

UNSILENCED: AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC ACCOUNT OF FAMILY LITERACY
PROVIDED BY A BLACK WOMAN SINGLE PARENT RESEARCHER

by

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ABSTRACT

PAIGE HILARY BRANDON. Unsilenced: An Autoethnographic Account of Family Literacy
Provided By A Black Woman Single Parent Researcher. (Under the direction of
DR. ERIN MILLER)

Family literacy research documents rich descriptions of literate experiences between families (Compton-Lilly et al., 2020), with parent research providing an insider's in-depth perspective which would not be available to other researchers (Kabuto & Martens, 2014). Family literacy is intersectional, encompassing the historical, cultural, and personal values of each family. Within family literacy research, first person, autoethnographic accounts of family literacy provided by Black woman single parent researchers with their four-year-old sons are nonexistent. Grounded in a blended model of womanism and Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, this study gives a voice to one Black woman to speak about the literate experiences of her Black family, primarily those with her four-year-old son. Using autoethnographic research methodologies which allowed for a blend of autobiography and ethnography (Ellis et al., 2011), this study employed field notes, reflections, archival data, interview transcriptions, and informal conversation transcriptions which served as meaningful pieces of data to disclose the intricate day to day pieces of literate involvement. Implications include suggestions for family and school interconnectedness, as well as support for all Black scholars as we use our voices to tell Black stories in spaces where our stories are either untold or told for us.

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this paper to my son and children I will have in the future. I am but a link in a chain, and I hope that the steps I take will provide you with a ladder to step even higher. Son, while I was in the program, you never complained when mommy had to make “quick” meals when I had to hurry up and be in class after work. You commuted with me up and down the highway, and then went to daycare the next day with a smile on your face even though we were both tired. You stayed “relatively” quiet lol while mommy listened to lectures, and you listened to lectures with me when you would have rather been playing outside, watching Blippi, or watching Peppa Pig. When you would have much preferred for us to be playing with cars together, you allowed mommy to write “one last thing.” I will never forget these days. This is as much your success as it is mine. While this journey is for God’s glory, it is also for us and for the upward mobility of our family. So, I dedicate this paper to my son and my children that will come. I love you, son. May God bless you and keep you. Thank you for your patience with me.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

*“Maw-maw, read it again!” my son exclaimed with excitement. I looked over and saw his big, beautiful, brown eyes. How could I have said no? I smiled, and I said, “sure.” Between working, dissertation-writing, and being a full-time parent, I was admittedly tired. However, I did not let that prevent me from reading to my son, and bonding through literacy after a long day, so I read *The Grumpy Monkey*, one of his favorite books, once again. I then contemplated getting some much-needed rest, going to do schoolwork, or going to do laundry. I ultimately decided to get some rest.*

On some occasions when I am interacting with my son, my mind will connect back to experiences I shared with my family growing up when I was a child myself. I grew up in a rather large immediate family. Each member, adult and child, contributed unique pieces of themselves, pieces that were unique to their own experiences and perceptions, pieces that ultimately made our family a whole. As far back as I can remember, I loved to read and write. Literacy has always been a source of peace and stillness for me. As I look back upon my early family literacy experiences, one of the first experiences that comes to mind is writing with my great grandmother. Because her hand trembled as she wrote, I helped her by writing out her bills for her, and I remember being so proud of myself for being able to help. Clear images of her thin, gray hair that I used to play in, her dark skin, her blue house gown, Barney on the TV in the background, and her green shaggy carpet bring on pure nostalgia. Without thinking about it too much at that time, I was having a literacy exchange with my great grandmother that was meaningful and practical in everyday life, as well as giving me handwriting practice as an emergent writer. Through passed down oral knowledge, I am aware that Grandma Rea’s mother was unable to read or write, and Grandma Rea’s grandmother was a slave. As a Black woman, Black mother, and a first-generation

doctoral candidate five generations removed from slavery, I find strength and meaning in knowing and reflecting upon familial literacy and familial history.

As I matriculated through secondary school and went on to become a teacher myself, I found that although the schools are no longer legally segregated, there was still segregation and separation of students abound, not only in English classes, but across grades and subjects. The knowledge that my father attended legally segregated schools highlights the closeness in proximity that we are to legal segregation, and while legal segregation no longer exists, my teaching experiences highlighted that there are arguably remains of Jim Crow laws abound. Nevertheless, my teaching career allowed me to meet and build meaningful relationships with so many students who represented various cultures, races, and backgrounds, and also allowed me to build relationships with their families. As I reflect, I believe this is where my interest in family literacy grew.

After teaching for a while, I went back to school for my master's degree, and eventually my doctorate. At one point in my early doctoral schooling experience, I attended a well-intentioned doctoral seminar to support doctoral students with children. What I found was that everyone on the panel was a married White woman. The lack of diversity on the panel left room for a substantial amount of disconnect to mothers and families from different races and family structures. Despite the disconnect I felt during the seminar, it simply reaffirmed my position that my voice and perspectives as a Black woman and mother are both relevant and needed within academia and in other spaces. As I continue to reflect, I am drawn to memories I have of watching television shows like *The Cosby Show* and *The Fresh Prince* growing up,

inadvertently receiving messages of what a Black family should look like, as well as how the role of a Black mother positions itself within the Black family. My experiences are different than those depictions as well, further heightening my level of certainty that my perspectives as a mother and parent researcher are needed.

Looking back at the literacy experiences I have shared with my great grandmother, to my experiences teaching, to experiences in my doctoral program, to family literacy experiences I share with my own son provide a full circle moment. The culmination of the experiences mentioned led to this work and seek to provide some context for this family literacy study. I understand first-hand the unique and complex caveats of Black woman single parent researcher. Furthermore, I understand and live with the desire to want the best literacy and academic outcomes for Black boys, like my own son, as well as the boys that I have been privileged to teach, learn from, and connect with over the years. My identities, experiences, and understandings qualify me to do this autoethnographic family literacy study.

While there is family literacy research from parent scholars that documents the literacy experiences of White parent researchers and their children, (Bissex, 1980; Halliday, 1975; Long, 2004; Martens, 1996), there is close to none that speaks to the lived experiences of Black woman single parent researchers engaging in literary experiences with their Black sons. Additionally, there is a great deal of research on the effects of Black single mother led households conducted from the perspective of researchers looking in and dispelling data from their lens. However, there is little research from the first-person perspective of Black mothers raising Black sons, or single mothers raising Black sons. As I give my own account of my familial

experiences as a Black woman single parent researcher engaging in literacy with my four-year-old Black son, this study will fill in multiple gaps and omissions across the literature.

Topic and Research Problem

Despite the fact that half of all Black children lived with their mother only in 2020 (Hemez & Washington, 2021), a voice in the first-person representative of this family is scarce within academic literature, leaving a large group of children, parents, and families unrepresented in family literacy research and parent research. The numbers represent a large portion of Black children and Black women, highlighting the need for a first person, intimate account of mothering and family literacy from the lens of Black woman single parent researcher. This account from an insider within the cultural group will provide more adequate representation within the literature and seek to provide a less biased understanding of the familial processes within this cultural group.

Black Families and Family/Parent Literacy Research

Family literacy research is a field of study that allows for a rich description of literacy practices across families and communities (Compton-Lilly et al., 2020). There are many family literacy studies that highlight families from various races and familial structures, with some of the most highly cited family literacy studies over time being Heath (1982), Taylor (1981), Moll et al. (1992), and Purcell-Gates (1996) (Compton-Lilly et al., 2020). Parent literacy research provides an even closer look into the everyday experiences of families, as the researcher is naturally situated within the family that they are studying. Baghban (2014) explained the necessity of parent research, “Parent research is necessary because it investigates the happening of

literacy as a process in a way like no other” (p. 149). Relationships between parent-child and the many contexts they occur in highlight various languages and cultures among each family, while also bringing attention to commonality amongst humans (Goodman, 2014). While there may be commonalities amongst different types of families, the Black woman single parent researcher and son present a unique and individual family that deserves to be mentioned explicitly within family literacy research and parent research studies.

Overall, accounts of Black families are lacking within parent literacy research. As it relates specifically to this study, there are no found family literacy studies in the first person that detail the lived and literate experiences of Black single mothers or Black single mother parent researchers as they engage in literacy with their Black sons. Historically, despite family literacy research being diverse overall, when Black families have been studied in family literacy research, many of the highly cited articles in the field have studies that have “remained silent in regards to racism” (Compton-Lilly et al., 2020, p. 275), using race as a sampling means or to compare families but failing to theorize racism as it relates to factors such as privilege, opportunity, where children live, and the schools they attend (Compton-Lilly et al., 2020). When comparing or discussing specific groups and specific families, it is dangerous and detrimental not to explicitly acknowledge factors such as the historical background, culture, and race of a population, and how those factors may affect their processes.

Early Literacy Within Families

Family literacy studies have consistently shown the importance of parent-child interaction as it relates to the literacy development of the child (Saracho, 2002). The learning process begins with the parent within the family as “they are uniquely

motivated to promote their children's wellbeing and development" (Dicataldo & Roch, 2022, p. 4). Within the familial system, mothers have a special role when it comes to the education and literacy development of their children (Dicataldo & Roch, 2022). Dicataldo and Roch (2022) explained, "Parents, in particular mothers, are the first teachers of their children" (p. 4). The income level of the mother, sensitivity level, maternal warmth, as well as education level of the mother have been directly linked to a child's language development (Kuhns et al., 2018). As it relates to young children, parent involvement is crucial in the development of a child's emergent literacy (Saracho, 2002). For these reasons, it is important to position myself at the forefront of this study, as the mother and an important piece in my son's language development.

It is the activities and the interactions in which the child participates in that are so crucial for their development (Tudge, 2017). The literacy activities that a child engages in at a young age are foundational as it relates to a child's language growth (Rodriguez & Tamis-LeMonda, 2011). Literacy activities and engagement in fascinating materials are crucial to a child's achievement in literacy (Dicataldo & Roch, 2022). Kapengut and Noble (2020) explained the wide variety of enjoyable activities that serve as meaningful literacy experiences, "Reciprocal verbal interactions occur through games, nursery rhymes, songs, daily conversations, and book reading, all of which promote foundational literacy skills" (p. 72). Literacy stimulation for children is imperative, as high-quality literary stimulation has even been shown to mitigate certain household disadvantages that children may face (Dicataldo & Roch, 2022). Children who grew up in disadvantaged households but received high quality stimulation at an early age earned 25% more as adults than those who did not receive early stimulation (Dicataldo & Roch, 2022). Literacy activities will vary across families and cultures and are often woven into the

everyday lives of the parent and child. Tudge et al. (2017) explained, “Of course, how those activities occur depends in part on the personal characteristics of all individuals involved” (p. 45).

As it relates to skills-based versus socialization-based approaches to learning, some parents prefer skills-based approaches, while some prefer to integrate learning into everyday activities. A longitudinal study that started when children were in prekindergarten found that the children of parents who took a socialization approach instead of a strictly skills-based approach scored higher in various literacy outcomes (Sonnenschein et al., 2018). Regardless of the type of literacy strategies and activities that parents choose, those literacy experiences should be explored across diverse types of families. This will help teachers and researchers to better understand the literacy experiences that children have across different cultures and settings, and to better understand the literacy experiences children come to school with.

The Black Single Mother and Her Family

Dominant images of motherhood do not include African American mothering (Dow, 2015), and little work has been done to examine the literacy practices and experiences of African American parents (Bingham & Mason, 2018). In addition, little scholarship has garnered a genuine and unbiased understanding of the familial processes of the Black single mother led family. Rather than focus on the function of the family or their processes, many studies have focused on the occupancy or lack thereof of the man with the family (Murry et al., 2001). Furthermore, as it relates to research on the Black single mother led family, previous methodologies, conclusions, and overall approaches to studies were derived from studies on White, nuclear, middle class, two-parent families (Murry et al., 2001). To compare groups of parents who

may differ in their educational level and resources, as well as their access to economic resources is “conceptually problematic and systematically unfair” (Bingham & Mason, 2018, p. 68). Often, this results in an abundance of literature that does not examine the Black single mother or the Black single mother led family as a relevant stand-alone entity within the literature, but only positions the mother and/or the family in relationship to traditional and historic Whiteness. This study will fill in that void, focusing on one family alone and their processes.

Existing research on Black single mothers varies. Some literature suggests that Black mothers who are single may find themselves stressed and less interactive with their children, especially their male children (Iruka, 2017). Much research on Black mothers has shown that they are invested in their children's academic future. In a study of poor, inner-city, African American mothers, with 82% of the participants being the only adult in the home, Jackson and Kiehl (2017) found that these mothers taught their children a set of principles and morals that they believed to be essential for their child's future. They believed these morals and principles would help their children to make good choices and reach their goals. Brown (2018) found that the majority of Black mothers place a high value on “teacher and student connectedness” (p. 165), seeking places where their children can feel connected and safe emotionally as Black students. The unique identities of Black and woman play a role in the ways Black mothers determine which strategies best suit the needs of their families (McDonald, 1997). To this point, research has shown that the Black parent's understanding of race has shaped how they engage in academics with their children, including preparing their children for bias due to race (Sonnenschein et al., 2018). Literature on single mothers and single mother households varies. Many recent studies suggest that the

impact of family structure on child outcomes is small “once variables such as “low income and poor maternal mental health are accounted for” (Harkness et al., 2020, p. 1762).

Black Boys and Literacy

There are a wide array of literacies that children speak and understand before the child even enters kindergarten (Goodman, 2014). Thus, the literacies that Black boys possess and carry with them into the classroom deserve to be acknowledged. Literacy has always functioned as a means of protection for Black boys, but data indicates that they are not receiving the tools to use literacy as a means to make positive academic and social choices for their lives (Tatum, 2014). Black boys are “energetic, powerful go-getters, difference makers, and leaders full of light and undoubtedly worthy of love” (Everett & Moten, 2022, p. 313). However, Black boys are often framed within the deficit literacy narrative that overpowers who they truly are as individuals and students. Furthermore, in today’s literacy classrooms, they are lacking literacy exchanges that are meaningful (Tatum, 2014).

It is imperative that Black males have “rich language experiences and have many experiences with rare words” (Tatum et al, 2021, p. 456). The importance of providing quality literacy activities cannot be devalued, allowing Black boys “multiple opportunities to ask questions of themselves, the curriculum, and the world they live in” (Everett & Moten, 2022, p. 323). All of these experiences shape a child's understanding of himself, the world around him, as well as providing a means to grow academically. However, in far too many classrooms, standardized testing and standardized test score data are the primary means to measuring student literacy. Bingham and Mason (2018) described standardized tests as being “developed based on

constructs that fit the behaviors and beliefs of White, middle-class models” (p. 68). Fortunately, researchers are moving towards an achievement model for Black children where a within-group analysis can be analyzed, rather than a deficit model that only compares Black and White student test scores differences (Tatum, 2014). The comparison does little to truly understand Black children and their families.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to use autoethnographic methodologies to research and analyze my experiences as a Black woman single parent researcher engaging in family literacy with my four-year-old Black son to add to the literature that currently exists within family literacy research, and to add to existing parent researcher studies.

Research Questions

1. As a Black woman single parent researcher, what family literacy experiences do I engage in with my four-year-old son?
2. As a Black woman single parent researcher, what connections are there between the family literacy experiences I've shared with my son and personal experiences I've encountered in my own life?
3. As a Black woman single parent researcher, what barriers have I encountered when providing or trying to provide these literacy experiences?

Theoretical Framework

This study utilized a blended approach to theory, blending womanism and Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory. The blended approach allowed for the focus on the study of the family, through the first-person perspective of the Black woman. The process of blending these theories included outlining each of the specific

theories and identifying which pieces from each specific theoretical framework would best fit with this work. The pairing of womanism with Bronfenbrenner's theory and autoethnography work well together in achieving a meaningful lens through which to view this study. As a theoretical perspective and research method, this combination uniquely situated my research on the literacy practices of the Black family and Black mothering.

Womanism

Centering and valuing the Black woman and the Black family, womanism is “rooted in Black women’s experiences” (Fraser-Burgess et al., 2021, p. 505). Walker (1983) describes a womanist as “a Black feminist or feminist of color” (p. xi). As markers of women’s experience, womanism centralizes race, class, gender, and sexuality as pieces of Black women’s experience (Bryant-Davis & Comas-Diaz, 2016). Furthermore, the theoretical framework allows for an emphasis on culture, self-determination, humanity, and spirituality (Bryant-Davis & Comas-Diaz, 2016). Rather than keeping these pieces of the Black woman’s lived experience separate, womanism allows for an integrated perspective of the Black women’s experience as opposed to a compartmentalized approach as seen in feminism and multiculturalism (Bryant-Davis & Comas-Diaz, 2016). Walker (1983) explains, “Womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender” (p. xii).

This autoethnographic family literacy study largely utilized the central tenet of womanism, which allows for the Black woman to speak on her own experiences. The central piece of womanism is speaking about our own position and our own unique location (Phillips & McCaskill, 1995). In addition, womanism allows for Black women and their experiences to be at the center of analysis in their stories (Phillips &

McCaskill, 1995). Historically, the Black woman has not only taken care of her own family, but the family of the oppressors (Canon, 2021). Even still, the Black woman has been forced to accept the telling of her own story by those who continue to ignore her person (Canon, 2021). Refusing to be invisible and silenced as Black women, womanism emerged in the United States in response to “systematic efforts to render an entire race invisible in gender-specific ways that were rationally justified and advanced through democratic institutions” (Fraser-Burgess et al., 2021, p. 506).

As a Black woman in a PhD program, I am minoritized, so my voice and perspectives are often underrepresented within the literature. However, womanism, similarly to autoethnography, allows for underrepresented groups to have a voice. Womanism counters the effects of “oppression and domination in the academy” (Fraser-Burgess et al., 2021, p. 519). In line with the activism valued by womanism, it is my duty to use my privilege and voice as a Black scholar to speak for myself, as well as other Black mothers and children, to position our stories as valuable and worthy. Fraser-Burgess et al. (2021) explained, “As minoritized scholars, we have a duty in our work to position the silenced Black and Brown community as grand interlocutors in the American experiment of democracy and education” (p. 519). As a Black parent researcher, I would be remiss not to use my privilege as a researcher to shine a light on Black parents and families through my work. As a Black woman, I do acknowledge that there are differences in each of our stories, and we are in no way monolithic. However, that is the beauty of womanism. Phillips & McCaskill (1995) explained, “Black women's scholarship does not parade as universal, but it emanates from a point of acute authenticity and invites others to participate in a similar, equally authentic, process” (p. 1011).

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory

Through the lens of womanism, this study utilizes Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory to focus on one of the systems in the microsystem which is closest to the child, the family. As a mother reflecting upon family literacy with my young son, this theory is highly appropriate. Bronfenbrenner's ecological model positions the child in the middle of four systems. The ecological systems theory notes that the individual child's interest and characteristics play an active role in their learning and experiences (Dicataldo & Roch, 2022), as the child is not merely absorbing the environment. The developing child is described as a "growing, dynamic entity that progressively moves into and restructures the milieu in which it resides" (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 21).

The closest system, the microsystem, is the most direct, and leads outward to more distant influences (Hayes et al., 2017). Within the microsystem are systems in which children have direct contact with others (Ispa et al., 2020), and this includes the family. Bronfenbrenner's theory places family as the most important microsystem in a child's life as it relates to child development, with Bronfenbrenner (1986) describing family as "the principal context in which human development takes place" (p. 723). Of all the systems that influence a child's development, this theory explains that family is the "closest and most familiar microsystem" (Hayes et al., 2017, p. 7). The family is one of the most "pervasive and potent primary setting in human societies" (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 285). With the family being identified as one of the closest and most influential systems in a child's life, it is meaningful for me to reflect on my familial processes with my son, both for the enlightenment of myself and also for the needed addition to family literacy research.

In line with Bronfenbrenner's theory, it is important to acknowledge the processes and interactions within each individual family. Proximal processes are the interactions between an organism and their environment (Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994). The idea that human development is a product of the interactions between a growing human and their environment is almost seen as common knowledge in behavioral science (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Bronfenbrenner viewed home processes as relevant pieces of a child's development, and "challenged the field to identify proximal processes in the home" (Isapa et al., 2020, p. 93). The activities that one engages in and is exposed to are potent in one's development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Bronfenbrenner's theory suggests proximal processes may include interactions and activities such as "group or solitary play, reading, and learning new skills" (Hayes et al., 2017, p. 23). Bronfenbrenner strongly believed in proximal processes and believed that these activities form the foundation for how children make sense of their worlds as well as shape their development (Hayes et al., 2017).

A child is more likely to learn language in settings where people are talking around him and to him (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Children learn to explore in settings where exploration is not only available, but valued (Hayes et al., 2017).

Acknowledging individuality, Bronfenbrenner's theory noted that processes will always vary based on "characteristics of the individual, the features of the environment and the historical time in which development takes place" (Hayes et al., 2017, p. 24). Furthermore, Bronfenbrenner noted the "the importance of close relationships for children's development" (Isapa et al, 2020, p. 93), with the adult in the family playing a key role in "in respecting, supporting and extending children's learning" (Hayes et al., 2017, p. 24). For this reason, this theory is aligned with my

study in the analysis of myself as mother within my family and in the exploration of our familial processes.

Outside of the microsystem lies the mesosystem. The mesosystem is described as “a set of interrelations between two or more settings in which the developing person becomes an active participant” (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 209). Children are more likely to excel when there is a connection between their microsystems. Outside of the family, other examples of influence within the microsystem include school and neighborhood play areas (Hayes et al., 2017). There should be alignment and connection between the microsystems for the benefit of the child. However, the school is described as being “one of the most potent breeding grounds of alienation in American society” (Bronfenbrenner, 1974b, p. 60, as cited in Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 231). This is due to lack of connection and the absence of “communal life” (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 231), with the alienation of students being the underlying cause of the decline in student test scores (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). A mesosystem where the child is the only link between systems is “weakly linked” (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 211). Multisetting participation, the involvement of an indirect linkage between settings, intersetting communication across settings, and intersetting knowledge across settings are all valuable methods for establishing interconnection (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

For the purposes of this study, the microsystem and the mesosystem are largely and primarily focused on and highlighted. However, it is worth noting that three more layers exist outside of the microsystem and mesosystem. Hayes et al. (2017) explained, “Exosystems include settings that influence the child but in which the child does not directly participate” (p. 16). An example of this could be a parent dealing

with stress at work, which may affect how the parent is able to deal with his or her children (Hayes et al., 2017). The macrosystem acknowledges the role of culture, subculture, belief systems, and ideologies (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), while the now fifth layer, the outermost layer which is the chronosystem, acknowledges sociohistorical conditions (Hayes et al., 2020). Again, the family within the microsystem and the importance of the mesosystem are mainly focused on for the purpose of this study. However, all layers of Bronfenbrenner's ecological model are expounded upon to some degree in this research.

Autoethnography and Subjectivity

The qualitative research design that I have selected is autoethnographic research. This autobiographical research design allows for the telling of my own story. As a research design which connects “the personal to the cultural” (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 739), autoethnography is described as “a practice of self-reflexively examining oneself in the context of a particular culture” (Kumar, 2021, p. 1013). Examination of myself within my specific cultural group of Black woman single parent researchers occurred within this research design.

Autoethnographers look outward at the social and cultural perspectives of their experience, then inward exposing a self that is vulnerable and may be resistant of existing cultural interpretations (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). Autoethnography reflects “multiple layers of consciousness” (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 739) on behalf of the researcher. Researchers often write about and analyze their epiphanies and experiences in ways that are engaging to the reader (Ellis et al., 2011). Autoethnographers display patterns of cultural experience that may be documented with field notes or artifacts,

and then use storytelling to describe those patterns (Ellis et al., 2011).

Autoethnographers seek to use their own voice and experience to establish theory and understanding of a group or culture, undermining “grandiose authorial claims of speaking in a rational, value free, objective, universalizing voice” (Foley, 2002, p. 474). Their stories are written using “aesthetic and evocative thick description” (Ellis et al., 2011, p. 277).

Since I utilized autoethnography for my study and this research method centered my experiences, it was especially important for me to openly address subjectivity. Foley (2002) described most autoethnographers as “openly subjective” (p. 474). This is imperative as we are the subject of our own research. My identities are a large part of my research and are not separate from my research, which could create biases within my research. I identify as a Black woman single parent researcher with a four-year-old son. I am also a former 7th, 9th, and 10th grade public school classroom English/ELA teacher, as well as a former public-school librarian (media coordinator). Furthermore, I am a doctoral student with a concentration in Urban Literacy. My personal and professional experience have been motivators for this particular research journey.

Significance of Study

The significance of this study is multilayered. As I examine and reflect on my experiences as a Black woman single parent researcher engaging in literary experiences with my four-year-old son via autoethnography, I am joining a minoritized group of scholarly Black women who have spoken to the Black experience and given Blacks their own voice and analysis in academic scholarship. I am also shedding a bright light on the familial experiences within the cultural group

that I am a part of. To this point, I acknowledge that Black people, Black single mothers, Black researchers, and Black families are in no way monolithic. However, I do hope that my study provides a mirror for Black mothers to see themselves somewhere within this study.

My study offers personal reflections and perspectives on mothering and literacy. In doing so, my study seeks to add one family's account of literacy into the field of family literacy research and parent researcher studies. As this account is my own, this account provides a different view than what has been provided by other studies in the literature, thus diversifying the field of family literacy research. This study sought to highlight the complexity of factors and variables that contribute to family literacy, such as how the personal, historical, and emotional experiences of parents may shape how they engage in literacy with their children. In doing so, I hope that this study will prove reflection to be meaningful and insightful, as well as a means to better understanding myself and my parenting practices.

Just as importantly, this study is critical for encouraging a bridge between educators and families. Children's motivation to achieve is heightened when the mutual support of parents and teachers is prevalent (Ispe et al., 2020). Ideally, parents and teachers will work together in sync for the betterment of students. It can be difficult to create the bridge between school and familial systems if there is no knowledge and understanding of the child beyond face value, no understanding of family, and no understanding of familial processes. Research has long established the importance of educators understanding familial literacy and individual children's literacies.

In doing so, the goal is to build on family literacy strengths, rather than taking a deficit lens to view families based on their race, structure, culture, or socioeconomic status. Schools must acknowledge and offer validation to the fact that each family exists relative to their own “intellectually credible history, culture, and language” (Whitmore & Norton-Miere, 2008, p. 459), each piece being essential and valuable for that family's survival and navigation in today's society (Whitmore & Norton-Miere, 2008). My desire is that this study furthers the initiative to “recognize the legitimacy of children’s [and, we add, parents] social existence and use it as a basis for curriculum and instruction” (Taylor & Strickland, 1989, p. 275 as cited in Whitmore & Norton-Miere, 2008, p. 460). This study has implications for parents, scholars across various fields, school leaders, and myself.

Outline of Study

My research study begins with a review of the literature in Chapter Two. The literature review will begin by detailing language development and acquisition in familial systems, essentially turning the focus of the literature to the mother within the household. Literature on mothers as facilitators of literacy will be provided as well as literature on Black mothers, single mothers, and Black, single mothers. Finally, the literature will detail Black boys and literacy, as well as the intersectionality of Black history and Black literacy. Chapter Three will provide a more in-depth account of myself as the researcher, as well as a detailed account of autoethnographic research as a method of inquiry. Chapter Four will discuss and detail the findings from my research questions, with Chapter Five providing recommendations and implications of this study.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

This study was an autoethnographic parent-researcher literacy study in which I examined and reflected on my lived experiences as a Black woman single parent researcher engaging in literacy with my son. The theoretical blend of womanism and Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory as a theoretical lens allowed for myself as a Black woman to freely and openly voice my familial and lived experiences, with an intimate focus on family within the microsystem. The purpose of this study is to provide one mother's account of family literacy, which contributes to the diversification of the existing literature. In this study, I draw upon the argument proposed by Danforth and Miller (2018) who explained, "Family is one of the most influential structures in a person's social ecology" (p. 73). For this reason, it is important that every family, regardless of race or structure, is accurately represented in the literature and has a voice across academic spaces. This addition of these voices would provide an increased understanding of the literacies each child may bring with them to the school setting.

The purpose of this chapter is to review the literature that currently exists on the topics related to this study. The first section will review the literacy development of children through socialization and family engagement. The literature and studies mentioned contribute to the idea that every family has their own unique set of literacies and home experiences that make up their identities and contribute to language development. I will also provide a close examination of the literature that exists on Black single mothers and the children in those families, and literature that exists on the mother's role in familial literacy is provided. Finally, literature on Black

boys and literacy, as well as literature on the intersectionality of Black history and Black literacy will be examined.

Literacy Learning Through Interactions in Family Systems

The family is one of the most important systems in a child's life as it relates to language acquisition and development. The everyday moments families share together are part of larger movements (San Pedro, 2021), and education exists anywhere relationships exist (San Pedro, 2021). By interacting with others in their family, young children are learning social behaviors, linguistic conventions, and how to adapt to certain norms (Kuhns et al., 2018). Whether it is directly or indirectly, young children are picking up linguistic conventions, vocabulary, and linguistic norms from their families day in and day out, even when the caregivers and children may not realize it is happening. Dicaldo and Roch (2022) affirm, "It is widely accepted that children acquire language during significant contexts with others in which they grow up" (p. 1). Caregiver-child interactions are the most potent relational experiences in a child's life and play a direct role in neural development and academic readiness (Kapengut & Noble, 2020).

Because the caregiver-child interactions are so profound, it is important that these familial interactions are considered as the child enters school and seen as a base and foundation for learning. The type of interactions that caregivers and parents can engage in to promote language learning is endless. Families can support their child's emergent literacy by having a large number of literacy materials in the home, increased interactions with the child, and the integration of literacy in social contexts within the home (Saracho, 2002). Engagement and participation with the child in daily routines such as reading

books, telling stories, learning about letters, nursing rhymes, rhyming games, and trips to the museum all serve as a foundation for children's language learning (Rodriguez & Tamis-LeMonda, 2011). Learning materials and toys provide for a wide range of mother and child engagement, providing opportunities for conversation and negotiation, as well as a means to increasing child curiosity (Rodriguez & Tamis-LeMonda, 2011). Having picture books in the home is also key in growing the child's expressive and receptive language (Rodriguez & Tamis-LeMonda, 2011). Furthermore, Saracho (2002) explained, "Outside the home, they read road/street signs, billboard signs, video boxes at the video store, menus at restaurants, and books and magazines in stores" (p. 114). All of these activities provide opportunities for language development to occur.

Conversations with children also serve as a meaningful way to help them grow linguistically. To best promote vocabulary expansion and exposure to lexical information, parent language should be often and varied (Rodriguez & Tamis-LeMonda, 2011). Children acquire spoken language skills by being immersed in a "functional conversational environment" (DeBaryshe et al., 2000, p. 120). Furthermore, it is proven that allowing a child space to speak, ask questions, and simply engage in conversational turns has a significant impact on learning and the brain. Kapengut and Noble (2020) explained, "In a study of gray matter structure among 42 five to nine year olds, children who experienced more conversational turns per hour had significantly greater surface area in language-related brain regions" (p. 74). The effects of parent-child functional conversations translate into the school setting. There is a direct correlation between increased parent conversations with children and better grades in school for those children (Pop et al., 2010). Rather than students being "banked" with information or "talked at," families should engage in a

transactional approach to learning in which children are allowed to speak up, ask questions, and make sense of the world around them, in their own terms with their own voice.

The door is open for all kinds of creative and fun activities and experiences to engage children in across various families. Development is an experience driven process and language is developed through learning experiences (Dicataldo & Roch, 2022). These experiences usually vary based on child, familial, or cultural interest, and can be tailored based on child or family interest at the time. With that in mind, literacy experiences do work best when a child is fully engaged and interested. Dicataldo & Roch (2022) explained “Taking advantage of individual children’s interests by planning activities in which children are fully engaged may be effective strategies for promoting children’s oral language development” (p. 1). After parents have knowledge of their children's interests, it is ideal to build upon those unique interests when planning outings, choosing books, and engaging in activities.

Literacy learning does not always have to be fully structured or even feel like traditional learning. This is demonstrated in San Pedro’s (2021) text in which he highlighted everyday learning experiences between Indigenous mothers and their families. Daily activities provide plenty of room for opportunity and growth, sometimes with less pressure for the child. Kabuto (2014) stated that “keeping up with the curriculum” (p. 21) is valued by many members of the Japanese community. However, she, a Japanese-American mother, did not hold the same mindset and wanted to provide fewer academic pressures for her young child. She desired to “provide experiences in which her children could develop their language proficiency in social and cultural contexts” (Kabuto, 2014, p. 22). Research reveals that parents

with lower literacy levels believe their children should own traditional learning resources such as workbooks and flashcards (DeBaryshe, 2000). Expounding upon this idea, DeBaryshe (2000) suggested, “As parental literacy skills rise, parents are more likely to feel their children should develop basic skills on their own initiative, without pressure to use conventional forms” (p. 120). While many parents mimic activities at home that replicate activities their children are doing in school, basic skills are taught using day-to-day home activities (Irvine, 1990). There are many conventional forms of literacy learning that may prove to be beneficial in some contexts, but language development and learning is still occurring in social, cultural, and everyday day to day contexts. Social and cultural experiences prove to be an adequate space for language development without the use of conventional forms.

Families are not one-size-fits-all, and the construction of the family cannot be applied universally, as the idea of family is highly dependent upon social and cultural context (Kabuto & Martens, 2014). There will be variances in literacy resources, activities, and materials based upon each family's diversity and resources (Saracho, 2002). With that being said, there is no set in stone model of family that must be in order for children to learn and for the family to function (Kabuto & Martens, 2014). The important piece for all parents to remember is engagement and stimulation. Social and language development is strengthened through both engagement and the cognitive stimulation that parents provide when engaging in daily literacy activities (Kuhns et al., 2018). The provision of experiences and genuine engagement is priceless and is not limited to or bound by one ideal way. The role that all families play in language learning is meaningful.

As I will draw upon literature to explain in the next section, children receive the most benefits when the systems in their lives are seamlessly merged together.

The Merging of Family and School Systems

Research indicates that students are most engaged in literacy learning and receive the most academic benefits from literacy instruction when the literate base that they are coming into the classroom with is acknowledged by teachers. Young children are coming to school with a basis of literacy knowledge that is the foundation of the learning that will take place in school, varying in many ways from child to child. Goodman (2014) explained, “Children come to school with a three to five year language, literacy, and experiential history that too often goes unrecognized in schools although it is the base they are building on” (p. xiii). Children go home to families and come to school from families (Kabuto & Martens, 2014). Yet, this notion is repeatedly overlooked in educational communities (Kabuto & Martens, 2014). More attention is on standards, rather than the everyday processes prevalent in families (Kabuto & Martens, 2014). Tudge (2017) explained, “Children whose language at home is the same as that of the classroom will find interactions much simpler than those for whom this is not the case” (p. 45). With this in mind, the literate experiences that all children encounter before school are worth exploring and really understanding.

Parent-researcher literacy studies have been insightful in the provision of understanding the literacy experiences children have before entering formal school and outside of school. Many have highlighted the importance of syncing across systems. In one instance, Lopez-Robertson (2014) conducted a study in which she assessed how her children's family, their children's school, and the context in which

their children were raised impacts bilingualism. Her study indicated that multiple systems play a key role in language development, thus emphasizing the importance of interconnection of systems as explained in Bronfenbrenner (1979). Sometimes the school and familial systems blend and work together beautifully, and sometimes these systems do not work together at all.

When systems exist separately and do not work together, struggles may arise for children. For example, Long (2004) studied her eight-year-old American daughter's literacy struggles with decodable text in a second language when she attended school in Iceland. She concluded that children find reading more difficult and view reading as being disconnected from their own world when home language fails to be mirrored in school literacy (Long, 2004). This has detrimental effects, potentially turning children off from reading, writing, and literacy learning all together, sometimes at a very young age. In another example, Marten (2014) studied her adopted Taiwanese, daughter's literacy at home and literacy in two kindergarten classrooms. Marten (2014) ultimately stressed, "Children learn language and how it works as they use it for authentic and meaningful purposes" (p. 104). This quote suggests how important it is for children to engage in authentic and social learning experiences during their younger years. However, this does not just apply to home. All of the spaces in a child's life, home and school included, should allow for meaningful and purposeful interactions with literacy. This is when we will see the most benefits for children. As it relates to Black children specifically and the merging of the home and school systems, Irvine (1990) argues "The combination of Afrocentric children and Eurocentric school's results in conflict because of lack of cultural correspondence or sync" (p. xix).

Very often in school, students are studied and compared to children who come from families different than their own (Kabuto & Martens, 2014). Teachers can connect instruction to the lives children have outside of school and build on the funds of knowledge that children already have by building quality relationships (Kabuto & Martens, 2014). These relationships can be built with the child and with the child's family, creating a team for the child. Some family literacy scholars advocate for literacy materials to be sent home and parents to be educated upon their proposed language strategies, but some family literacy researchers argue that this is a deficit model which wipes out any family strengths and essentially highlights perceived deficits (Saracho, 2002). As it relates to families and their children's schools, the best approach for children's learning is a teamwork approach, a wealth model in which literacy is grounded in strengths of the parents and families (Saracho, 2002).

For the sake of this study, the focus of the literature review will now shift to the mother within the family and her unique position in the family as it relates to literacy.

The Role of The Mother in Familial Literacy

As previously reported, research indicates that the family is a special piece in the puzzle when it comes to the education of children, especially in their reading competence (Jiménez-Pérez et al., 2020). At the heart of many families lies the mother. Mothers specifically have a unique placement when it comes to literacy in the lives of their children. Parents, particularly mothers, are their child's first teachers (Dicataldo & Roch, 2022). The mother within the family is the center of teaching and reading education, thus having a central role and position in the reading and emotional learning processes of her children (Jiménez-Pérez et al., 2020). Jiménez-Pérez et al.

(2020) declared, “Within the family, studies point to the basic role of the mother as the main axis of both educational and social teaching” (p.1).

As early as pregnancy, the literacy experiences that a mother has with her child are significant in promoting language development (Kapengut & Noble, 2020). Research has demonstrated that mothers can connect with their child through literacy even before a child is born (Kapengut & Noble, 2020). For example, an investigation of 33 mother-infant pairs found that “newborns preferred a passage that their mothers had read aloud each day during the last six weeks of pregnancy over a novel passage” (Kapengut & Noble, 2020, p. 72). Implications from this study encourage mothers to read to their babies while pregnant, specifically during the last six weeks, as the baby is able to connect to both the mothers and the readings. As the child gets older, book reading promotes letter learning, and later promotes the ability to decode words (Kapengut & Noble, 2020).

While children are infants, mothers who are highly and consistently responsive promote lasting language milestones for their children. Longitudinal studies have suggested that regardless of socioeconomic background, infants who have highly responsive mothers achieve language milestones four to six months earlier than infants with less responsive mothers or mothers who are less responsive consistently (Kapengut & Noble, 2020). These milestones include first words, vocabulary, and speech (Kapengut & Noble, 2020). These studies would suggest that having a mother who is highly responsive could not only mitigate some of the potential negative effects of lower socioeconomic background, but improve language readiness as well. This speaks to the importance of mothers engaging and interacting with their children, even while they are as young as infants.

Maternal sensitivity has been proven to play a huge role in language development as well. In early childhood, maternal sensitivity and sensitive parenting have repeatedly been found to be significantly associated with expressive and receptive language and vocabulary scores (Kapengut & Noble, 2020). The sensitivity of the mother and cognitive stimulation that she provides her children are independently related to the child's language outcomes at age four (Kapengut & Noble, 2020). Researchers Kapengut and Noble (2020) documented several studies to illustrate this point. In a longitudinal study, warm and sensitive parents were associated with children's language abilities in infancy in 40 mother-infant pairs (Kapengut & Noble, 2020). One and two year old children of more sensitive mothers experienced a faster rate of receptive and expressive language from 18 to 36 months; this study included over a hundred families (Kapengut & Noble, 2020).

Maternal education is a significant factor as well when it comes to children's language development. The education level of the mother matters, proving to increase children's academic outcomes, even when it is only a little higher than that of the father (Jiménez-Pérez et al., 2020). Dicataldo & Roch (2022) noted, "Maternal education and maternal beliefs about the importance of literacy experiences for children have been associated with more frequent book reading activities, having positive effects on child language" (p. 2).

The reading habits of the mother are also associated with positive literary outcomes for their children, even children who are post-adolescent. In a study led by Jiménez-Pérez et al. (2020), researchers found that the post adolescents who scored best in reading also scored higher in emotional intelligence, *and* their mothers scored highest in reading habits. Mothers can transmit their passion for reading to their

children (Jiménez-Pérez et al., 2020). This study also suggests the importance of parents modeling literacy in the household. Children seeing their mothers reading can play a positive and lasting role in their children's language trajectories.

The role and influence of the mother within the family should always be appreciated when it comes to the provision of education for her children. Jiménez-Pérez et al. (2020) asserted, "The role of the mother within the family is even more important than it appears in a society that seeks parity" (p .1). The aforementioned literature acknowledges that maternal sensitivity, maternal responsiveness, maternal education, and maternal reading practices all play a role in children's language development. All mothers should trust that they are capable and uniquely situated to enhance their children academically. In the next section, I will review literature specifically related to Black single mothers.

Black Mothers, Single Mothers, and Black Single Mothers

Within her specific family, Black single mothers have their own circumstances and processes that exist within their households, but also within their own personal lives. They have their own familial and lived experiences, experiences best understood by cultural insiders- Black single mothers themselves. Much of the research on Black single mothers fails to account for the wide range of variability amongst this cultural group, portraying an entire group as monolithic and without variances (Murry et al., 2001). Also, many studies on African American parents have been done within the context of lower income families or lower income programs, with little attention to those from diverse education levels (Bingham & Mason, 2018). Tyler and Muhammad (2015) spoke to Black single mothering from their perspective:

My single parent identity commands that I have two people who are dependent on me to provide for all of their needs because they are unable to do so for themselves. This identity is further accentuated by other alter identities of being both Black and female in a world that privileges its non-Black paternal member (p. 89)

The intersectionality of the Black single mother identity presents an interesting space to operate from as a woman and mother. In the following subsections, I will review literature specifically related to Black mothers and their family, single mothers and their families, and I will expand upon literature on Black single mothers. Literature specifically on the parenting processes or literate experiences of Black woman single parent researchers with their sons was not found within the literature.

The Black Mother and Her Family

The Black mother is operating within a culture in which she is often stereotypically viewed as strong (Dow, 2015). Cultural mandates often require Black women to remain strong, act as caregivers for the family, and deny feelings that might position them as weak (Atkins et al., 2008). This sometimes results in just making oneself simply “go through the motions” (Atkins et al., 2008, p. 948). In fact, because many Black women have taken on the identity of the “strong Black woman”, they are unlikely to discuss challenges, which may allow for less emotional support from others (Dow, 2015). Dating back to slavery, racist ideologies have exempted African American mothers from the “cult of domesticity” (Dow, 2015, p. 39) with the underlying message remaining even today, “Staying at home to raise children is not an appropriate use of African American mother’s time (Dow, 2015, p. 40). Tolley (2011) explained that being Black and woman is often viewed as the “minority of minorities”

(p. 115). The Black mother is often simply navigating her own life and everything it means to be Black and woman in America.

Even when parenting, the minority identity is still present in many spaces, even spaces that are supposed to be ideal for “mommy and me” experiences. In a group of sixty Black middle-class mothers who were interviewed in depth, the majority of the mothers felt that they constantly had to contend with negative assumptions about being poor, unmarried, or on welfare, and the overarching idea of the welfare queen (Dow, 2015). In addition, one Black mother spoke about the added labor that she reluctantly had to do at mother-child activities just to be accepted by White mothers who were the majority in these spaces (Dow, 2015). This led to feelings of lack of belonging as well as feelings of unacceptance, which led to further disengagement from the activities (Dow, 2015). These activities included spending time in parks in neighborhoods that were mostly White, museums, as well as mommy and me events (Dow, 2015).

Furthermore, in many spaces, Black mothers unjustly have been blamed for many of the perceived problems that exist within the Black community, partially due to studies such as Edwards (1992) study that portrayed Black parents as not promoting literacy experiences that promote academic achievement among Black youth in school. However, many Black mothers do provide a rich literacy environment and promote academic wellness for their children, which contributes to the wellness, not the detriment of the Black community. Most of the studies done on African American families that demonstrate lower reading engagement with Black children derive from lower income families, and lower SES families which present an incomplete portrait of Black mothers collectively (Bingham & Mason, 2018). Unfortunately, these

incomplete conclusions, often void of perspective and cultural and racial context, become circulated as knowledge and claimed as truth, contributing to stereotypes of the Black woman as not engaging in literacy practices with their children.

Providing a counter narrative, Ispa et al. (2020) conducted a study on low-income African American mothers on mother-child conversations in which participants were videotaped. It was found that mothers (especially those with sons) do have conversations with their children about education and schooling. Suizzo et al. (2008) found that African American middle-class mothers viewed education as a necessity given the occurrence of racism. Both studies act as a counter-narrative to ideas that depict lack of Black parent support for school, contradicting other studies that paint Black mothers with a deficit lens when it comes to supporting literacy development. Suizzo et al.'s (2008) study demonstrates the cultural awareness that Black mothers have as it relates to racism and race in America, also demonstrating that Black mothers do believe educational attainment is important in the face of racism.

The role of race as it relates to Black motherhood is prevalent across the literature, occurring as a theme in Allen and White-Smith's (2018) study as well. Allen and White-Smith (2018) conducted a study with ten Black boys and their families. Six of the families were middle class. Four were poor or working class. Field observations, interviews, and semi unstructured interviews were conducted. The findings from this study revealed that the mothers held high educational goals for their children despite the awareness of racism they faced along with their children inside and outside of school (Allen & White-Smith, 2018). Merging poor and middle-class families, this study found that Black mothers do have academic goals and expectations for their Black sons despite racial barriers. Furthermore, Black mothers were

advocates and voices for their sons despite the “racial, socioeconomic, and school barriers” (Allen & White-Smith, 2018, p. 427), and despite the schools “failure to provide equitable opportunities” (Allen & White-Smith, 2018, p. 427) for their sons. This literature demonstrates the awareness as well as the burden of racial tension that many Black mothers have to contend with as they navigate motherhood, which results in mothers also having to be advocates for their children just because of race and skin color. This is an extra layer of motherhood that mothers from privileged races do not have to worry about.

In the following section, I will turn attention specifically to the research on single mothers.

The Single Mother and Her Family

This review of the literature on single mothers will reveal studies that may appear to be conflicting as it relates to single mothers and their children. However, a close examination of literature suggests that the effects of family structure as it relates to child academic outcomes may be small if existent at all. In addition to family structure, there are other factors that may be just as important if not more important when it comes to the children of single mothers thriving academically (Kuhns et al., 2018). A great deal of the literature does not support the idea that single mother-led households are inherently less capable in the provision and support of education for their families. However, literature does highlight circumstances that are often more prevalent in these families that could impact children from these households.

Blake et al. (2006) compared mothers from single parent families and mothers from dual parent families during shared book reading. Mothers were observed via videotape. There were very few differences between mothers from dual parent

families and mothers from single parent families in terms of shared book reading (Blake et al., 2006). One distinction that the study revealed was that mothers from dual parent families commented to their children more than single mothers. The results of his study would not indicate potential negative outcomes for children in single parent families, as the frequency of comments was not related to language measures in this study. Findings also revealed that single mothers imitated their female children more than their male children (Blake et al., 2006). The results of his study suggests that there could be a greater sense of awareness between single mothers and their female children as compared to male children. In another study that assessed dual parent and single parent families, Cheung and Park (2016) found little difference between single mothers and parents in two families when discussing well-being and time talking with their children.

Cheung and Park (2016) found that single mothers were less involved in providing homework help than other parents, partly because of parental SES background. Cheung and Park (2016) also found that single mothers were less involved with eating main meals with their children, potentially due to fewer opportunities because of the absence of one parent. Two important pieces of this study were that it did bring socioeconomic status into light as a key variable in single parent households. This study also highlighted the fact that single parents may have fewer opportunities to do activities with their children due to having to choose between their many duties, and balance time for different opportunities within the household. Despite these findings, Cheung and Park (2016) did not find a significant negative effect of single motherhood on the academic performance of their children.

Cross (2020) established that socioeconomic status within single mother households play a key role in children's academics. Cross (2020) found that it is socioeconomic difference rather than difference in family structure that accounts for the gap in high school completion and college enrollment between children from single parent and two parent households. Cross (2020) explained that when looking at children from two biological parent homes as well as those living with a mother only, or mother and a non-biological parent, “differences in socioeconomic resources accounted for 22% to 48% of the gap in on-time high school completion and college enrollment” (p. 708). Socioeconomic status directly correlates with the number of resources that a family may have to better situate themselves and enhance schooling. This study indicates that SES and the lack of resources can be attributed to the perceived gap in academics, not the single mother or the structure of the household itself.

Harkness et al. conducted a study in 2020 that yielded similar findings. The weaker economic position facing single mothers is the most important factor that explains the lower test scores of children in their children (Harkness et al., 2020). These studies would further indicate that it is not the single mother family structure in itself that causes detriment to children, but the economic position of the families that is of concern. The amount of money that one parent brings in may place them in a weaker position economically, compared to if she was combining incomes with another parent.

Traumatic events, such as divorce or separation, that may be associated with single parenting is another variable that may affect children in single parent households (Schmuck, 2013). Traumatizing events may have heavier outcomes for a

child than the type of family structure itself that the child belongs to (Schmuck, 2013). Studies reveal that children of single parents who have not experienced traumatizing events have no internalized or externalized behavior differences than their peers with two parent households (Schmuck, 2013).

Socioeconomic status, time constraints, and traumatizing events are only three of many variables that play a role in family systems in general, but specifically the single parent household. Despite some stereotypes, the single mother is not inherently unable to provide a rich literacy environment for her child simply because she is a single mother. With that being said, the literature suggests that some of the factors prevalent in some single parent households such as less resources, divorce, or separation could affect the children in those households. Literature also suggests that households led by single mothers have been found to be just as successful as dual parent households in promoting children's academic achievement (Kissman & Allen, 1993). Implications suggest looking at each household on a case-by-case basis rather than simply looking at family structure alone, and implementing support where and if it is needed. The culture of prejudging single mothers or children from single mother-led households is often based on preconceived biases and in many cases, without merit.

Literature has been reviewed on the Black mother, the single mother, and now, attention will be turned to the Black single mother and a discussion on parenting and her family.

The Black Single Mother and Her Family

Perceptions of Black women who are also single mothers are often not positively portrayed with the literature. The Black mother who is also single has been

stereotypically and unjustly classified as being on welfare, leaching from the government, and contributing to the downfall of the Black community (Tyler & Muhammad, 2015), with the very idea of the welfare queen being circulated by former American president Ronald Reagan's campaign. Some of the literature that currently exists perpetuates the negative perception. However, there is literature that provides a positive counter narrative of Black Single mothers.

Jackson et al. (2013) led a two-term longitudinal study consisting of 99 single Black mothers, all of whom were current or former welfare recipients. All the mothers had preschool children, age three at time one and five years old at time two. On average, single Black mothers faced unfavorable circumstances such as fewer parenting resources, increased stress in the parenting role, and poorer mental health than others (Jackson et al., 2013). All of these factors have the ability to influence outcomes for the children in these households (Jackson et al., 2013). However, children benefited when mothers received parenting support from significant others, including but not limited to nonresident fathers, as mothers showed less stress and fewer depressive symptoms (Jackson et al., 2013). Jackson (1999) also spoke to supporting Black single mothers in parenting by suggesting that young Black children benefit from the active presence of their nonresident fathers. While this study showed the hardships that some Black single mothers may deal with, it also showed that parenting support may mitigate the negative effects that may accompany Black single mothers who are or have been on welfare. Implications include a support-based approach for mothers including an understanding of racial and socioeconomic contexts for families. The implementation of a support-based approach will ultimately benefit the children. As literature has shown, in supporting the mother, the children benefit as well.

Bush (2000) explained that the role women play in raising sons has received little scholarly attention, with the literature on Black women raising sons being almost nonexistent. Much of the literature that does exist on the Black mother and son “remains reticent and neglectful” (Bush, 2000, p. 32). However, more recently, Danforth and Miller (2018) conducted a study in which they interviewed Black boys on the role their single mothers played in their resilience and college readiness. The boys stated that their mothers maintained high academic expectations, providing them with “tunnel vision,” (p. 71) placing limits on their behaviors, and attempting to reduce exposure to negative peer pressure by influencing choice in peer groups (Danforth & Miller, 2018). Researchers found that the mothers recognized the low expectation from society regarding the futures of their sons (Danforth & Miller, 2018). In order to protect their sons, mothers urged their sons to focus on school (Danforth & Miller, 2018).

A full 100% of the Black boys who were interviewed did report that they felt societal expectations of them were negative (Danforth & Miller, 2018). However, partially due to their mothers’ goals and expectations as well as parenting styles, they were able to overcome society's expectations of them (Danforth & Miller, 2018). Along with the mothers high academic expectations for their sons, the mother son relationship was filled with “love, open communication, understanding, and mutual respect” (Danforth & Miller, 2018, p. 73). This study was profound in that it gave Black boys a voice within the literature to speak about their experience being raised by their Black mothers in female headed households. Furthermore, it speaks to the power that high motherly expectations can have in a child's life. This study is also

enlightening in revealing the awareness that the Black males had regarding low expectations for them from society.

The mental health of parents is a variable that may play a role in parenting and in the shaping of familial systems. Atkins et al. (2018) classified Black single mothers as a vulnerable subpopulation, reporting that “Black single mothers are at risk for clinical depression” (p. 936). Fifty percent of the women in this population report significant levels of depressive symptoms (Atkins et al., 2018). The numbers are so high due to poverty, lack of social support, perceived racism, and socio-economic as well as socio-cultural stressors (Atkins et al., 2018). Within this literature review, this is relevant as this study suggests the mental health of the mother could affect the development of their child and could inadvertently play a role in parenting and family processes. Areas of child development that could be impacted include poor language development and learning disabilities (Atkins et al., 2018). Atkins suggests prompt identification of depressive symptoms and early treatment (Atkins et al., 2018).

Nevertheless, in speaking to the determination and perseverance of Black single mothers, Brodsky (1999) found that Black single mothers are “determined to find ways to make it” (p. 157). Furthermore, Brodsky’s (1999) study found that Black single mothers believed that single parenting can be an adaptive and positive decision. Coping has been strengthened by focusing on the positive, focusing on their own parenting, as well as spirituality (Brodsky, 1999). This literature speaks to the determination and adaptation process of Black women and Black single mothering. Within group studies have found that merely growing up in a single parent family in and of itself is not a predictor of negative child outcomes (Murry et al., 2001). Rather, it is the life circumstances that may be more prevalent in this family structure that

seem to account for any outcomes that are less than optimal (Murry et al., 2011). Any narratives that unjustly paints Black single mothers in a negative light is not only irresponsible, but counterproductive to the benefit of Black women and families, and fails to accurately portray the large majority of Black single mothers.

Literature on early literacy learning within families, literature on the importance of home and school sync, as well as literature on the mother within the family has been provided. In the next section of this literature review, I shift attention away from mothers to provide a review of the literature related to Black boys and their literacy, as well the intersection of Black history and Black literacy.

Black Boys and Literacy

As highlighted in previous sections of the literature review, all children have their own literacies that should always be acknowledged and accounted for. Black boys are no different than other children in having their own literacies and deserve to have them acknowledged. These are literacies that make up portions of their identities, and that are carried into the classroom with them as they begin school. Tatum et al. (2021) noted that home-to-school connections are proven to have a positive impact on reading scores for Black boys (Tatum et al., 2021). Many may not know or understand the specific literacies that Black boys have because there are limited voices within research to tell their stories fairly and adequately, as well as limited opportunities for Black boys to articulate their own stories themselves. Furthermore, there are often so many deep-rooted biases and stereotypes surrounding Black boys and literacy. Haddix (2009) argued that the greater emphasis is on the control and socialization of African American males for the school to prison pipeline instead of truly educating them.

The National Assessment of Education Progress (2023) reported that in 2022, only 42% of White students were at or above proficient in reading in grade four and only 17% of Black students were at or above proficient in reading in grade four. This data depicts a concerning disconnect between many students and standardized reading tests. Unfortunately, this test is the dominant tool to measure a child's literacy achievement. However, when looking at data such as this, it can be dangerous to compare numbers without acknowledging the opportunity gap that many Black children, especially Black males face. It is also important to examine some of the factors and variables that may contribute to the numbers and the less-than-optimal experiences in school that many Black males face. Coley (2011) explained that Black boys face indicators that reduce life success at higher rates than their peers; these indicators include school suspension, grade retention, low income and wealth, incarceration, and low life expectancy (Iruka, 2017). Furthermore, Kunjufu (1982) noted factors such as low teacher expectations, lack of parental involvement, peer pressure, and the lack of male teachers and role models that may contribute to less-than-optimal outcomes in school (Haddix, 2009).

Furthermore, systemic racism has played a role in negative educational experiences for Black boys including segregation in neighborhoods and segregation in schools, cultural disconnect amongst teachers, preferred treatment of White students, limited resources in schools, and negative interactions with school staff (most of which are White) (Danforth & Miller, 2018). Furthermore, race and language are characteristics that have become methods for stereotyping and separation of Black children (Irvine, 1990). White teachers and other school personnel are baffled by the

“verbal communication style” (Irvine, 1990, p. 27) of Black students, failing to understand the way Black children express themselves through language (Irvine, 1990). All of these factors and variables help shape the schooling and literate experiences of Black males in schools but are invisible when looking only at standardized test scores.

Black males possess an expansive range of literacies that have existed long before the creation of standardized testing. Tatum and Muhammad (2012) argued, “Literacy among African American males existed prior to the scientific machinery of testing that has been used by social scientists to perpetuate racist ideologies of intellectual superiority and inferiority” (p. 436). The test scores are often used as a means of division and creating a sense of inferiority amongst Black students, as they are taking a test that may not register with any of their identities. Nevertheless, Black boys have many skills that may not be leveraged in K-12 education such as creative language, charismatic oral language, as well as persuasive and empathetic communication (Iruka, 2017).

Haddix (2009) explained her experience working with Black youth in community writing projects and explains the disconnect many Black students have in school. Many of the students say that they are not writers because they associate writing with literacy practices that are sanctioned and governed by school (Haddix, 2009). Haddix (2009) explains, “Writing for school is often defined by timed writing tasks for standardized exams or the demonstration of the conventions of writing, and many of the young people I work with feel inept in such tasks” (p. 3). Many adults who are charged with teaching and helping students contribute to the problem by

making stereotypical comments about Black boys not going to school and not knowing how to write (Haddix, 2009).

In her own autoethnography, Haddix (2014), a Black mother, speaks about her son's literacy journey. Haddix (2014) noted that her son loved reading and loved school. Using autoethnography and counter storytelling, Haddix theorized her personal experiences as a homeschooling parent while disrupting dominant narratives about the parental involvement of Black boys. After her son was placed in a "remedial" tracked class despite being "on track", she decided to pull him out of the district and select other schooling options. To no surprise, Haddix (2014) found that most of the children in her son's "remedial" class were Black. Unfortunately, the placement of Black boys in remedial and "lower" tracked academic classrooms is common (Allen & White-Smith, 2018). Haddix (2014) states that she still struggles with the "school sanctioned and standards-based expectations governed by the culture of United States schooling" (p. 75).

Despite any hurdles that Black boys may face, there are many untold stories of Black boys and men doing exceptionally well academically and across many different spaces. To no surprise, Black male literacy research has glaring omissions of Black males who do have high academic performance in reading and writing (Tatum, 2021). Gandara (2005) explained, "There are numerous examples of Black boys who have excelled academically and socially, such as males who have graduated from college with bachelor's and advanced degrees and have been identified as gifted and talented" (Gandara, 2005, as cited in Iruka, 2017, p. 129). Expounding upon Black boys and literacy, Tatum (2021) explains, "They have created and maintained a rich literate

tradition despite policies and practices aimed at their suppression, oppression, silence, and exile” (p. 131). There are and will continue to be Black males who beat the odds that exist against them and continue to succeed in literacy and other areas.

The Intersectionality of Black History and Black Literacy

Literacy for Black people has always been connected to freedom. Irvine (1990) explained, “Historically, slaves used education as the primary strategy for liberation” (p. 106). Learning to read and write would give the slave power to gain control of themselves, both their bodies and their minds (Warren & Coles, 2020). For this reason, literacy for those who were enslaved was scarce to nonexistent (Warren & Coles, 2020). This did not stop slaves from risking their lives to learn how to read and write, with this same culture and desire existing in the Black community today (Irvine, 1990). Despite anti-literacy laws being prevalent for Black men and women in the 19th century, Black people were determined to read and write anyways (Everett & Moten, 2022). Black people came out of slavery with a strong desire to be able to read and write (Anderson, 1988). Unfortunately, even after slavery, the focus was on teaching Black people to use their hands, instead of exercising their intellect (Warren & Coles, 2020).

Nonetheless, Black people have a valuable historical literacy base. Diaries, letters, poetry, hymnbooks, and speeches have been left behind indicating the literacies that existed during slavery (Schweiger, 2019). This is evidence of the Blacks desire to read and write, as well as their strength to overcome adverse conditions even in the harshest of times. Due to the suppression of book learning that Blacks were faced with as well as the mental pain and suffering accompanied with being deprived intellectually, Black tradition remained largely oral (Canon, 2021). There was literacy

in the form of songs, hymns, chants, storytelling and Bible reading (Schweiger, 2019). Many of these literacies have been carried down through generations and passed down into Black families today. Biblical culture was mainly oral, with the Bible being memorized off the page, and learned via sermons, hymns, and tales that circulated (Schweiger, 2019). As the Black experience is recorded, Black women writers should always carry Black oral tradition, Black consciousness, and the Black community with them as they tell their stories (Canon, 2021). This literature solidifies that Black children are readers, writers, and storytellers, even dating back to times when Black literacy was forbidden. Anti-Blackness, which has its origins in plantation and chattel slavery, still lingers in the cultural makeup of many social institutions (Warren & Coles, 2020). Despite this truth, the desire is for the passed down slave culture that renders Blackness as invisible and inhuman to dissipate from our schools. The physical scars of slavery do not remain, but its inheritances do (Warren & Cross, 2020). Nevertheless, as Warren and Cross (2020) explained, “The story of Black people’s collective advancement is still being written” (p. 384).

Conclusion

This study takes an autoethnographic account to examine my lived experience as a Black woman single parent researcher engaging in literacy with my four-year-old son. Through the blended theoretical lens of womanism and Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, this study ultimately provides a different and needed perspective of family literacy than what is currently provided in the literature, providing my own narrative which positions itself in literature on Black single mothers, Black families, Black boys, family literacy, and parent research.

The literature review began detailing how language is acquired and developed within families. The literature has demonstrated just how important and critical the family and literacy experiences are when it comes to shaping children's literacy, further demonstrating the importance of motherly reflection. Furthermore, the literature details how literacy learning may look different across various families.

Very often, the mother is at the heart of the family, harboring a special role when it comes to the education of her children. As related to this study, literature was examined on the topic of the mother's role in literacy development. Further, I explored literature on Black mothers specifically, single mothers specifically, and finally, Black single mothers. Next, literature was examined on Black boys and literacy, creating a striking parallel to the literature on the merging of home and school literacy, also indicating the need for partnership and understanding amongst home and school systems. Finally, the intersectionality of Black history and Black literacy was discussed, as it is most fitting to discuss Black literacy with the appropriate racial and historical context. The literature review consistently presented connections to race, culture, and history when it comes to Black mothering and Black literacy.

The next chapter will delve into the methodological approach used for this study.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

The methodological approach selected for this study was autoethnography. This chapter will discuss the main tenets of autoethnography as a rigorous methodological approach, followed by discussion of two approaches to autoethnographic research: analytic and evocative. Finally, this chapter will provide an overview of the participant, research design, data collection methods, and data analysis. The purpose of this study was to examine and reflect on my experiences as a Black woman single parent researcher as I engage in literacy with my four-year-old son, to add a different perspective to the parent researcher literacy studies that currently exist within the literature, and to better understand the literacy practices of Black woman single parent researchers with Black sons. Autoethnography allowed me to have the opportunity to share my voice as I sought to answer the following research questions:

1. As a Black woman single parent researcher, what family literacy experiences do I engage in with my four-year-old son?
2. As a Black woman single parent researcher, what connections are there between the family literacy experiences I've shared with my son and personal experiences I've encountered in my own life?
3. As a Black woman single parent researcher, what barriers have I encountered when providing or trying to provide these literacy experiences?

Autoethnography

Autobiography and ethnography together allow for the methodological approach of autoethnography (Ellis & Adams, 2014). Autoethnography is a provocative blend of story and theory (Spry, 2001). The researchers' stories as well as theory are intertwined in the study, blending the personal life of the researcher with

existing theory and research itself. This allows for a personal, yet rigorous methodological approach to research. One of the key pieces of autoethnography is the researcher's story, separating autoethnography from other research methods. The story may come first, followed by context of the study, or it may be weaved throughout the literature review (Copper & Lilyea, 2022). Incorporating pieces of the researcher's story or autobiography may be accomplished by recollection, reflexivity, and storytelling (Adams & Manning, 2015). Often centering upon morality, the researcher's story invites readers to put themselves in the researcher's place (Bochner & Ellis, 2016). While the story is important, the ethnographic research piece in autoethnographic research is equally important.

Research reporting that is high quality is what ultimately separates autobiography from autoethnography (Cooper & Lilyea, 2022). To complete autoethnographic research, the researcher may conduct fieldwork, observations, as well as acknowledging current research, literature, and theories (Adams and Manning, 2015). The researcher will be completely involved in cultural participation and analysis (Adams & Manning, 2015). Unlike their peers within the research setting, researchers who use autoethnography must be fully engaged as participants within the cultural group and must also spend time documenting and analyzing action (Anderson, 2006). The personal experiences of the researcher are seen as data and are ultimately seen as an “important source of knowledge” (Ellis & Adams, 2014, p. 254).

When used in family research, the strengths of autoethnography include an insider account into the family, allowing for the examination of everyday and unexpected experiences of families (Adams & Manning, 2015). In addition, the researcher is able to write against stereotypes and biases, fill in gaps in family research, engage in the art

and power of storytelling, and represent narratives in a personal style of writing that can make data accessible (Adams & Manning, 2015). Autoethnography allows for accessible research about a wide range of families in many different contexts (Adams & Manning, 2015). As a mother and the head of my household, I have an insider's view on what happens within my family, specifically literacy with my son.

Autoethnography allowed me the space to explore “personal and cultural experiences of motherhood” (Adams & Manning, 2015, p. 355). As I studied myself and shared my own experiences, I also engaged in a process that will allow others to have a better idea of human experience and society as a whole (Ellis & Adams, 2014).

Unfortunately, most of the studies within family literacy research depict Whiteness as the norm. However, autoethnography allowed me to have a voice, removing the “non-white male scholar objective scholar from the realms of the academically othered” (Spry, 2001, p. 727). As a Black woman single parent researcher engaging in literacy with my four-year-old son, there were no autoethnographic parent-researcher literacy studies that represented my cultural group. While there is literature on Black single mothers, first person voices from our cultural group are almost nonexistent as it relates to parenting and literacy. According to Cooper and Lilyea (2022), “Autoethnography fills a gap in traditional research where the researcher’s own voice typically is not overtly included as part of the research” (p. 198), making autoethnography the ideal methodological approach for my study. Autoethnography allows me to fill a gap in the research and literature by sharing my unique mothering experiences as it relates to early childhood literacy.

Analytic and Evocative Autoethnography

Analytic and evocative autoethnography are two types of autoethnography, both serving a distinct purpose. Ellingson and Ellis (2008) explained the key difference between analytic ethnography and evocative ethnography, analytic ethnographic research is focused on “developing theoretical explanations of broader social phenomena” (p. 445), while evocative ethnographic research is focused on “narrative presentations that open up conversations and evoke emotional responses” (p. 445).

The five key features of analytic autoethnography include “(1) complete member researcher (CMR) status, (2) analytic reflexivity, (3) narrative visibility of the researcher’s self, (4) dialogue with informants beyond the self, and (5) commitment to theoretical analysis” (Anderson, 2006, p. 348). In other words, the researcher must be a complete member of the “social world being studied” (Anderson, 2006, p. 379), have the desire to analyze and understand self and others, the researcher should be visible within the text, communicate with others within the field, and “gain insight into some broader set of social phenomena” (Bochner & Ellis, 2016, p. 379).

Anderson (2006) described autoethnography as “a specialized subgenre of analytic ethnography” (Anderson, 2006, p. 388). Analytic autoethnographers function largely as story analysts (Bochner & Ellis, 2016). Analytic ethnographers are not only sharing their stories; they are also analyzing their stories for greater meaning and connection to the literature and theory (Bochner & Ellis, 2016). Very often, researcher stories are used “to reach a theoretical explanation” (Bochner & Ellis, 2016, p. 210), similar to the discussion section seen in typical research reports. Sticking to the traditional goals of “generalization, distanced analysis, and theory building” (Bochner & Ellis, 2016, p. 63), analytic ethnographic work is mainly directed to other scholars

(Bochner & Ellis, 2016). Little interest is shown in evoking emotion and critical reflection from their cultural group (Bochner & Ellis, 2016).

On the other hand, evocative ethnographers have a distinct interest in connecting with others within their cultural group. “Much of the enthusiasm for evocative autoethnography among its practitioners stems from the fact that it has been articulated in a way that places it near the heart of their scholarly orientation” (Anderson, 2006, p. 388). Their attention is on people and connecting with their readers (Bochner & Ellis, 2016, p. 79). Evocative ethnographers even make it a point to communicate in ways their readers can understand, intentionally avoiding too much academic jargon (Bochner & Ellis, 2016). Evocative autoethnographers want their readers to be able to understand, connect to, and relate to their work. Evocative autoethnographers challenge themselves to write in ways that allow readers to engage in dialogue with the researcher’s life, as well as engage in understanding of their own life (Bochner & Ellis, 2016). Because of their rejection of traditional academic writing styles, evocative ethnographers remain marginalized in mainstream social science venues (Anderson, 2006). Historically, evocative autoethnographers have published a great deal of research “on topics related to emotionally wrenching experiences, such as illness, death, victimization, and divorce” (Anderson, 2006, p. 377).

This research study blended both styles of autoethnographic research, analytic and evocative. While the desire is to connect with my readers, especially other Black mothers and Black women scholars, the goal is also to analyze my stories for greater meaning and connection to the literature, thus establishing contributions that have meaning for Black scholars, Black mothers, and Black boys.

Research Design

An autoethnographic research design was used. The following sections will detail the participant, data collection methods, and data analysis method which are all key pieces of this research design.

Participant

As I did an autoethnographic study, I was the researcher as well as the only participant in my study. I am a Black single mother, and I have a four-year-old son. I am also a parent researcher in the academic field where I am minoritized. I experience navigating these identities on a day-to-day basis, with these intersectional identities solidifying my worldview, perspectives, and ontological reality. Given my unique insider position with the Black single mother and Black parent researcher cultural groups, I am uniquely qualified to share my experiences via autoethnography. I am the best fit researcher to give a voice to my own lived experiences engaging in literacy with my son, as well as analysis of the experiences, and connecting those experiences to the literature.

I have spent time teaching in K-12 education teaching 9th and 10th grade English, 7th grade English Language Arts, and I have worked as an elementary librarian (media coordinator). In these positions, I have been able to meet many wonderful children, and I have been able to see the wide range of knowledge and literacies that different children and cultures bring into the English classroom. My experiences in K-12 education have solidified my perspective that there is a heavy cultural and intellectual base that children bring into the classrooms, often derived from their families before they even enter the classroom. I believe that the literacies of all children should not only be acknowledged in the classroom, but also welcomed and

understood. In my experience, understanding has best been derived from getting to know the children as individuals, their families, and welcoming who they are as people into the classroom.

I believe all Black women and mothers should always have a voice to tell their stories. I also believe that all minoritized scholars should have a voice to speak on any of their chosen lived experiences as well. As a Black woman single parent researcher with a Black son, I chose to study my family's literacies because I believe we have a valuable and worthy place in the field of family literacy research. Autoethnography gives me a space to share my story and experiences.

As part of my reflexivity and self-examination as to my role in this study, I want to acknowledge the privileges that I have. Although I am minoritized as a Black woman single parent researcher in the academic field and historically across various spaces due to the combination of my race and gender, I do have privileges as it relates to this study. I am privileged due to having been a teacher and a doctoral student who studies literacy, both of which have afforded me a certain skillset and knowledge base. I am also privileged to have my support system and access to certain resources. Finally, my daytime working hours as a teacher have allowed me the opportunity to have time throughout the week to spend with my son over the course of his childhood.

Data Collection

Autoethnography allows for the use of multiple methods to collect data. Methods for data collection may include self-observations, and taking ethnographic field notes on these observations, developing self-reflexive data through in the means of journaling reflections about personal experiences and topics, and incorporating external data such as photographs, letters, and reports (Cooper & Lilyea, 2022). Other

methods of data collection may include using personal memory data and writing rich, thick descriptions to capture experience (Cooper and Lilyea, 2022).

For my specific research study, I used a total of six methods of data collection. The totality of my data collection methods allowed for a plentiful and rich set of data. I utilized the following means of data collection over the span of approximately six weeks:

- In a journal, I jotted down field notes of literate activity between my son and myself throughout the data collection period. These field notes included observations and activities that we were engaged in.
- Every night, I recorded a nightly reflection which allowed me to reflect on our activities and my feelings throughout the day, as well as make sense of the events that transpired that day and my feelings.
- Archival data consisted of jotted down memories in a journal that came to me throughout the period of data collection.
- I conducted short interviews on those who were able to give an account of my mothering, childhood, personal, and/or professional experiences. Interviews were recorded and transcribed manually.
- I collected artifacts related to my mothering, childhood, as well as artifacts related to my personal and professional experiences.
- I engaged in conversations naturally and informally, and transcribed accurate record of spoken conversation whenever conversation was relevant and pertinent to this study.

Thematic Data Analysis

As seen in the table below, after all data was collected and organized, manual thematic data analysis was used to analyze the data.

Table 1

Data Collection and Analysis Table

Data Collection	Analysis	Procedure
Ethnographic field notes	Thematic data analysis	Braun/Clark, 2006
Nightly reflections	Thematic data analysis	Braun/Clark, 2006
Archival data (Personal memory data)	Thematic data analysis	Braun/Clark, 2006
Interview transcriptions	Thematic data analysis	Braun/Clark, 2006
Artifacts (pictures, text messages, Instagram messages, letters, etc.)	Thematic data analysis	Braun/Clark, 2006
Informal conversation transcriptions	Thematic data analysis	Braun/Clark, 2006

Braun and Clark (2006) described thematic analysis as “a method for identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns (themes) within data” (Braun & Clark, 2006, p. 79). A theme is representative of something important about the data that is related to the research question, while showing a pattern or meaning across the data (Braun & Clark, 2006). The process of thematic analysis can begin as early as data collection, as the analyst begins to notice patterns of meaning in the data (Braun & Clark, 2006).

Thematic analysis can be coded by looking for significant events or experiences, looking for thematic ideas, and highlighting emotive language (Cooper & Lilyea, 2022). Further suggestions for conducting thematic analysis include looking for critical incidents or conflicts, looking for major themes or keywords, and looking for what does not fit or contradictions (Cooper & Lilyea, 2022).

All the data including field notes, nightly reflections, archival data, interview transcriptions, artifacts, and informal conversation transcriptions were coded individually for themes. The themes were not determined beforehand and were solely data driven, which allowed for a reduction in potential bias. I adhered to the six steps presented by Braun and Clark (2006) for thematic analysis. The steps are as follows:

1. Become very familiar with the data by reading and re-reading multiple times.
2. Come up with initial codes by coding attributes of the data across the entire set of data, collecting data that is appropriate for each given code.
3. Combines codes into themes, gathering all data that falls under each potential theme.
4. Review the themes and create a thematic map, making sure the themes work “in relation to the coded extract (level 1) and across the data set (level 2)” (p. 87).
5. Engage in ongoing analysis to refine and rename themes to match the specifics and story of the data. Have clear definitions for each theme.
6. The production of the report provides the last step for thematic analysis, making sure the themes are “vivid, compelling, extract examples” (p. 87) and that themes connect back to the research questions and literature.

My data resulted in five vivid themes that I was able to connect back to research questions and literature. Each theme was supported by a plentiful amount of data. An example of my coding map is provided below. The coding map shows how I transitioned from codes to code descriptions, to code family, to themes, and then to narratives within my study:

Table 2*Coding Map*

Code	Code Description	Code Family	Theme	Narrative Development
A1	Jurassic Park show	Places we experienced literacy together outside the home	Family literacy and outside spaces	Narrative analysis
A2	Library visits			
A3	Storytimes aimed at Black families			

Note. All codes in Table 2 belong to the same code family and theme.

Narrative Analysis

In addition to thematic analysis, narrative analysis was also employed in this study. Following thematic data analysis, I studied the themes that I came up with very closely and I used narrative analysis to construct narratives from my data.

Autoethnographic research is a form of narrative research (Cooper & Lilyea, 2022).

For this reason, it is reasonable that autoethnographic researchers use analysis methods related to narrative inquiry (Cooper & Lilyea, 2022). Often times, we have to allow time to pass and look back at a moment before we are able to make meaning of what exactly has gone on (Freeman, 2015). Stories are an important way to make meaning of and interpret one's experience (Cooper & Lilyea, 2022). Within the small and large stories we construct, retrospection is most visible (Freeman, 2015). Writing my narratives allowed me a space to deeply reflect on my experiences and expound upon the details in my data as I captured feeling, idea, and activity.

Strategies for Quality

To maintain quality, I was honest and forthcoming about any bias I may have had going into the research process. That involved me being transparent in my subjectivity statement. I also used multiple methods of data collection which allowed for more reliability in the data. The use of various data sources allowed me to use the triangulation method. Triangulation involves carefully reviewing data collected from different sources in order to achieve greater accuracy and validity (Oliver-Hoyo & Allen, 2006). The process of triangulation is described as being “invaluable to avoid gross errors when drawing conclusions” (Oliver-Hoyo & Allen, 2006, p. 46). I also searched for cases that were outliers or did not “fit in” with the study. The identification of disconfirming evidence or the deviant case is a key piece of trustworthiness in qualitative research (Booth et. al., 2013). This evidence strengthens credibility and validity as contradictions are identified (Booth et. al., 2013). While disconfirming evidence was present in the data, my data highlights many positives in my son and my own literate experiences. Interviewing relevant others was another method I used that provided another strategy for quality. Cooper & Lilyea (2022) explain, “Interviewing a family member about an experience may provide support for your own recollections” (p. 203). Others that were relevant to my study included my son, family members, community members, as well as past colleagues and classmates. Despite my proximity to this study as the researcher and the participant, I fully committed myself to upholding the integrity of this research study.

Ethical Considerations and Risks

As with any methodological process, there were risks that had to be considered when conducting autoethnographic research. One of the biggest risks was the risk to

me. Autoethnographic work is highly personal (Adams & Manning, 2015). Cooper and Lilyea (2022) described the autoethnographic process as “an exciting journey of exploration and disclosure” (p. 204). This process “can also lead into highly emotional, vulnerable, and even unresolved parts of ourselves” (Cooper & Lilyea, 2022, p. 204). This is very important to me to consider, as I am typically a very private person. I have spent time considering the ways, if any, that I could be impacted personally and/or professionally. Autoethnographers open themselves up to critique, as well as subjecting themselves to their own emotions that may be involved with such writing (Adams & Manning, 2015).

Although the work was personal and reflective of my experiences, other people are still involved in my story, whether directly or indirectly. Cooper and Lilyea (2022) explained, “None of us lives in isolation; our lives include others” (p. 204). For this reason, there were ethical considerations and I had to consider how others may be subjected to risk due to my study. Responsible autoethnographers acknowledge ethics related to those associated with the work (Ellis & Adams, 2014), and relational ethic must be upheld. I acknowledge that de-identification of people associated with autoethnographic work can be very difficult (Adams & Manning, 2015). However, I mitigated the risk by not using the real names of relevant others within my study. I also had a conversation with relevant others beforehand about the content of my study. As an autoethnographic researcher, I acknowledge all risks, and minimized the risks to myself and relevant others to the best of my ability.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

This family literacy study used autoethnographic methodologies to research and analyze my experiences as a Black woman single parent researcher engaging in literacy with my four-year-old son. This study will add to the literature that currently exists within family literacy research and parent researcher studies. Admittedly, I was unprepared for some of the data that would arise. However, I am more than grateful for the journey of self and familial exploration, and the revelations that came to light. From my perspective, there is always power in knowing, power in greater understanding, and power in enlightenment.

The purpose of this chapter is to present the findings for my research questions. The data narratives that are present are all based on narrative analysis. Each of these stories are built from data using narrative analysis, with narrative analysis creating the stories in chapter four. Data in the forms of ethnographic field notes, nightly reflections, archival data, interview transcriptions, artifacts, and informal conversation transcriptions allowed for a plentiful collection of information to answer my proposed research questions. Due to an abundance of data, all data could not possibly be included within this chapter. Over the span of six weeks, I observed myself engaging in family literacy, and that is reflected in a series of short excerpts which are detailed across this chapter, and which comprise most of the chapter. Also included are transitions that span back to various moments, spaces, and times, detailing meaningful moments in my life. The findings demonstrate that my identity as Black woman single parent researcher is multi-layered and intricate. Further, the data highlights that my experiences and perspectives in mothering and engaging in family

literacy have connections to various personal, professional, historical, and cultural experiences in my life, with the meanings I have derived from those experiences becoming embedded in my very existence.

The research questions were as follows:

1. As a Black woman single parent researcher, what family literacy experiences do I engage in with my four-year-old son?
2. As a Black woman single parent researcher, what connections are there between the family literacy experiences I've shared with my son and personal experiences I've encountered in my own life?
3. As a Black woman single parent researcher, what barriers have I encountered when providing or trying to provide these literacy experiences?

Introduction of Themes

At the conclusion of data analysis, I had five larger themes that I was able to connect back to my research questions as well as the literature I explored in Chapter Two. The subcategories within the larger themes are intended to provide clarity and direction to the reader, as well as guidance for a clear breakdown of the data. While some of the data could have fit under more than one theme, I decided to determine which theme was the best fit for the data, rather than combining themes. The five developed themes show the ways that family literacy exists for my son and I across our own paradigm, in ways that are special and meaningful to us, within our specific relationship. The themes developed are as follows:

Theme 1: Family Literacy and Outside Spaces

Theme 2: Family Literacy and Special Calendar Days

Theme 3: Family Literacy and Creative Play

Theme 4: Family Literacy and “Material Things”

Theme 5: Family Literacy as Comfort, Stillness, and Peace

Theme 1: Family Literacy and Outside Spaces

The data under this theme confirmed my long-held belief that literacy is not confined to a classroom or a library, and that there is no set locality for literacy. Literacy is everywhere, and everyone should be allowed to freely experience literacy in various spaces. This section will detail the family literacy experiences that I shared with my son outside of our home.

Library Visits

Personal memory data as well as artifacts in the form of pictures of my son at the library indicated that we have been visiting the library for storytimes and other literacy events since he was a baby. I used to particularly love the “Laptime Storytimes,” and now we enjoy the “Toddler Storytimes” and the “Pre-K Storytimes” just as much. Aside from the set library storytimes which are usually accompanied by a read aloud story from the children’s librarian, dance, bubbles, arts and craft activities, and time to interact with other families, my son simply enjoys the process of picking out his own books and checking them out by himself with the scanner.

One Wednesday, we decided to visit the library after school before heading home. We headed over to the children’s section of the library, bright and beautiful, welcoming for children and their families. We scanned the shelves together with my son leading the way. I immediately gravitated toward and picked up a children's book by Langston Hughes with a Black child on the front cover. I notice that I gravitate

toward books by Black authors and books with Black children very often. I held the book up to my son and said, “What about this one?” My son glanced at the book that I selected and turned away in search of another book. We ultimately agreed on a T-Rex book and ended up sitting down to read that one. After we read the book, we continued to play the sensory games in the library and simply enjoyed what the space had to offer. Even after all this activity, I noticed that I was still holding onto the book by Langston Hughes, hoping to find a moment to squeeze it in. I started to check the book out, but ultimately decided against it as we have enough books at home that we have not read yet. I ultimately gave up on the text and placed the book back where it belonged. In my reflection that night, I wrote the following:

Welp, my son was not interested at all in the book I chose today. It didn't bother me because I know that there are very few things, he loves more than dinosaurs and dinosaur books. However, it is important for me to expose my son to texts in which he is represented, as well as exposure to Black authors. At the same time, I do want him to have autonomy in the literature he reads. How do I mitigate the competing interests? It is just going to be an ongoing balancing act. In our literacy moments moving forward, I want to make sure I am honoring his interests and his sense of choice, as well as making sure we are including important cultural pieces.

Jurassic Park Show

It was finally the day of the Jurassic Park Show, and I was thrilled as I purchased the tickets for this show months in advance. On the way to the show, which was one hour away, I listened to my son explain characteristics about all of his

favorite dinosaurs. He explained what they ate, how tall they were, and other interesting facts. When we got off the highway, I tried to get him to identify words and letters on the road signs. I was only partially successful as he mainly wanted to talk about dinosaurs. When we got into the show, he spotted the area where they had Jurassic Park themed items for sale, and he excitedly exclaimed, “I want the Mosasaurus!” Admittedly, this was my first time ever hearing of a Mosasaurus! Though I know he did not need any more stuffed animals, I purchased the stuffed Mosasaurus anyway. The show was a complete success, absolutely beautiful and well executed. We awed in amazement, and predicted what would happen in the next scene. Before we knew it, the show was over, and we were back on the highway. That night, he asked to watch a Mosasaurus video. So, I found a documentary about the Mosasaurus on YouTube, and we learned together through video. My reflection for this day stated:

I am so happy that he was so happy today. I was so lucky to get us tickets on the fifth row. I was not able to experience events like this as a child, so I am thrilled to be able to do this with him. It's so funny that he talked about dinosaurs literally all day. It's amazing how much kids know and will talk when they are given space to talk about topics that genuinely interest them.

Storytime Events for Black Families

“Hey girl! Storytime at 11!” I received this text message from a friend, and the text message served as an artifact in my data set. On this day, this text message was a morning reminder for a children's storytime event that would occur later that morning. The storytime was going to be held at a coffee shop and was “aimed toward Black

families.” My son and I had a free day, so I was excited to go out and attend this storytime which was not only led by another Black mother, but also someone I consider a friend. In my journal, I detailed the first encounter I shared with this friend:

We met randomly while out at another storytime event held downtown in our city. We clicked immediately after realizing that we were the only Black moms with Black sons at the storytime event. In fact, we were the only Black families at all which admittedly created a sense of “otherness.” We stood out due to the color of our skin and gravitated towards each other. As always, the other moms were friendly, but distant. At this point, I was used to being the “other” at these events, but the day I saw her, I remember being so happy to see another mom that looked like me around my age, with a little boy around my son’s age. After the storytime, we introduced ourselves to each other and pointed out the obvious, which was the fact that we were the only moms there that looked like us. We laughed it off, but we noted how this situation could be and was somewhat uncomfortable. We both agreed that it is important to be in spaces where we see other people that look like us and where our children and cultures are represented. So, my friend decided to be intentional about holding storytimes where she intentionally reached out to Black families to attend, and where we read books with Black characters.

Although my son and I still attend community storytime events in various places, I make it a point to attend the storytimes that my friend leads as well which are geared toward Black children. While my son and I enjoy and are able to learn something from both story times, the storytimes led by my friend are special in that

there is no pressure to fit into what feels like a White space. I am grateful for her friendship, her leadership, and her sense of agency.

Theme 2: Family Literacy and Special Calendar Days

I use any special day or holiday that I can to get creative with literacy and to get my son excited for literacy. I like to pair a cooking activity or an arts and crafts activity along with a literacy activity for us. During the data collection period, there were several “special days” on the calendar.

Christmas Eve

It was Christmas Eve, and we were both looking forward to the excitement that tomorrow would bring. Earlier that week, we made a special trip to Target to pick out Christmas themed cookies to bake and a new Christmas story. That evening, I suggested that we bake the cookies we picked out and that we make hot chocolate as well. My son asked, “What ingredients do we need?” We dashed to the kitchen to get the cookies from the fridge and the ingredients for the hot chocolate. When the cookies were done, we placed the Christmas cookies on a Christmas decorated plate which had a Black Santa on it. We then made our hot chocolate with the favorite part being the whipped cream. Before bed, I asked my son to help me write names on the last few gifts for family members, which allowed for a little handwriting practice. Finally, we cuddled up and read our story before calling it a night. My reflection stated:

Tonight was so fun: the baking, the hot chocolate, and the story. My son’s use of the word ingredients impressed me today. It’s funny to see his little vocabulary grow every day. Earlier this week, I was so excited to run to Target with him

and purchase our new Christmas story. I am so glad he ended up enjoying the story. The hustle and bustle of the holidays can be and has been stressful! The stores are crowded, and I have been running around trying to make things perfect. I honestly just want him to be happy tomorrow. The little tree we have is drowned in gifts, and I know that he is going to be so excited to unwrap everything tomorrow. I am a little tired, so I think I will take a quick nap, and then wake up in the middle of the night to finish wrapping his gifts.

New Year's Spring Cleaning

On New Year's Day, we embarked upon our New Year's sweep of our home. This sweep included deep cleaning, rearranging items in the home, and throwing things away. When we got to my son's room, we decided to begin with his bookshelf and reorganize it together. So, we sat side by side on his Paw Patrol rug and got to work. I take special pride in his bookshelf, making sure he has a wide selection of literature to choose from, and making sure that the bookshelf is neat and organized in a way that makes sense to us. Sometimes, it makes me feel like I still work in the library. While shelving, I came across *The King of Kindergarten*. I pulled it out and set it aside, deciding that this will be a great text to read with my son very soon since he is about to start kindergarten. After pulling that book, I continued to go through his books, weeding and reorganizing. My reflection for the day detailed some of my thoughts:

I am glad I came across *The King of Kindergarten* earlier today. As a Black mom with a Black son, one thing I can already appreciate most about this book is that there is a Black boy on the cover, which will allow my son to literally see

himself on the pages. What started off as us simply reorganizing his bookshelf together quickly turned into a reflective moment for me. After I pulled the first text, I continued to pull all the books with Black or Brown boys on the cover, and in that moment, I realized just how many books he owns with Black boys as the main characters. In reflecting back to the moment at the library earlier this week, it is clear how adamant I have been about Black literature. I have always been adamant about reading books to him where he can see himself reflected in a positive light. For one, I think my rationale behind this is partially because I know that such a small percentage of children's books feature Black children, especially Black boys. So, in purchasing Black literature for him, I see myself as standing in the gap, and making sure that he has texts that position him as a main character, as important. Subtle omissions like rarely seeing oneself represented in literature, media, or in other spaces may contribute to a child feeling like the “other” or an “outsider.” I just don't want that for him.

Personal memory data is filled with my memories teaching. As an English teacher, I had the same thought process when it came to text selection. My thought process was to pick out texts that were culturally relevant and texts where my students could be positively represented in the text. Over the course of my life and as a teacher, I have seen the misjudgment, alienation, and misunderstanding of Black boys far too often. In my classroom, I always tried to make sure that my classroom was a safe space where they could see themselves and feel comfortable to be themselves, as well as feeling welcomed and appreciated for who they were. I actually wanted my class to be a safe space for all students. As young as I was, I still felt a motherly protection

over many students, especially my Black male students. I know that my position was received well from messages I have received. One particular message on social media from a former Black male student served as an artifact in my data set. The message read, “You was the only one who ain’t treat me like I was lower than you.” While the message warmed my heart, I was hurt and disgusted to know that he experienced any other teacher treating him like he was “lower” than them. Unfortunate as it was, I knew the message was one hundred percent accurate based on things I used to witness, and things I used to hear as a teacher.

Black History Month

Towards late January, as February approached, I began thinking about Black History Month and what I wanted to highlight with my son. I used the upcoming month as an excuse to buy new books, as I admittedly, look for any reason to buy new literature. I decided that I will do a mini spread on top of his bookshelf, decorating the top shelf with a few books that we will plan to cover that month. On the last Saturday in January, I started a conversation about Black history month with him detailing why the month is significant. That afternoon, we ran to Barnes & Noble together to look for Black literature. We selected four new books together and sat down to read one in their Starbucks before leaving as we drank strawberry Frappuccino’s. That night, when he went to sleep, I stayed up to organize his new books into a decorative spread on the top of his bookshelf. Further expounding upon Black History Month, my journal revealed:

I remember, when I was in the second grade, my teacher allowed each student to choose a Black person to research for Black History month. After our research,

we were to write a biography in the first person, dress up like the person of our choice, and share our findings with the class speaking as the person that we chose for the project. My second-grade teacher even invited our families for the special day. I chose Sojourner Truth. I remember being so nervous to present, but my Grandma Rea was there as well as my parents, and that made it all better. My great grandmother, at that point, could barely walk, but she was determined to make it there to see me. I wish she could see me now. It's funny that I still remember all of the details of that assignment, what I wore, and the actual presentation day. I can still see my family in the crowd as I presented my project as Sojourner Truth.

Valentine's Day Writing

Valentines Day presented another fun opportunity for us to practice writing. A few weeks before Valentine's Day, my son's teachers sent out a note to the parents explaining that the class will be having a Valentine's Day party on February 14th. The note explained that the students will be exchanging cards that morning followed by a Valentine's Day party that afternoon. The teacher also attached a list of all the students' names in the class. I immediately sent the list to the printer, knowing that this would provide a fun opportunity to practice handwriting. My son loves all his friends at school, and I knew that he would love making cards for them. That night, we looked at the list and I let him choose which friends name he wanted to practice first. Each night, we practiced a different friend's name. An excerpt from my reflection the first night read:

I am happy that I always feel “in the know” about activities and learning objectives in my son’s class. Honestly, I am just so happy that he has such fun, loving teachers. I remember being so nervous about him starting Pre-K, scared of him or me being prejudged, and him not being seen for the amazing boy he is. However, his teachers have been intentional about the inclusiveness of parents, and I genuinely feel they have my son’s best interests. They send weekly newsletters, daily updates, recommend books based upon his interests, and send practice sheets home for the students, which they do not have to do. I pray this continues all his school years. Anyways, I know he is going to be so excited about the Valentines Day party the teacher is planning.

Theme 3: Family Literacy and Creative Play

Family literacy and creative play arose as a theme due to the occurrences in the data where my son and I were playing, having fun, and engaging in literacy simultaneously.

Broken Spaghetti Noodles

On one Thursday afternoon, I was in the prepping stages of making spaghetti for dinner. As I grabbed the box of spaghetti noodles from the cabinet, the noodles poured out onto the floor. I forgot that I had already opened that box on a prior night. I grabbed most of them but told myself that I’ll just get the rest when I’m done cooking, so I continued to make the spaghetti. My son came over and sat on the kitchen floor quietly. I was busy cooking, glancing over only now and then to see what he was doing. I was stirring the meat when I heard his little voice exclaim, “Look maw-maw, I made a T!” He went on to demonstrate his knowledge of the sound associated with

the letter T as he exclaimed, “Tuh, Tuh, T”. He continued to demonstrate his knowledge of letters by forming more and more letters with the raw spaghetti noodles. I was so moved by his creative use of letter making that I paused what I was doing, sat on the floor with him, and joined him. We continued to take turns shaping broken up, raw spaghetti noodles into various letters on the kitchen floor before I got up to finish cooking. Shaping broken spaghetti noodles into letters and practicing letter sounds in that moment proved to be a family literacy experience that was not only fun, but also meaningful. I can thank my son and his creativity for that fun activity. My reflection that night stated:

I was so moved by his initiative and creativity earlier, making letters out of noodles. I am so grateful for him and the way his little mind thinks. It was his idea to engage in letter making at that moment, and he did not need me to initiate the activity for him. In fact, I’m not sure I would have even recognized an opportunity for family literacy at that moment. Busy cooking, I do wish I had more undivided time to give him, time where I can do nothing with him except be. It feels like I am always cooking, cleaning, working, or writing.

While I enjoy my work, I sometimes think, “How lucky are those who have or had the luxury of being SAHM’s before their children start school, even if only for a little while.” I just wish we had more time.

Playing Pretend in the Living Room

“You will be the raptor, and I will be the T-Rex.” My son walked over to me and passed me my dinosaur. Because we play with dinosaurs so often, I already knew to immediately shift into dinosaur mode. Cars and dinosaurs are his favorite. We both

began to change our voices to a roar and slam our dinosaurs towards each other. We also imitated their movements with our own bodies, and gave the dinosaurs conversational voices, creating dialogue on a whim as we went through the motions. An excerpt from my reflection stated:

Sometimes we reenact scenes from Jurassic Park, but today, we just went with the flow. While this is more fun for him than anything, I find joy knowing that this is also meaningful. Our pretend conversations, narrations, and movie reenactments with the dinosaurs allow him to think on his feet. Even while playing, I am glad that we are inadvertently enhancing his language skills by creating verbal dialogue on a whim.

Shaving Cream

Many times over the period of data collection, we used shaving cream while spelling out letters on the bathtub tile. While my son was in the bathtub, I was sitting on the edge of the tub and reached across him to spray shaving cream on the tile. I sprayed a nice layer on the tile wall but stopped and pulled back as some splattered back in my face. “Oops, I got shaving cream in my eye!” I exclaimed. I was holding my eye, a little uncomfortable as my eye was burning, and my son was curled up in the bathtub laughing uncontrollably. After he gained control of himself from his laughter, I encouraged him to write out his letters in the shaving cream. He excitedly began doing so. For the rest of his time in the bathtub, we switched back and forth between letters, and playing with the bath toys. My reflection on this night stated:

The shaving cream activity is a pretty fun activity to do and was actually a suggestion from a teacher of his. He writes out various numbers and letters using

his pointer finger. When he gets it right, we have a mini celebration, usually resulting in water and suds splashing, and more shaving cream flying everywhere. However, I'll take it. This beats using paper and pen as we usually do.

Theme 4: Family Literacy and “Material Things”

This section speaks about literacy and the use or nonuse of material things. Ultimately, I believe that literacy can be effective and meaningful even without the addition of “material things.”

Growing Up and Material Things

In an interview with my mother about my mothering in respect to my childhood, she revealed:

You all had things that you had to share with each other, all the kids had to share because we didn't have a lot of material things...I think with your experience today, you do give him more than what you had as a child, and you want to make sure that he never has to want.

When I heard her response, I just became silent. Her analysis of my childhood and the connection to me as a mother was breathtaking for me. When I came to and was able to fully process what she said, I thought about it, and I decided that maybe she was right. My memory allowed me to go back in time, and I pictured the blue house on top of the hill where we lived as I grew up. Following, my mind went to the room my sisters and I shared. I can still vividly visualize the room, and she is right about the fact that we did have to share many things. My mind then jumped to my son's room where he has an abundance of “material things.” As far as literacy and

material things, he has a good number of fiction books, nonfiction books (which are his favorites as he loves books on science and animals), learning toys, crossword puzzle books, spelling and writing workbooks, and board games. Data collection reflected a good amount of time spent working in *My First Learn to Write Workbook*. Aside from literacy “things,” my son’s room is filled with a good amount of material things in general that he gets to enjoy all to himself. At four, he has more “things” than I may have had in my entire childhood. As obvious as my mom’s conclusion now seemed, I had never thought of things that way or made that connection. With the help of my mom, an astounding revelation was made in connection to my childhood and my mothering. My reflections that night stated:

I really never thought about things in the way my mom put it. Maybe I am kind of making up for some sort of perceived lack subconsciously. I’m not sure.

Could there be other things that I may be trying to overcompensate for with all of this stuff? That will be up for me to continue to unravel on my journey of self and motherly exploration. I will say, as far as literacy, learning with material things has been a nice plus, but some of our most beautiful moments in family literacy have been shared when we had nothing except ourselves.

I detail a few of those family literacy experiences below.

Storytelling

Storytelling is one of the times that we are able to engage in literacy with nothing except ourselves. Field notes revealed an exhaustive amount of storytelling that we shared between ourselves, occurring almost every day. On various occasions, field notes revealed that we told each other stories that ranged from dreams we had the

prior night, happenings in our day, or stories that were just made up as we went along. My son spent countless times telling me about things that happened with his friends at school and recalling stories from scenes he watched in movies. Many times, his stories started with, “Maw-Maw, do you remember when...?”, and he would start recalling something special he experienced. I also told him stories about my experiences (child-friendly), stories recited off the top of my head, as well as stories such as *The Three Little Pigs* or *The Billy Goat Gruff*. My personal narrative reveals:

As a child, I loved hearing the story about *The Billy Goat Gruff* from my dad. Now, I enjoy telling my son stories. But what I really love is listening to my son’s stories. What I’ve noticed is that my son is a way better storyteller than me. His stories are very elaborate and very colorful. As he enters kindergarten, my desire is for him to always have a safe space to share his stories and ideas. I never want his colorful voice and descriptive language to be hushed, and I hope that his voice is never stifled as he gets older.

Letters In the Sand

As I reflected upon family literacy and all the beautiful places it occurred as well as the beautiful moments we have shared together, personal memory data allowed me to be taken back to last summer. It was a warm summer night, the waves were roaring, and the sun was going down. The sky was shades of blue, purple, and pink. I remember being a little stressed during that time, but in that specific moment, I felt nothing but peace. I was at the beach, and I was next to my favorite person, my son. I took my pointer finger and wrote our names in the sand separated by a heart, with the

picture serving as an artifact. We then began to write and draw in the sand together, only us, the sun, the sand, and our fingers.

I do not think that a lot of material things are always needed to engage in familial literacy. Some of our most special family literacy moments have been spent with us alone.

Theme 5: Family Literacy as Comfort, Stillness, and Peace

This theme is the last mentioned theme due to the fact that it was unexpected. Literacy as comfort, stillness, and peace arose as a theme due to the many instances in the data where literacy provided a space for feeling, healing, or other emotive responses, either for myself, my son, or us both.

Early Morning Reads

Field notes revealed many times over data collection that my son walked in on me doing my morning reading. On some occasions, he would ask questions or comment about what I was reading, and sometimes he would simply come sit in the room with me and play with his cars on this floor. On this Saturday morning, he climbed into my arms and laid there. When he climbed into my arms, I continued to read, but instead of quiet reading, I now read The Bible out loud. My son simply laid there and listened to me read, switching between eyes shut and glancing up at me. My journal stated:

I try to make it a point to wake up early to read The Bible every morning. This early morning reading provides me with a sense of peace and the presence of God that is beneficial to start my day with. I recognize that the few minutes I have when I wake up early may be the only still moments I have all day. Even

though I am tired most mornings, it is important for me to squeeze this in. I remember myself as a little girl standing beside my siblings and my dad as my dad read the Bible to us out loud. As we got older, we would take turns reading the Bible together as a group. This will forever be ingrained in my memory and is one of my most beautiful memories with my father. Because of these early familial literacy interactions focused on The Bible, I will never forget each word in The 23rd Psalm or The Lord's Prayer. The words in those prayers have provided me peace in some of my hardest moments.

Nighttime Reads

“Maw-maw, I don't want to go to bed.” The excerpt is from a night I documented in my field notes. However, this sentiment from my son is expressed almost nightly. On this particular night, he pounced on me imitating the pounces of one of his favorite dinosaurs, the Scorpius Rex. He also requested a drink of water and snacks before he finally agreed to lay down. Isn't it funny how children are the thirstiest right before bed? He squirmed and squirmed, telling me, “Maw-maw, it isn't time to lay down!” Exhausted myself, I get up to head over to his bookshelf to pick out a story. He jumps on my back, declaring that he will choose a book on his own. He selected one of his favorite *Pete the Cat* books before we climbed back into his bed. As he got under his covers, I began to read. As the book progressed, with every word, I noticed him getting more and more relaxed, moving his body less and less, before he eventually drifted off in my arms. Before long, he was snoring, and I was on my way back to my room. My reflection for the day revealed:

Even when my son was a baby, I was always marveled by how he would calm down when hearing the words to a story. Nighttime reads are my favorite with him because they are just so soothing and relaxing. During our early day reading, things go a little different sometimes. Because we are both wider awake in the earlier hours, we are both talking more, commenting more, and asking more questions. I almost find myself mimicking myself in the classroom at times. I also like to ask him to identify certain words in the story as we read. However, in the evenings after bath, dinner, and a long day, our readings are more so soothing and comforting after a long day of being apart, allowing ourselves to just get swallowed up in the words of the book and the pictures on the page before dozing off. I have always loved that literacy has the power to bring such peace, comfort, and stillness when used correctly.

Writing Letters

My artifacts included a plethora of cards and letters that I wrote for my mom and dad when I was a child, and my parents valued them enough to hold onto them to this day. After daycare one day, my son asked to see a family member. Aware that my son wanted to spill all the details about his day, I suggested we write her a quick letter instead. Though this is a far less appealing option than a face-to-face visit or even a Facetime date, surprisingly, he agreed, “Okay, maw-maw.” While my son is not going to write an actual full letter at his age, it is still important for me to introduce the idea of getting thoughts down on paper. There are just some things that we may not be able to say when we want to say it, and some people we may not be able to talk to whenever we want, and writing things down is better than forgetting or keeping things

inside. So, when we got home, I went over the parts of a letter with him in a pretty simple way: the greeting, body, and signature. Then, I grabbed us a snack, grabbed markers, pencils, crayons, and paper, and we both made letters, his consisting of mainly beautiful drawings and bright colors, my page full of words, words I needed to set free...a diary entry to myself in a sense. In my journal, there is an excerpt where I wrote about my experiences with letter writing as a teacher:

In the classroom, during an allotted time for creative writing, students were allowed to write letters. They chose to write to their parents, friends, and sometimes students even wrote to their loved ones that have transitioned. At the conclusion of the exercise, some students would volunteer to present. The emotions that showed up during the writings and presentations, paired with the deep intention and attention that the students gave their writing was truly beautiful, special, and comforting to witness as their teacher.

Songs

Field notes highlighted multiple occasions that singing songs together soothed my son or provided comfort to either me, him, or both of us. One of our favorite songs to sing aloud is a gospel song titled “Wait On You”. We sing, “Wait on the Lord, wait on the Lord, He will renew your strength, so wait I say...” I often wonder how his brain is processing the lyrics in the composition, and I wonder if those lyrics are bringing him the same sense of comfort that they bring me. Many of my documented field notes included singing songs together on long car rides which eased the restlessness that came about from sitting in one place for an extended amount of time, playing songs at bedtime which helped bring calmness and a sense of stillness at

bedtime after a busy day, or singing songs during hair washing time which actually soothed him when he was getting his hair washed and was absolutely convinced he was going to fall in the sink. My field notes allow me to highlight one of our hair washing days:

As my son was reluctantly letting me wash his hair, it dawned on me to start singing, so just I started to sing aloud. Although he was still trying to sit up and prevent laying back into the sink by any means necessary, he eventually joined in with me and started singing. We started with The ABC song, moved to Baba Black Sheep, and then Twinkle Twinkle Little Star. As I washed his hair while we sang together, I noticed that his body became less and less tense, and less resistant. I intentionally put extra emphasis on the words that rhymed while singing to draw his attention to rhyme. He began to relax more and more, focusing more and more on the rhyme, words, and rhythm of the song, rather than the fact that he was nervous about falling in the sink.

In my journal, I mentioned our experiences with songs when my son was a baby:

It's amazing what peace songs can bring. I remember sleepless nights of being a new mom with a newborn. I remember people telling me to try playing soft music for him and see if it would relax him. I remember thinking, "What is that going to do for a screaming baby?" However, I tried it, and it worked. The music proved to be effective in getting him relaxed enough to fall asleep as a baby, but also effective in helping him to sleep a little better throughout his period of sleeping. Playing soft music while he sleeps is something I did more

when he was younger, but I still do it at times now too. My favorite soft song to play was Beethoven's Sonata no. 29. Because of the beautiful memories associated with this beautiful piece of music, it will always be one of my favorite songs. It's just beautiful how impactful songs still prove to be in bringing that same sense of peace.

In my journal, I detailed the impact the impact that songs had when I was a teacher:

Songs often showed up during my time as a teacher and brought peace and stillness with them. I remember playing soft music in the class during assignments to promote a calming and peaceful environment. Particularly during the class periods after lunch when students were a little more excited after having eaten and seeing friends, the power of song proved to be truly transformative. In other instances, I would print off song lyrics for my classes, and we would analyze literary elements within the songs. Aware of how much they loved songs and music, I also gave students a creative space to compose their own rap songs, which was essentially their own poetry. While they read their writings aloud, many students opened up and came out of their shell in ways I had not yet seen. Many students showed intense emotion as their writings came to life being read off the page. In those moments, it was absolutely confirmed for me that literacy was a healing agent and serves so many beautiful purposes.

Library

I was on the phone with my mother one morning during the data collection period. I told her that I was going to the library to work on my dissertation. She excitedly asked, “Do you remember we used to go to the library for book giveaways?” My mom explained that we used to go all the time and “stock up on books.” Truthfully, and somewhat ashamed to admit, I had no recollection of the book giveaway. I had no single memory of receiving a book from the library. What I did remember about the experience was being with her and my siblings and being happy and at peace in those moments. I do not remember the details of what we did while I was there as far as collecting books, but I remember being there and I remember how I felt. My reflection that night stated:

As I reflect on the conversation with my mom earlier today, I have a takeaway. Just as much as I appreciate literacy in its respect to being an academic endeavor, I also want my son to experience literacy in the sense that it promotes a feeling of peace and happiness, as it has always done for me. Literacy can offer so much more than what it is usually confined and limited to. Sometimes, even after a moment is gone, and we cannot remember everything we did or everything we said, what we do remember is the feeling associated with that moment or experience. I am grateful for the feeling and the memory accompanied with being at the library with my mother and siblings. I am grateful for the memories I have of my dad taking us as well. While I was able to share those family literacy experiences with both parents, I am now able to share them with my own son. I absolutely love the library, and I believe my son

finds the same joy. Although the library has been remodeled from the time I was there as a child, I am provided with the same feeling I had as a child when I walk through those doors. Even while in the library working on my dissertation, as stressful as it can be, I still have the same sense of peace at the library that I had since I was a child. Nostalgia.

Conclusion

Narrative analysis was used to construct narratives based on data that was collected during this study. This chapter provided a snippet via story and narrative of some of the family literacy events that spanned the data collection period between my son and I, as well as connections to moments in my own personal life. These findings are unique to us, our identities, and our own ontological position. This chapter showed some of the spaces where literacy occurs for us, how we engage in family literacy on special days, how we use materials to engage in literacy learning, how we use play to engage in literacy, but also how literacy comforts us. Our family literacy experiences are special and personal to both who I am and who he is, with both of our identities shaping the way we engage in familial literacy together. These findings are important in that they shape our bonding today, they shape my son's language development, and interestingly enough, the findings are shaped by and connected to many of my past experiences. While writing Chapter Four, I have learned that my mothering is very much shaped by my own personal experiences, even experiences that exist deep in depths of my subconscious memory. Those experiences have passed, but yet, in many ways, the experiences are still there. In the construction of Chapter Four, it has also

been reiterated to me that literacy learning is a very natural experience, with the ability to occur any time and anywhere.

The final chapter will provide an overview of the study and a discussion of the findings.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

This chapter will provide an overview of the entire study, inclusive of the methodology. The chapter will also detail findings in relation to the specific research questions, as well as the findings and their connection to the literature and theoretical frameworks. Finally, implications, lessons, suggestions, and conclusive thoughts will be provided in this chapter.

Background and Research Questions

Acknowledging the wide array of diversity within families, and also the privilege that I have as a Black doctoral student, I chose to research and analyze the family literacy experiences that I share with my son. This study arose out of a genuine desire to better understand and explore the literate experiences that I am sharing with my son as he approaches kindergarten, but also to better understand the personal, historical, and cultural base in those experiences, a lot of which comes from me and my own experiences as his mother. The purpose of this study was to use autoethnographic methodologies to research and analyze my experiences as a Black woman single parent researcher engaging in family literacy with my four-year-old son, to add to the literature that currently exists within family literacy research, and to add to existing parent researcher studies. The research questions were as follows:

1. As a Black woman single parent researcher, what family literacy experiences do I engage in with my four-year-old son?
2. As a Black woman single parent researcher, what connections are there between the family literacy experiences I've shared with my son and personal experiences I've encountered in my own life?

3. As a Black woman single parent researcher, what barriers have I encountered when providing or trying to provide these literacy experiences?

Review of Methodology

In alignment with using my own voice to tell my own story, and my own experiences being used as data, an autoethnographic methodology was selected for this study. Throughout this study, tenets of both autobiography spanning from childhood to adulthood, and ethnographic research inclusive of self-observations and field notes were infused together for the end product, this autoethnography. Included as data in this study were field notes and reflections, archival data, interview transcriptions, artifacts, and informal conversation transcriptions. Autoethnography is described as being reflective of “multiple layers of consciousness” (Bochner & Ellis, 2016, p. 66), which is seen over the course of this study as I transition through the experiences and feelings accompanied with myself in multiple modalities including granddaughter, daughter, teacher, mother, while also transitioning through identities of scholar and Black woman.

Autoethnographic research provided me with the best methodology to fill a gap in family literacy research and parent research. In line with autoethnographic research, I used my own voice and was fully engaged as an insider and participant within my cultural group throughout the course of this study (Anderson, 2006). This study used a blend of analytic autoethnography and evocative autoethnography, as my stories are analyzed and connected to literature and theory being largely directed to other scholars (Bochner & Ellis, 2016), but my study also connects to my readers and engages in an understanding of my own life (Bochner & Ellis, 2016).

Limitations

There are several limitations to this study. Because there is only one participant, this study does not allow for the voices of other mothers or other parent-researchers to be included. Other racially diverse mother scholars such as other Blacks, Latina/Hispanic, or Asian mother scholars were not included. Thus, the inclusion of only one voice makes the data unable to be generalized. Furthermore, in analyzing one's own collected data and experiences, there is space for increased bias and increased subjectivity. With autoethnographic research, self-reporting is not a limitation. However, the limitation with autoethnographic research is the question of the accuracy of the data as only one person's account is provided. Finally, due to the plentiful amount of autoethnographic data that was collected, some data had to be left out of the study's findings.

Discussion of Findings and Their Connection to The Literature

RQ1.

Research question one asked: As a Black woman single parent researcher, what family literacy experiences do I engage in with my four-year-old son?

Within the literature, experiences of Black woman single parent researchers engaging in literacy with their sons was simply not present. Historically, literature on Black women raising sons has been almost nonexistent (Bush, 2000). While Blake et al.'s (2006) study noted a distinction in the way single mothers engage with their male and female children, this study provides a different and much needed perspective, focusing on the processes of one Black mother and one son without comparison to another child or family. Though my son was four at the time of the data collection

period, my data allowed me to span through many of his developmental stages ranging from newborn to four-year-old, so various periods in his literate life are reflected in the data. I have appreciated the opportunity to explore some of our literacies that have occurred before he goes to elementary school, with the knowledge that those formative years before elementary school help to shape a child's literate foundation.

My findings detailed the intricate and personal, day to day, literate experiences that occurred between my son and myself. Within the findings, I imagine that many of the overarching themes can be transferred amongst families, while the specific activities will likely look different. Many of the activities we engaged in were consistent with activities mentioned by Rodriguez & Tamis-LeMonda (2011) such as reading books, singing nursery rhymes, and learning about letters, as well as reading street signs and reading books in stores as mentioned by Saracho (2002).

My theme *family literacy and outside spaces* demonstrated the spaces where we engaged in literacy outside our home. Consistent with San Pedro's (2021) sentiment that learning occurs anywhere there are relationships, my findings under this theme prove his idea to be consistent, with the findings depicting family literacy experiences occurring in multiple places and spaces from the beach to the bathtub. Speaking of places, Brown's (2018) study noted that Black mothers want places where their children can feel connected and emotionally safe. Consistent with Brown (2018), the findings revealed that my son and I attend child storytimes geared towards Black families for a heightened sense of connection and inclusiveness. Brown's (2018) study focused on connectedness in school. This study offered an extension of that desire, not only focusing on connections and spaces within the school space which are very

important, but the desire as a Black mother to have those spaces for connection outside of the school space as well.

In line with race, Sonnenschein et al. (2018) asserted that race shapes how the Black parent engages in academics with their family. The findings in this study are consistent with this idea. The findings indicated the value I see in selecting Black literature for my son, depicted in the findings with our trip to the library to find new texts for Black History month, as well as my selection of the Langston Hughes text during our library visits. One key piece my findings did bring to the forefront is the mitigation process for Black mothers in allowing children to navigate their own interest and their own innocence, while also knowing the importance of including the Black race and culture in their literature and their experiences. It is a constant mitigation process in wanting to preserve innocence, but also understanding the inevitable implication of race surfacing at some point in their life and wanting the child to already have some sense of awareness and protection for when that day comes.

Family literacy and special calendar days detailed the ways in which we engaged in literacy on special occasions. As represented in the findings, we engaged in literacy that was aligned with his classroom experience by practicing handwriting and writing out the names of classmates in preparation for cards that will be made for the upcoming Valentine's Day Party at school. These small endeavors create some level of sync between home and school. Important to note is that this is made possible because of a teacher that is open in her communication about daily and weekly school happenings. A unique contribution of this study is that it provides the ways one parent

experiences the level of home and school connectedness for her son in an early childhood education setting.

On New Year's Day, we did a New Year's sweep of the house with the findings detailing my son and I at his bookshelf, and my reflection on the day. The findings reflected me selecting *The King of Kindergarten* to elaborate on conversations about the upcoming school year, a text where he could visually see a Black male on the cover and through the pages as the main character experiencing kindergarten. This finding engages in literature that discusses the ways children's literature can be used to discuss important topics. Consistent with Allen and White-Smith's (2018) finding, I do have very high educational goals for my son. Ispa et al. (2020) found that Black mothers, especially those with sons, do have conversations about school with their children. My study was consistent with this finding as I constantly talk to my son about school, specifically the upcoming kindergarten school year. However, my conversation was geared toward my four-year-old son, which allowed for a different perspective than the mentioned study. My findings not only affirm Ispa et al.'s (2020) finding that Black mothers have conversations with their children, but this study further provides perspective on how children's literature can be used as a supplemental tool to enrich conversations about meaningful subjects such as school with young children.

Family literacy as comfort, stillness, and peace detailed the ways literacy has been a comfort to us. The findings presented under this theme position literacy as a tool for comfort, rather than a tool that is only used for academic purposes. The findings demonstrated that literacy as comfort was experienced while singing at the

shampoo bowl, listening to songs before bedtime, and singing gospel songs around the house. This was also demonstrated with the suggestion of letter writing to family members who are distant in location, to get present thoughts and ideas on a page. While many articles within the literature discuss the relationship between family structure and literacy learning or race and literacy learning, the findings in the final theme offer reflections that provide a perspective of literature that is not centered upon anything but the relationship between literacy and comfort, stillness, and peace. These findings expound upon a small body of outside literature that speaks to the use of literacy as a healing agent and method for facilitating comfort or peace.

Family literacy and creative play detailed the ways in which we engaged in literacy through creative play. The findings under this theme engage in a large body of outside research on how children learn while playing and the use of play as a tool in comparison to more structured learning. When play is used in the curriculum, it is noted to have a positive impact on Black boys reading (Tatum, 2021). *Family literacy and “material things”* detailed our use as well as the nonuse of material things as far as literacy engagement. Under this theme, I did mention the use of practice writing workbooks which mimic work he does in school. Furthermore, under *Family literacy and special calendar days*, I mentioned practice sheets that my son’s teacher sends home to her students. We have used those at home on occasion as well. However, DeBaryshe et al. (2000) suggested that pressure to use conventional forms of literacy lessons as parental literacy rises. My findings are inconsistent with that idea. Despite my level of literacy, I know conventional learning is likely what my son will

experience in school, so I try to make sure he experiences organic as well as conventional methods of learning.

Using my voice to provide a peek into our own intimate world, one of my intentions for research question one was to contribute to meaningful discussion on the literate experiences that children have within their families before they arrive to K-12 schooling. As I conclude the discussion of research question one, I acknowledge that parenting and literacy learning (whether formal or informal) is accompanied by challenges and is not always easy. I am in no way exempt from the challenges and hardships of parenting. There was data collected during the data collection period that was indicative of hardship and challenges. There were and are many things I wrestle and struggle with as a parent and woman. There is hardship, worry, guilt, and self-doubt. Also, there were some days I received pushback from my son. However, in this study, the data that was included and the narratives presented from that data mainly highlighted the positive family literacy experiences that my son and I shared.

RQ2.

Research question two read as follows: As a Black woman single parent researcher, what connections are there between the family literacy experiences I've shared with my son and personal experiences I've encountered in my own life?

With the formation of this question, my intent was to move beyond family literacy experiences between my son and I, and to dig deeper to analyze those experiences in relation to my own personal lived experiences. My personal experiences are rooted in culture, race, family, history, as well as my professional experiences. The goal was to analyze if and how those experiences play into my

mothering. This was very important for me to assess because I know that I am a culmination of all my experiences and a primary person in my son's life. In forming this question, my viewpoint was that my experiences and my perspectives of those experiences may have effects that linger and play an indirect or direct role on my mothering, and thus, have an effect on my son. My findings demonstrate that to some degree, that initial idea was rooted in truth.

Findings indicated that some of my familial literacy experiences with my son replicate familial literacy experiences I shared with my own parents. Compton-Lilly et al. (2020) discussed family literacy as containing “longitudinal and generational knowledge” (p. 279), and my findings are consistent with this idea. As I analyzed my findings, I was able to see where pieces of generational literacy and familial literacy experiences were repeating themselves. I saw connections between several family literacy experiences that I shared with my own son to family literacy experiences that my parents shared with me as a child. Those experiences included visits to the library which I experienced with each parent, as well as oral Bible reading and storytelling that occurred with my dad, all of which I now engage in with my own son. This study engages in literature that discusses repeat and generational literate practices within families and intergenerational literacy. Although this is beyond the scope of this study, this study also lends itself to the idea of generational and repeat familial practices that extend beyond literacy.

Rodriguez and Tamis-LeMonda (2011) spoke to the wide range of engagement that learning materials can provide. My findings detail an abundance of learning materials and things in general that my son has. My findings go on to express the

contrast between the “materials” my son has of his own and what I had growing up that I had to share. My study speaks to the idea that I may be trying to “make up” for a perceived difference or lack. The findings in this study contribute to a body of outside literature that speaks to the ways the childhood experience of parents may influence their parenting processes with their own children.

Racial-based experiences have also been a factor in shaping my engagement in literacy events with my son. My findings highlight that my son and I experience literacy together in storytimes for Black families. However, behind our engagement in Black storytimes, was an encounter that took place for me with another Black mom. I explained that I met another Black woman at a children's community storytime, and we connected as the only Black women and Black mothers there with our sons. I discussed the discomfort that accompanied that experience, and how the woman who is now my friend went on to create a space for “us.” Dow (2015) interviewed a Black mom who spoke about feeling uncomfortable in spaces where most of the moms present were White, and the work involved with trying to fit in with those moms. This study presents findings that are both consistent and inconsistent with the perspective mentioned in Dow’s (2015) study. Consistent is the idea that the storytime experience was somewhat uncomfortable. However, I was also at a point where I was almost used to feeling isolated in “mommy and me” spaces around my community. Nevertheless, rather than trying to fit in as mentioned in Dow (2015), this study provides a different approach that involved creating a new space. A unique contribution from this study highlights the charge we took as mothers and agents of ourselves and our families to mitigate our discomfort by creating our own spaces for our own children. In addition,

these findings engage with outside literature on Black women and othermothering. Othermothering is present in the data with our participation at Black storytimes led by my friend who is also a Black woman. In these spaces, my friend read to, nurtured, and created community for a group of Black children who were not her own.

Furthermore, my experiences teaching and in scholarship are heavily related to and have shown themselves in my mothering, and again, are heavily connected to my Black experience. Researchers (Allen & White-Smith, 2018; Haddix, 2009; Irvine, 1990) mention negative experiences that Black boys and children must mitigate in K-12 schooling. As a researcher, I am aware of much of the data and literature on Black students. As a teacher, I have witnessed the schooling experiences of many Black children firsthand. As I discussed my Black male students in Chapter Four, the theme of othermothering presented itself again as I discussed feeling like a mother to my students despite being so young myself. My findings revealed a message from a student explaining that I was the only teacher who never made him feel like he was lower than them. Admittedly, I have remained troubled with that sentiment. The knowledge of certain research, my experiences teaching, and that note has admittedly seemed to contribute to a hyper-sensitive degree of protection, concern, and worry. I believe that this has shown itself in my mothering, as well as in ways that extend beyond the scope of this study.

As it relates to this study, my findings express happiness that my son's current teacher sees him for who he is, alluding to the fact that I do not want him prejudged for the combination of his race and gender. At times, I find myself worrying and hoping that his experience will be different than what I have read about and witnessed.

These worries and stressors are worries specific to Black and Brown mothers, as White mothers do not have to carry that worry based on race alone. The meanings and perspectives derived from my professional experiences and the knowledge from those experiences has carried over to my parenting, doing little to provide a sense of peace for me as my son transitions to kindergarten. The findings from my study engage in literature on the ways Black teachers and Black education researchers process their professional and teaching experiences and knowledge, and how that knowledge and experience exists in relation to their own children.

With my own son, I carry a similar sense of protection over him that I used to have over my Black male students. This is partially why I am adamant about the representation of Black males in literacy materials and in their learning, positioning them as important and primary. I did this as a teacher, and I do this as a mother. This is represented in my findings as I gravitate towards Black literature for my son, try to attend Black storytimes where Black culture and Black being is validated, and also as I express my deep desire for my son and other Black boys to be fairly represented and acknowledged for who they are as individuals without prejudgment.

Schweiger (2019) detailed the literate lives of slaves. Schweiger (2019) noted that oral Bible reading is a tradition among Black people that dates back to slavery, and also noted that many slaves had the Bible memorized off the page (Schweiger, 2019). In addition to oral Bible reading aloud, my findings mention the memorization of The Lord's Prayer and The 23rd Psalm. Furthermore, Schweiger (2019) asserted that oral storytelling was prevalent during slavery when much communication was oral. My study highlights oral storytelling between my son and I, as well as my dad

and I when I was a child. As highlighted, oral storytelling is a familial tradition which has its roots dating back to slavery. In addition to Bible reading and oral storytelling, I mention the peace that one particular Gospel brings when sung aloud. My mind connects to the Black spirituals and songs mentioned by Schweiger (2019), songs sung in the midst of hardship. While these findings present a parallel to more of a historical connection than a personal connection, a unique contribution to the literature from this study is the presentation of historical Black literate tradition and how it may show itself in Black families and familial practices today.

The findings on Bible reading lead to to a key discussion point. In addition to the personal connection between spirituality and my own childhood to spirituality and my mothering, there is a strong, interwoven connection between faith and literacy, faith and Black history, faith and family literacy, as well as a connection between literacy, faith, and the reading of the Bible and other religious texts. This is reflected in my data and is evident throughout Black history. There are many people who will never read a novel but read the Bible every day. Arguably, this speaks to more of a connection with God or spirituality than to a connection with literacy. Even with my own Bible reading, the practice has always been centered upon my faith and spirituality rather than literacy. However, upon collection and analysis of the data, it was evident that I was engaging in family literacy and literacy itself as I studied the Bible with my family. These findings in the data open the door for more conversation on the intersectionality of spirituality, motherhood, Black history, the Black family, and literacy. This study also joins conversations in outside literature on spirituality and faith.

Dow (2015) asserted, “Increasingly, sociological researchers are exploring how the meanings that mothers attach to their family, work, and life decision making influence how they experience motherhood” (p. 50). My findings from this study, specifically research question two, engage in that body of research.

RQ3.

My third and final research question asked the following: As a Black woman single parent researcher, what barriers have I encountered when providing or trying to provide these literacy experiences?

As I approached the end of this study, I realized that the very formation of this question went against the entire framework for this paper which is the acknowledgment of parent and family strengths. As one who is hard on myself and one who has studied barriers in K-12 education, this question seemed fitting at the time that I was forming questions. However, while the identification of barriers is important, deficit lens-based thinking and the identification of barriers alone does little to move conversations forward and towards progression. As I approached the end of this study, I realized that better fitting questions would have been "How do Black women mitigate perceived barriers to family literacy engagement?" or even, "As a Black woman single parent researcher, what advantages do I have in my provision of family literacy?" In his study on Black single mothers, Brodsky (1999) explained, "A research question on within group successes can be empowering to participants and the groups to which they belong" (p. 148). In retrospect, more attention on successes, strengths, or even mitigation of barriers would have been far more beneficial and aligned with this research study.

Research question three asks what would have been seemingly predictable and pre-assumed as it relates to this study, as motherhood and dissertation writing are both all consuming, thus creating a time crunch. Furthermore, endless literature already speaks to perceived barriers of Black single moms, single moms, and barriers that mothers have in general as it relates to balancing duties and time, let alone parenting while in a doctoral program. As it relates to this study, the findings indicate that the intersection of competing interests such as parenting, housework, and schoolwork is always present. This aligns with Cheung and Park's (2016) study that spoke to the balancing act that single parents must mitigate in relationship to their many duties. My findings do express my desire for more time to just "be" with my son. These findings engage in conversations on what researchers Allen and White-Smith (2018) referred to as time poverty.

However, and most importantly, what is revealed in the findings, in the face of the ever-present barrier of time, are ways that I have mitigated that barrier or have triumphed over the barrier of time, allowing me to still be present and engage in literacy with my son amidst my many duties. In the midst of the barrier of time, findings reveal Bible reading which allowed me to engage in family literacy with my son as well as the practice of self-care and self-preservation simultaneously. The Lord and my meditations with my Lord and savior Jesus Christ have been the key piece is sustaining me throughout this study, my doctoral journey, and my life. It is beautiful that I can spend time with God and my son at the same time, while engaging in something I love to do which is reading. Brodsky's (1999) study found spirituality to

be an important resource in the lives of the ten Black single mothers he interviewed. My findings are conducive with that study.

Furthermore, findings discuss participation in Black storytimes led by my friend, allowing for the blend of literacy and also allowing me to engage with other mothers and friends simultaneously. Lastly, simply engaging in daily routines such as my son's bath time and cooking were all opportunities for language development and bonding, further highlighting the ways that the barrier of time is mitigated and showing that literacy is not separate from everyday life. The findings mentioned in this study show countless examples of multitasking as a mother, although multitasking was not something I was even thinking about at the time. The findings join many conversations across various bodies of literature. The findings mentioned engage in conversation about the ways doctoral students who are also mothers mitigate time barriers, the ways single mothers mitigate time barriers, and also engage in conversations about the ways Black women perceive and overcome challenges. These findings suggest the importance of conversation and research that is not based solely on barriers but shifts toward a more progressive and strength-based dialogue. These are the conversations that will create a more appropriate lens for which to view minoritized populations.

Discussion of Findings and Their Connection to Theory

This study used a blended theoretical approach, blending womanism and Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory. Womanism speaks to the importance of Black women telling their stories and having a voice of their own. The entire study and the entire set of findings are representative of womanism as I am telling my own

story through the lens of a Black woman, and also doing my own analysis. This study involved me outlining Womanism and Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory and discovering which components of the theory fit my study. I also took my experiences and triangulated data, and analyzed that data based on theory. These theories provide the lens through which to view this study and worked seamlessly with this study.

I am transparent and open about the lens from which I conduct my research, which is a key piece of womanism. This study provides a transition away from the tradition of Black women and Black families being depicted and analyzed through the lens of Whiteness. This study moves away from the inclusion of the Black woman or family solely as a measure for sampling and comparison rather than genuine understanding. In the beginning of my study, I spoke about my isolation as a Black woman and mother in a seminar for doctoral students with children, and I later detailed my isolation as a Black mother at mommy and me events. These experiences are simply microcosms of larger racial systems abound, which highlight the relevance and appropriateness of womanism as a theoretical lens for this study. My findings make an important contribution to the literature by speaking from a first-person account of a Black woman and depicting the raw and everyday truth of my own personal and familial experiences, situating itself perfectly through the lens of womanism.

My findings present a clear and honest perspective of my view as a Black woman with a focus on the Black family. Bronfenbrenner stressed the importance of family as it relates to human development (Bronfenbrenner, 1986), and further

highlighted the importance of identifying proximal processes within the home. Within Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, the child is the center of the ecosystem. This study, specifically research question one, details the proximal process between my son and me in which he is at the center of the ecosystem. In addition, findings also unveiled some of the proximal processes I shared in my own family growing up while I was a child myself. Furthermore, Bronfenbrenner stressed interconnectedness between systems in the microsystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The findings demonstrate the level of school and family interconnectedness on the early childhood level that my son and I have experienced thus far with his schooling. My findings also speak to the desire I have for some level of school and home interconnectedness to be able to continue as he gets older.

In addition, ecological models of parenting suggest that parents' beliefs, educational experiences, and cultural experiences, as well as their parenting practices have an impact on their children's learning and development, thus suggesting the need for the examination of various aspects of the parenting environment (Bingham & Mason, 2018). Not only are children affected by environments in which they spend their time, but they are also affected by what occurs in the settings where their parents live their lives (Bronfenbrenner, 1986). My findings, in relation to research question two, detail many of the personal experiences I've encountered in my life, and how those experiences affect my mothering processes, thus having an impact on my child. As this study concluded, it was evident that the blending of womanism and Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory proved to be an appropriate approach to theory for this study.

Implications

This study engages in conversations on race, motherhood, early literacy, and the merging of school and familial systems. The implications of this parent researcher study are layered, with implications ranging from the personal to the professional.

1. Parents should give themselves a space to observe, reflect, and analyze their own practices with their children. The implication of this study suggests that reflection and understanding of self is a meaningful and valuable practice.

There is beauty in reflecting on our practices and assessing if the way we have been parenting is the way we wish to continue as we move forward in our parenting processes. Furthermore, it is worthwhile to assess if and how any of our own personal experiences have carried into our experiences with our children. In doing my own analysis of myself, I saw just how much race, childhood experiences, and work experiences play a role in my everyday life and my mothering.

2. It is important for minoritized scholars to continue telling their own stories, both of themselves and of their families, and providing their own analysis within the literature. In doing so myself, I have revealed truth that is accurate as it relates to my specific person and location. Furthermore, this study has allowed me to assert my own agency and tell my own story on Black motherhood and family literacy, instead of repeatedly reading outsider perspectives on my cultural group. There is a saying that goes, “The lion's story will never be known as long as the hunter is the one to tell it.” This quote

highlights the importance of telling our own stories and silencing the mistruths that come from others telling our stories for us.

3. There is beauty and specific distinction across all families and students. Each parent, family, and student has a specific story, culture, history, and language base that comes with them into different spaces. A student's literate base and familial strengths should be welcomed and built upon, rather than the literate base of families being devalued, stereotyped, or expected to be discarded.
4. The findings have highlighted my son's active voice, his love of storytelling, love of fiction books and dinosaurs, and a genuine love to learn and explore. I would contend that most, if not all children start off this way. Black male students are no different in this regard. The goal should be to capture and keep the natural curiosity that all children have and hold that throughout school.
5. School and parent connectedness is valuable, and this study calls for a greater degree of sync, togetherness, and appreciation across all systems.

Sonnenschein and Sawyer (2018) explained, "What remains is to make schools aware of what the families are doing and to provide culturally grounded and pedagogically sound experiences for the children" (p. 2).

Lessons and Suggestions

My engagement in this study has allowed me to partake in a great deal of reflection, not only as it pertains to me, but across different areas. I would like to highlight a few of the lessons I have learned and reflected upon throughout this study. I would also like to highlight a few suggestions and cautionary pieces.

Political and Economic Policy makers

While there are often debates over whether a woman can be a good mother and a good worker (Dow, 2015), women should not have to choose. I would love to see policies that support a better work life environment and policies that allow for families to be better involved in their children's life. I would also suggest inviting and considering conversation and engagement from minoritized mothers in an attempt to support work-life balance and today's intricate motherhood.

School Leaders and Stakeholders

I believe, as educators, we could all benefit from training and professional development that highlights racial, cultural, and socioeconomic variances among children, and how those variances may present themselves in the classrooms. I would love to see these trainings be developed and prioritized as they are much needed. I would also suggest sharing decision making by allowing parents to have a say in the hiring process and the identification of teachers and administrators that would be a good fit for the students and families within their school. Finally, I would suggest allowing teachers some autonomy to tailor their lessons to best fit the needs of their specific students. Sometimes, a one size fits all model of literacy instruction may not be in the best interest of students.

Teachers

As teachers, we have a lot on our plate. I have found it to be beneficial when teachers have a quick phone conversation or either meet with parents and students early in the school year to communicate common academic, social, and behavioral goals and expectations for the child. Discuss how parents can support those expectations. Give

parents a chance to respond and question those expectations, as well as a chance to voice their expectations for the school year. The goal is to make sure there is as much alignment and common ground as possible.

As it relates to setting that bridge between home and family literacy, one suggestion is to set up a family literacy night that allows children and parents to share their family literacy stories and experiences. I would suggest using their stories and experiences as a base for instruction and the creation of literacy-based assignments. The night can also be a chance to show books that students are reading in class, as well as students' poetry and writings. Furthermore, this night can be a chance to have mini workshops. Workshops can be used to support parents in their own literacy learning as well as workshops that provide at home suggestions for literacy learning. With knowledge of the child and their families, allow students to have opportunities in class to read or write about topics that are both meaningful to them and reflective of their cultures and worlds. Furthermore, allow students space to be creative by allowing for literate expression in a wide range of modalities and provide spaces to use literacy for authentic purposes. Finally, if time permits, invite parents and guardians in during storytime to read to the class. This will allow for multisetting participation (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

I would also suggest we get to know our students as humans first and be hyper-aware that we are not judging them based on factors such as their skin color, how they dress, their familial background, their parents' education level, or what neighborhood they come from. This requires us to be aware of our own biases, as we all have them. On the front end, teachers should thoroughly research the demographics of the students

at the school in which they applied, and steer from populations of students that they may be afraid of, uncomfortable around, or simply do not like. Students can pick this up and are more aware that many people think. It is important that we do our part to create a safe, caring, and comfortable classroom space for all students. Lastly, I would suggest we all continue to do the work and research so that we may be cognitive and understand how biases, systemic racism, inequities, cultural misalignment, and other variables are disproportionately affecting certain groups of students. Many times, students are prejudged, mislabeled, and even punished for “acting out” or being “uninterested” while the root of the problem continues to be ignored.

Parents

As a parent, it has been very important for me to keep an open door with my son when it comes to communication. I want him to be able to tell me anything. May I suggest that we allow for open, honest, and ongoing communication and collaboration with our children. We also have to allow for open and frequent communication with our child’s teacher and school staff. A quick call or email just checking in goes a long way as far as keeping us in the know and keeping us aware of how we may support our child’s learning. This all falls under intersetting communication and intersetting knowledge (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). To support learning, allow for opportunities for the child inside and outside of home that support both academic growth and socio-emotional growth. This can be done with everyday activities.

Specifically, to mothers, we are often hard on ourselves and self-critical at times. However, you are the best mother for your children, and I am sure you are doing better than you know. Also, I know we are busy. If you are anything like me, you may

find yourself putting your needs last. However, try to set aside time to take care of yourself. Taking care of ourselves enables us to best continue to take care of our children. Specifically, to my Black mothers, a wise man once said, “Never confuse schooling with education.” There are many things that our children need to know about our history and the world in which we live that simply will not be taught to them in a classroom setting. Let us always take agency and activism in the lives of our children. We do not have the privilege of being an onlooker.

Recommendations for Future Research

1. My suggestion is for minoritized scholars to continue to conduct family literacy research using autoethnographic methodologies. These studies will center and highlight our everyday experiences and processes, removing us from the position of “other” across various fields of research.
2. It would be interesting for me to conduct a longitudinal autoethnographic study that serves as a follow up to this study, continuing my journey of familial and motherly exploration.
3. Conduct a multiple case study with teachers who have been successful at creating a sense of sync and interconnectedness amongst home and school systems. Their strategies and viewpoints can serve as a model for other teachers.
4. Conduct a qualitative study interviewing teachers on the ways that literacy is used as a healing space and an emotional outlet for minoritized children in their classrooms.

5. Dating back to slavery, Black women have been “other mothers,” helping with the care of children that were not their own. That intrinsic mothering nature still exists for many of us across various spaces. I would love to see more literature that explores the concept, progression, and experiences of Black women and other mothering both past and present.
6. Conduct a large qualitative study that further explores the interwoven history of spirituality, Black history, motherhood, and literacy. This will most likely be a mixed methods qualitative study.

A Note for My Son

As my son was a large part of this study, I wanted to include a note for him before this study concludes.

Dear son,

While I am the mother and your “first teacher,” you have taught me so much since you’ve been here. My desire for you is that you will always be happy and always remain true to you. You never have to be anything more or less than the way God designed you. He knew you before I knew you, and he has a beautiful plan for you. He created you in his image. May you always keep your voice, your initiative, your sense of self agency, and your love for learning in kindergarten and every space you enter in. May literacy and learning continue to bring you freedom and joy. Know that I will always be here to listen to your funny stories and your bright ideas. Today, dinosaurs, cars, and snakes are all the rave. I am filled with excitement as I imagine what you will grow to love and be passionate about in the days to come. Whatever it is, always know your “maw-maw” will be here to learn from you and learn with you. Thank you

for being my partner in this study. I cannot wait until you are old enough for us to re-read this together and smile and laugh at the memories and how far we have come. We have come a long way, and we are headed in a beautiful direction. I am thankful to God for paving this way for us. Son, I love you immensely.

Maw-maw

Conclusion

This research study, both scholarly and personal, both delicate and therapeutic, provided me with a space for reflection and increased self-awareness of me. Children develop in more than one microsystem (Tudge et al., 2017). For example, my son experiences and is shaped by the literate experiences he has with his dad, other family members, his friends, and even random literate experiences outside the home as he provides his order to the waitress at a restaurant. Needless to say, and as scary and humbling as it is to admit, there is much that is out of my realm of control as it relates to my child. However, it was still a meaningful and beautiful journey to focus on me. Through autoethnographic methodologies, I reflected on the intersectionality of my mothering processes and my own personal lived experiences. I further explored intersecting identities of granddaughter, daughter, teacher, student, and mother. From my perspective, one of the highest and most rewarding forms of awareness is awareness of self, and that is what this study has helped to provide.

As a mother, I have learned many things. This study allowed me to exist in a multi-dimensional realm as a researcher and the one researched. I studied myself intensely, all day, every day for six weeks. Thus, this study has changed me and made me a better mother. I am much more cognitive of my actions, my words, and my

parenting processes. When I have a thought arise, I am double-checking, “Is this fear-based?” Am I reacting out of extreme worry? Am I making decisions based on the little girl in me and the things she experienced? This study made it clear that none of my experiences have been in isolation, and many of my experiences often show themselves in my parenting. This study has also allowed me to see that I must allow for some separation between spaces, as my experiences and the experiences of some of my Black male students may not necessarily be my son’s experiences. I must let my son have his own experience. I cannot operate in fear and worry as a parent. I am also extremely hard on myself as a mom, so this study confirmed for me that there is a lot I am doing right by my son. As a teacher, I have learned to spend more time getting to know my students’ literate background, and seeing how I can work their background and experiences into the classroom. I have seen just how important it is to create a level of interconnectedness amongst their systems. I want my teaching to be relevant to their interests, cultures, and history. As I teach English, I also want to make sure I am allowing students to demonstrate subject understanding and express themselves in multiple modalities, as the goal is to help them grow academically but also socio-emotionally. Have I taught literacy in a way that enables my student’s survival and the betterment of their whole selves or has my main focus been on teaching to a test? I am grateful that this study has led to a period of intense reflection.

As this study concludes, I would like to reinforce that while I am a member of various minoritized groups, I am also privileged and fortunate in many ways. This study has helped me see those privileges more clearly. I am privileged to have support, as well as certain knowledge due to my teaching background and due to my

level of education. Though I wish I had more time, I am privileged to have the time I do have to spend with my son. Many parents work odd or late hours and may not have the luxury of spending much time with their children. Though in a space where I am minoritized as a Black woman, I am privileged to be a Black doctoral student, and to have a space to share my story within academic literature. My parenting has not only been shaped by my experiences, but also by the privileges I carry.

Finally, this study touches on historical Black literacy and generational literacy. Literacy has been an object of White violence for many years throughout the course of our history and still is in some spaces. During slavery, the very attempt of a Black person trying to read or write was punishable by death. However, as I reflect through my data, I am able to see the ways that literacy in my life has been loving, familial, safe, and sacred. Literacy, whether its reading, writing, studying, or journaling, has in part enabled my survival. I am forever grateful for my literate experiences. With that being said, I acknowledge Black people in my family and outside of my family who were robbed of the ability to explore and engage in their own literate experiences, and I do not take my access to education and literacy for granted.

Throughout the course of this study, I have been blessed to mix so many areas that I love such as my faith, motherhood and parenting, family, Black womanhood, Black history, and literacy. May this study find itself engaging in meaningful and progressive conversation. Prayerfully, this study will bless others the way that it has blessed me. Though autoethnographic research is not generalizable, it is relatable. I hope parents, specifically Black mothers, and other Black scholars will be able to see

themselves somewhere in this study and relate to this study. This is not just for me. This is to center the Black experience, and I am forever grateful to God for the opportunity to do so. I will continue to challenge not only others, but also myself in growing in self-awareness, growing in parenthood, and of course, making strides to move literacy and education forward for all students.

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