time spent with peers who get into trouble, fight, steal, smoke), and the frequency of family conflict. In addition, teachers were asked to report student engagement with problem behaviors, including aggression, oppositionality, peer relationship challenges, disliking school, and moodiness (Connell et al., 2007). In the fourth study, the promotion of creativity, inclusivity, and educational equity was assessed as factors of child adjustment (Yuan & Grant, 2023).

Relevant Findings

Effects on Academic Adjustment

For two of the four studies, child adjustment outcomes were measured by exploring the rates of student academic achievement (GPA) and achievement gap based on reported perceptions of school climate. Researchers discovered that regardless of family structure, when students indicated higher perceptions of school climate, they self-reported higher GPAs (O’Malley et al., 2015; Huang et al., 2017). Moreover, researchers determined that positive school climates serve as promotive factors for students who identify with more “at-risk family structures,” meaning any child that does not live with two parents at home (O’Malley et al., 2015; Huang et al., 2017). In addition, Huang et al. (2017) noted that for students who do not

reside with any biological parents, “supportive and academically demanding” school climates provide greater protective factors, specifically mentioning the role that positive teacher-child relationships play for these students.

Within Huang et al.’s (2017) additional exploration of socio-economic status as it relates to diverse family structures and the impacts of school climate, the researchers mentioned the difficulties in distinguishing the direct effects of SES on academic achievement. However, the researchers did conclude that even when controlling for this variable, students residing with fewer than two parents reported lower academic achievement.

Finally, Yuan & Grant (2023) discovered that the use of artistic and cultural resources through the multimodal digital curriculum allowed for students to expand their writing skills and engage with their complex identities.

Effects on Risk & Socio-Behavioral Adjustment

In one study, researchers explored child adjustment outcomes by examining the rates of student engagement with antisocial behaviors, their arrest rates, and any substance use diagnoses throughout middle to late adolescence (Connell et al., 2007). Researchers discovered that positive school supports (i.e., one universal and one targeted school interventions) led to a decrease in students’ display of risk and externalizing behaviors (Connell et al., 2007). Furthermore, findings from Connell et al. (2007) suggested that the targeted school intervention (the “Family Check-Up”) significantly reduced the risk for students to (1) engage in antisocial behaviors among peers, (2) use alcohol, tobacco, and marijuana, (3) engage in risky behaviors that lead to arrest, and (4) receive a substance use disorder diagnosis. Overall, students reported by teachers as having “problem behaviors” as well as student reports of increased family conflict and/or absence of a father at home were predictors of engagement with the targeted intervention.

In addition, researchers noted that the absence of a father within a child's home was a factor related to caregivers' willingness to participate in the targeted intervention (Connell et al., 2007).

In another study, child adjustment outcomes were understood as whether the two children were able to "make meaning" of their digital storytelling projects, as well as engage in less frequent negative behaviors (Yuan & Grant, 2023). Researchers found that when students are given the opportunity to engage with multimodal digital literacy experiences (e.g., communication, play, creativity), they experience more enhanced, positive social and cognitive behaviors (Yuan & Grant, 2023). Moreover, researchers found that the two children of focus displayed greater social health, communication, attention, and cognitive/control skills from their engagement with the digital literacy experience. As a result of the curriculum, one student (Lei) established more friendships and could talk about his schoolwork more easily at school and home.

Discussion

The current study aimed to explore and synthesize literature on how positive school supports promote positive child adjustment among students within single-parent families. In addition, this study focused on identifying gaps in existing literature to help guide future research. As the sample for this study incorporated four research articles, it is necessary to acknowledge that while these studies broadly overview positive school climates, existing, specified research in this area is limited. However, considering the four studies included in this review, the most basic finding is that school supports, specifically positive school climates, do positively impact academic adjustment and risk and socio-behavioral adjustment among children living in single-parent homes. Within all four studies, researchers concluded that school

supports, as defined in their study, were positively associated with assessments of child adjustment. Overall, one study utilized targeted interventions to explore child engagement with risk and antisocial behaviors, one study used a multimodal digital literacy curriculum to explore child social behaviors, and two studies utilized school climate reports to determine academic achievement.

Another noteworthy finding within the current study involves the ways in which "supportive and academically demanding school climates" positively impact children who live in "at-risk" family structures (Huang et al., 2017; O'Malley et al., 2015). Specifically, as these children reported higher levels of positive perceptions of school climate, they also reported greater levels of academic achievement (see Appendices A and B). While these findings were especially true among children who identified as homeless or living with no biological parents, this finding indicates that positive school climate is a promotive factor for children, particularly the impact of positive teacher-student relationships (Huang et al., 2017; O'Malley et al., 2015). Broadly, when students, particularly "at-risk," feel that they have a positive teacher-student relationship, they are more likely to engage with learning, demonstrate positive behaviors, and perform better academically (Allen et al., 2011; Bergin & Bergin, 2009; Hughes et al., 2008; Podsakoff et al., 2003; Quin, 2016; Wentzel, 2009; Roorda et al., 2011; Gehlbach et al., 2016). These findings highlight the necessity for school environments to promote positive relationships between teachers and students, specifically among students from single-parent families. By doing so, students who may not have as many strong relationships outside of the school context will be provided with opportunities to establish healthy, foundational connections with adults that build resiliency (Masten, 2018).

Additional findings also suggest the importance of positive school climate among students' academic achievement and socio-behavioral adjustment. First, Huang and Eklund (2017) and O'Malley et al. (2015) discovered that regardless of the number of parents in a child's family, positive school supports (i.e., school climate factors) were associated with greater academic achievement. On the other hand, Yuan and Grant (2023) concluded that when children can engage with school supports that encourage creativity and access to cultural resources, they are more likely to engage with and "stay in touch" with their identities. Altogether, these findings are crucial to understanding the impacts of school support and underscore the necessity for opportunities within educational settings for children to engage with creativity and culture throughout their development. Moreover, when children can access these avenues of support, they are fundamentally more likely to experience positive academic and socio-behavioral adjustment, including a greater sense of belonging and school success (Crul, 2018).

With consideration for Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems and risk and resilience theories (Masten, 2003), the findings within the present study reflect the pertinence of positive school supports in promoting positive child adjustment. Moreover, findings from all four included studies suggest that when children from "at-risk" family structures (e.g., single-parent families) are provided specific supports in schools, they experience greater academic and/or socio-behavioral adjustment.

Gaps in Existing Literature

While overall findings within the current study suggest that school supports do indeed impact academic success, engagement in risk behaviors, and broader socio-behavioral adjustment among children in single-parent families, gaps remain in the existing literature that may be used to conduct research in the future.

First, we must note the small sample of research studies (see Figure 1) within the current study as an indicator of an overall lack of published research in this area. As exclusion criteria limited the inclusion of studies prior to 2004, a final sample of 4 studies suggests that this topic is not currently being addressed. It is necessary to consider that as changes in educational practice occur, the impact of certain school supports on families may also change, such as more recent evidence-based interventions and the recent push for greater school-based mental health providers (Sohn, 2024; United States Department of Education, 2024). Moreover, it is likely that contemporary changes in educational practices across the last 20 years, such as more recent evidence-based interventions and the recent push for greater school-based mental health providers, has direct and indirect implications for children from single-parent family structures.

Second, findings within the current sample were largely based on adolescent children from single-parent families. Within the current sample, only one study (Yuan & Grant, 2023) researched children under the age of 11 years old, which uncovers a gap related to research conducted on children and single-parent families during early and middle childhood. Furthermore, the measures of school support within the studies were not targeted towards supporting children throughout specific stages of development (Erikson, 1958). This poses additional questions specifically regarding the difference that these impacts (e.g., targeted interventions) may have if offered to children and families at different developmental stages, such as during pre-K or elementary school.

Another noteworthy finding exists within the four studies' sample characteristics. All four samples explored a diverse range of participant demographics (see Appendix A). Overall, within the four studies, no specific findings were concluded based on sample characteristics (e.g., race, gender, socio-economic status) beyond the number of parents present at home.

Moreover, while all four studies address a range of racial/ethnic groups, not one disaggregates the impact of school supports on child adjustment within the context of race and ethnicity. It is important to consider how the impact of school supports may differ when the single-parent family structure intersects with other identities. For example, immigration status may be a reason for single parenthood, adding additional complexity for child resilience and the need for school supports, yet is not explored within the contexts of these studies. Furthermore, for single-parent immigrant families, additional challenges such as social integration, discrimination, and fear of deportation may arise (Ayón et al., 2017; Shutes, 2022).

Furthermore, we must consider how intersectionality is prominent within the context of child adjustment research (Moffitt et al., 2020), especially as intersectionality underscores the complexity and the many nuances of families and children. To mitigate educational inequities, having a broad understanding of the impact of intersectionality within education research is integral (Evans-Winter, 2021). By considering the backgrounds of children, their intersectional identities and lived experiences, we are more able to understand systems of oppression and privilege that impact children. This gap in existing literature raises further questions around the impact of school supports on children with multiple complex identities. Yuan & Grant (2023) and Connell et al. (2007) address the labeling of children of color in their samples as "underperforming" and/or having "behavioral issues." Within these studies, while researchers concluded that the utilization of a creative curriculum approach (e.g., the multimodal digital literacy curriculum) or targeted interventions allowed students to connect with their identities more, this research does not address whether school supports specifically impact those with multiple intersecting identities. Furthermore, it is unknown whether school supports decrease

labeling of children of color as “problem children,” and associating stigmas, within education (Sowards, 2015).

In addition, factors often associated with single parenthood—including lower socio-economic status, children’s ability to access extracurriculars, and parental participation (McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994)— were not largely discussed within the contexts of these studies. As Huang et al. (2017) controlled for parental socio-economic status, findings concluded overall that students from families with fewer than two parents had lower academic achievement. Researchers suggest that regardless of the difficulty to establish direct effects of factors like socio-economic status on academic achievement, it is necessary to consider other influences that impact single-parent family structures (Huang et al., 2017; Connell et al., 2007). For example, a large body of recent research on single-parent families explores the ways that the United States’ child support system and policies are often not adequate in providing children and their single-parent with financial and custodial resources (Cancian et al., 2007).

These findings indicate that future research is needed on school supports that focus on impacts throughout a variety of systems (e.g., micro, meso, macro) that influence children and families (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). For example, continued research that identifies the potential outcomes of implementing interventions at the school, family, and community level may shed light on the impact these interconnected systems have on student well-being. Similar research conducted at the macro level (e.g., education and child support policies) to identify the ways in which large-scale implementation of supports in schools impact adjustment on children in single-parent households.

Finally, while findings of the current study uncover that varying types of support in schools decrease children engagement with risk and problem behaviors among those in single-

parent homes, the existing literature does not conclude that these supports *increase* positive, prosocial behaviors. While one study (Yuan & Grant, 2023) did address positive outcomes (e.g., increase in creativity and identity awareness), overall, these studies do not assess increases in assets such as social and emotional skills, and positive behaviors. Furthermore, to understand the holistic impact of school supports on children within these family structures, research that also identifies factors that promote and increase positive behaviors is pertinent.

Study Limitations

Within this scoping review, it is necessary to address limitations pertaining to the studies included in the analysis and the chosen methodology overall. For this review, it is important to note how research in the field has often not considered family structure, particularly single-parent homes. Moreover, there is often a lack of interventions taking place for children from single-parent homes, as well as a lack of school involvement overall from these families as they are spread thin (Noguera, 2004).

Second, this review is limited in depth of exploration as exclusion criteria exists, and the small sample size is noteworthy. Furthermore, analyses are limited to only exploring school systems within the United States, children from single-parent homes, and research conducted since 2004. Language within the present study also explicitly examined “parent(s)” of children and did not consider other caregivers and/or guardians that may play a role in caring for a child, which may have limited studies for inclusion in the final sample.

Finally, it is important to address the ways in which school systems have drastically changed over time, especially related to an increased emphasis on targeting and improving mental health and socioemotional skills in schools through prevention and intervention strategies. As educational policies continue to shift towards increasing mental health and

wellbeing for children in schools (Randi & Gould, 2022), continued research on the topic will be pertinent to maintain the utmost relevance to the ways in which these systems impact children and families.

Implications for Practice

As the aim of this scoping review is to explore past research conducted on the ways in which positive school environments may impact a child's academic and socio-behavioral adjustment, particularly those raised in a single-parent household, it is imperative to consider the implications that this review will have within the fields of education, social work, and school psychology. Moreover, this review will provide experts including mental healthcare providers, educators, social workers, and other professionals who serve children, with a synthesis of specific tools within school environments that positively impact a child's development of psychological, social, and emotional skills. For example, this review may be able to provide clinicians with specific school prevention and/or intervention strategies that promote resiliency and positive adjustment outcomes among children raised in single-parent homes. Furthermore, this study highlights key systems of intervention and engagement (e.g., school and family) that impact children. From the synthesis of studies conducted on this topic, this review suggests the need for further research to explore topics including specific prevention/intervention strategies, potential changes in school environments and staffing structures, and targeted psycho- and socio-emotional education within schools.

In addition, this review focuses on addressing areas for future research as it pertains to exploring school supports for children more in-depth. For example, future studies may aim to examine the effectiveness of certain school-based interventions in promoting resiliency and

adjustment among single-parent families, as well as the impact of on-site, school-based clinicians or community mental health programs in promoting equitable positive child adjustment.

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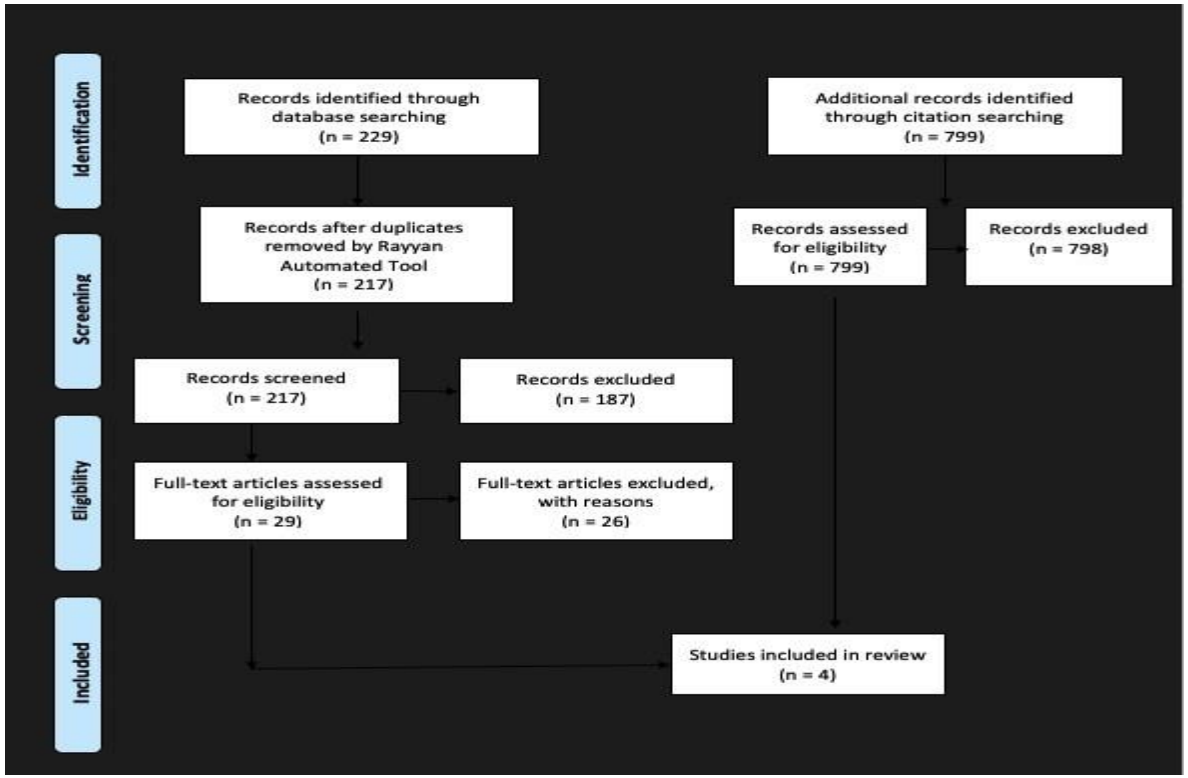
Appendix A

Figure 1

PRISMA flow diagram of included and excluded studies



Exclusion Criteria:

1. Studies not conducted in the United States
2. Studies written in a language other than English
3. Studies that did not address resiliency and/or positive child adjustment
4. Studies published prior to 2004
5. Studies not relevant to single-parent families.

Appendix B

Table 1

Sample Characteristics

Citation	US region of study	Sample size	Demographics	Child age	Reporter	Method
Connell et al. (2007)	Northwest region (Urban)	n = 998 585 (58.6%) youth had biological fathers present in household (dual-parent family structure)	Ethno-Racial: White (42.3%); African American (29.1%); Latino (6.8%); Asian American (5.2%); Biracial (16.4%) Socio-Economic Status: NA Gender (% Female): 47.3%	11-17 years old	Youth-report	Experimental, Longitudinal, Quantitative
Huang et al. (2017)	Virginia (Rural/Urban)	n = 56,508 Two-Parent Homes: 41,641 (73.7%) Single-Parent Homes: 14,017 (24.8%) Zero-Parent Homes: 850 (1.5%)	Ethno-Racial: White (46%); Black (17%); Hispanic (16%); Asian (7%); Other or 2+ Races (14%) Socio-Economic Status: M = 3.42, Highest parental education scale (‘1’ indicated parent did not graduate from high school; ‘5’ indicated parent graduated from postgraduate program) Gender (% Female): 51.7%	Seventh (50%) and Eighth graders	Youth-report	Non-Experimental, Cross-Sectional, Quantitative

(table continues)

O'Malley et al. (2015)	California (Rural/Urban)	n = 305,956 Two-Parent Homes: 69.6% Single-Parent Homes: 26.6% Foster Care Youth: 0.5% Homeless Youth: 1.8%	Ethno-Racial: White (33.7%); Black (7.1%); Latino (45.4%); Asian (17.2%); American Indian (3.8%); Other (8.5%) Socio-Economic Status: NA Gender (% Female): 52.4%	M age = 15.06 Ninth graders: (61.6%) Eleventh graders: (38.4%)	Youth-report	Non-Experimental, Cross-Sectional, Quantitative
Yuan & Grant (2023)	Manhattan, NYC (Urban)	n = 2 Single-Parent Homes: 2 (100%)	Ethno-Racial: One Chinese American student and one African American student Socio-Economic Status: Low-Income, per parent-report Gender (% Female): 0%	Second graders	NA	Non-Experimental, Longitudinal Case Study, Qualitative

Appendix C

Table 2
Study Characteristics

Citation	**Definition and Measurement of School Supports**	**Assessment of Child Adjustment**	**Relevant Findings**
Connell et al. (2007)	Universal Intervention: Family Resource Center and SHAPe Curriculum Targeted Intervention: “Family Check-Up"	Engagement with antisocial/problem behaviors; SUD diagnosis and arrest rates throughout late adolescence	Family-centered interventions demonstrated significant decreases in problem and antisocial behaviors, diagnoses of SUD, and arrests throughout adolescence.
Huang et al. (2017)	School climate Measurement: disciplinary structure, academic expectations, and student supports	Increased academic achievement (GPA) and achievement gap	Students with fewer than 2 parents at home experience lower academic achievement overall. However, regardless of the number of parents at home, positive perceptions of the school climate serve as a promotive factor for all students.
O'Malley et al. (2015)	School climate Measurement: school connectedness, relationships with adults at school, opportunities for students to meaningfully participate in school, and perceived school safety	Increased academic achievement (GPA) and achievement gap	Students living in higher-risk family structures, positive school climate experiences operate as a promotive factor, and are especially beneficial for homeless students.
Yuan & Grant (2023)	Multimodal digital literacy curriculum Measurement: Classroom observations, informal student conversations, author reflections, and digital artifact collection.	Potential changes in social behaviors; engagement with multimodal digital literacy curriculum	Students appeared to establish more interpersonal relationships, demonstrate more focus/independence, and connect to their identity/lived experiences with the inclusion of the multimodal digital literacy curriculum, counter to behavior labels the school had given them prior.