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PARENT SCHOOL INVOLVEMENT, STUDENT SCHOOL ENGAGEMENT, AND ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT IN CHILDREN ADOPTED FROM FOSTER CARE BY LESBIAN AND GAY PARENTS

Cassandra P. Vazquez

University of Kentucky, cvazquez0004@gmail.com

Author ORCID Identifier:

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1318-7137>

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Cassandra P. Vazquez, Student

Dr. Rachel H. Farr, Major Professor

Dr. Mark Fillmore, Director of Graduate Studies

PARENT SCHOOL INVOLVEMENT, STUDENT SCHOOL ENGAGEMENT, AND
ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT IN CHILDREN ADOPTED FROM FOSTER CARE BY
LESBIAN AND GAY PARENTS

THESIS

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of Master of Science in the
College of Arts and Sciences
at the University of Kentucky

By

Cassandra P. Vázquez

Lexington, Kentucky

Director: Dr. Rachel H. Farr, Professor of Psychology

Lexington, Kentucky

2021

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ABSTRACT OF THESIS

PARENT SCHOOL INVOLVEMENT, STUDENT SCHOOL ENGAGEMENT, AND ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT IN CHILDREN ADOPTED FROM FOSTER CARE BY LESBIAN AND GAY PARENTS

Sparse research has examined academic outcomes of children adopted from foster care by lesbian and gay (LG) parents. Children who have experienced foster care are at greater risk for negative outcomes, but investment in academic achievement could help buffer potential adversity. Parent and student engagement with school peaks in middle childhood, so this may be an important period for understanding processes that influence academic achievement. This study explores how LG parents ($N = 57$) of school-aged children ($M_{age} = 10.56$ years) adopted from foster care in the U.S. involve themselves in their child's school, how this involvement may influence children's own engagement with school, and how these forces impact academic achievement—specifically school grades, social competence, and scholastic awards. Using bioecological theory, the present study provides evidence consistent with pre-existing models of student school engagement and parent school involvement in predicting the academic achievement of children within this unique family system. Parent school involvement had a significant positive indirect effect on both children's grades and social competence but was not related to scholastic awards. This work holds important implications for the advancement of policy, law, and home-school interventions supporting LG parent families and children adopted through foster care.

KEYWORDS: foster care, adoption, LGBTQ+, school engagement, parent school involvement, academic achievement

Cassandra P. Vázquez

(Name of Student)

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Date

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By
Cassandra P. Vázquez

Dr. Rachel H. Farr

Director of Thesis

Dr. Mark Fillmore

Director of Graduate Studies

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Date

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CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

Despite recent advancements in policy and law surrounding the rights of sexual minority individuals in the United States (e.g., the Supreme Court ruling in 2015 on marriage equality; *Obergefell v. Hodges*), many lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ+) people face discrimination in the realms of parenting and adoption (Brodzinsky, 2011, 2015; Goldberg, Frost, Miranda, & Kahn, 2019; Goldberg, Moyer, Kinkler, & Richardson, 2012; Kinkler & Goldberg, 2011; Mallon, 2011, Movement Advancement Project, 2021). However, many LGB1 adults desire parenthood (Riskind & Tornello, 2017; Simon, Tornello, Farr, & Bos, 2018) and often report less of a commitment to biological parenthood (Farr & Patterson, 2009; Goldberg, Downing, & Richardson, 2009; Goldberg & Smith, 2008). Moreover, LG individuals have adopted at increasing rates (Gates, 2011) and LG couples are at least seven times more likely than heterosexual couples to have adopted a child (Goldberg & Conron, 2018). Additionally, there are many pathways to becoming adoptive parents (e.g., international, private infant domestic, public domestic) and each present a different set of potential challenges (e.g., navigating contact with birth relatives in international vs. public adoption; Grotevant & McDermott, 2014; Howard, Smith, & Ryan, 2004; Pinderhughes & Brodzinsky, 2019) and unique dynamics for LGBTQ+ parent families (e.g., socialization practices surrounding parents' sexual minority identity; Goldberg et al., 2012). In this paper, I focus on non-relative LG parent adoptive families formed through foster care in the

¹ I will use appropriate acronyms to reflect the identities of participants in the research described.

United States (U.S.) because little is known about this unique family system (Goldberg et al., 2012) which is growing at increasing rates (Gates, 2011). Knowledge gained from examining these families could have important implications for adoption policy as well as developmental and family science.

1.1 Developmental Outcomes for Children in Foster Care

Over 672,000 children received services from the U.S. foster care system in 2019; about 66,035 of those children were adopted and 123,216 were awaiting adoptive placement (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2020). Given that children in foster care are at greater risk for adverse outcomes (e.g., mental health disorders; Bruska, 2008) and these risks increase with the age of the child and the amount of time children spend in care (Grotevant & McDermott, 2014; Julian, 2013)—it is important to ensure children have a permanent placement (e.g., adoption) in a timely manner. As such, if policies were in place to promote fostering and adoption by LG adults, the number of children awaiting placement could likely be reduced (Bewkes et al., 2018; Gates, Badgett, Macomber, & Chambers, 2007).

Neglect from primary caregivers is the most common reason children are placed in out-of-home care and adoption becomes the primary goal when reunification with the child's family of origin is not in their best interest (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2020). Children in foster care are seven to eight years old on average and they are also about this age when they enter care (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2017; U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2020). They spend an average time of 20 months in care (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2020). Due to the nature of why children are placed in care, children in foster care often are at greater risk for

many adverse outcomes compared to their peers. Some of these outcomes include incarceration, homelessness, teenage pregnancy, and unemployment (Bruskas, 2008; Courtney et al., 2005; Courtney et al., 2007; Courtney, Dworsky, Lee, & Raap, 2010; Fernandes, 2008; Hook & Courtney, 2011; Shirk & Stangler, 2004; Yates & Grey, 2012). Relatedly, the Donaldson Adoption Institute (2016) conducted a nationally representative survey which found that people associate children in foster care with greater behavioral issues. Further, children in foster care and foster care alumni often report experiencing stigma related to their foster care status and may employ concealment strategies to manage this stigma (Hochman, Hochman, & Miller, 2004; Kools, 1997; Rogers, 2016).

Although children in, and adopted from, foster care often have experienced abuse or other forms of trauma (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2014; Beyerlin & Bloch, 2014; Greeson et al., 2011; Kramer et al., 2013; Leve et al., 2012), they also possess many strengths. Research has begun to explore the resilience of foster youth and foster care alumni (Hines, Merdinger & Wyatt, 2005; Yates & Grey, 2012), particularly in the contexts of academic achievement and college attendance (Batsche et al., 2014; Hines et al., 2005; Kirk & Day, 2011; Martin & Jackson, 2002). Such research has demonstrated that relationships with others, including foster and adoptive parents, have greatly impact on resilience and positive developmental trajectories, including those related to academic attainment and achievement (Batsche et al., 2014; Hines et al., 2005). Indeed, warm stable interpersonal relationships, social competence, and stigma management are important contributors to foster care alumni's academic and developmental outcomes (Hook & Courtney, 2011).

Academic achievement of children within families headed by LG parents formed through public adoption is a domain that warrants particular attention given the strong relationship that academics have with other developmental outcomes (e.g., socioeconomic growth, social competence; Steinmayr, Meibner, Weidinger, & Wirthwein, 2014; Welsh, Parke, Widaman, & O’Neil, 2001) and the challenges that LG parents often face when interacting with their child’s school (e.g., discrimination; Goldberg, Allen, Black, Frost, & Manley, 2018; Goldberg & Smith, 2014a, 2014b). Further, limited research exists examining the school context of children adopted through foster care by LG parents (Goldberg & Byard, 2020) and literature on the academic achievement of has primarily focused on adult foster care alumni or adolescents (e.g., Batsche et al., 2014). Thus, the present study seeks to understand how LG parents of children in middle childhood adopted from foster care involve themselves in their child’s school, how this involvement may be associated with their child’s own engagement with school, and how these forces relate to children’s academic outcomes.

1.2 LG Parenting

LG parenting has been the subject of much controversy (Davis, 2013; Farr & Goldberg, 2018; Goldberg, Gartrell, & Gates, 2014; Webb & Chonody, 2014). The question of whether children raised by LG parents fare as well as children in heterosexual parent families has often been at the center of this debate (American Psychological Association, 2015). Empirical work on LG parent families has examined family functioning (Farr, Forssell, & Patterson, 2010a; Farr & Patterson, 2013; Lavner, Waterman, & Peplau, 2014), parent-child relationships (Golombok et al., 2014), and a host of child developmental outcomes (e.g., Farr, 2017; Goldberg & Smith, 2013;

Golombok et al., 2014). Some outcomes of interest include children's gender development (Farr, Bruun, Doss, & Patterson, 2018; Farr, Forssell, & Patterson, 2010b; Goldberg & Garcia, 2016; Sumontha, Farr, & Patterson, 2017), behavioral adjustment (Farr, 2017; Farr et al., 2010b; Goldberg & Smith, 2013), academic outcomes (Gartrell, Bos, Peyser, Deck, & Rodas, 2012; Potter, 2012; Wainwright, Russell, & Patterson, 2004), children's identity development and socialization practices (e.g., surrounding racial-ethnic identity, adoptive identity; Goldberg & Smith, 2016; Oakley, Farr, & Scherer, 2017), and children's school and disclosure experiences related to their parents' sexual orientation (Farr, Crain, Oakley, Cashen, & Garber, 2016a; Farr, Oakley, & Ollen, 2016b).

Much of this literature has used heterosexual parent families as a benchmark for normative child development compared to LG parent families (Fish & Russell, 2018) to help inform public policy and debate (Farr, Tasker, & Goldberg, 2017). The broad consensus of this work is that family structure (e.g., parental sexual orientation) has no observable *direct* impact on child psychological adjustment (Biblarz & Stacey, 2010; Goldberg & Sweeney, 2019; Moore & Stambolis-Ruhstorfer, 2013); rather, family *processes* (e.g., interactions between members of the family), which may be influenced by individual family characteristics (e.g., household income, parental sexual orientation, nationality), are most influential in determining child and family level outcomes (Farr, 2017; Lamb, 2012; Lavner, Waterman, & Peplau, 2012). To understand children's development more thoroughly, we must shift the focus of family research from between group differences (e.g., LG vs. heterosexual), to understanding how individual and environmental characteristics shape the processes within families that influence

outcomes. This shift from a “no differences” approach to LG parenting research may help us understand what processes contribute to the flourishing of all children, how these processes develop, and ultimately redefining what “normative” child development means within the context of these unique family systems (Fish & Russell, 2018; Prendergast & MacPhee, 2018). The following section will outline what is known about adoptive families headed by LG parents.

1.2.1 LG Parent Adoptive Families

As stated previously, adoption is commonly reported as a preferred pathway to parenthood for many LG adults (Goldberg, 2012; Goldberg & Smith, 2008) and LG couples are about seven times more likely than heterosexual couples to have an adopted child (Goldberg & Conron, 2018). About 21.4% of all same-sex couple households are raising an adopted child (Goldberg & Conron, 2018) and about 4% of all adopted children in 2007 were living with same-sex coupled parents (Gates et al., 2007). Currently, about 2.9% of all same-sex couples in the US are raising a foster child (Goldberg & Conron, 2018). Public adoption through child welfare agencies (i.e., foster care) is the most common form of adoption (Pinderhughes & Brodzinsky, 2019). LG couples often face barriers (e.g., discrimination; Brodzinsky, 2015; Goldberg et al., 2012; Kinkler & Goldberg, 2011) at multiple levels when trying to adopt. For example, same-sex couples have reported adoption disruptions and delays because of discrimination from judges and difficulties finding attorneys that would represent them (Goldberg et al., 2019). LG couples may also face discrimination from social workers during home assessments (Mallon, 2011) and application rejections from adoption agencies (Brodzinsky, 2011). Additionally, LG couples face adoption discrimination in

the legal realm—currently eleven states have religious freedom laws which allow child welfare agencies to deny services to LG couples if doing so conflicts with their religious beliefs (Movement Advancement Project, 2021). Further, the Supreme Court recently made a unanimous decision in *Fulton v Philadelphia* to provide a religious exemption to Catholic Social Services’ so they may deny services to LG couples, despite the city’s LGBTQ+ non-discrimination ordinance. Although the ruling was specific to the context of this particular case (*Fulton v Philadelphia*), it raises the question of if a federal level precedent for religious exemptions from anti-discrimination laws could be set in future cases from other municipalities (Fields, 2021).

The family formation method that LG couples choose may be influenced by some of the perceived and experienced barriers described above. In a qualitative study of gay adoptive fathers, some parents reported being open to “hard to place” (e.g., children with special needs, older children, children of another race) because they felt they would be more likely to land a placement (Goldberg, 2012). Indeed, some research has demonstrated that LG couples may be more open to transracial adoptions (Farr & Patterson, 2009; Goldberg, 2009a) and are more likely to have adopted children with higher rates of biological and environmental adversity (Lavner et al., 2012). Thus, LG couples may be more willing to adopt children that are considered “hard to place” in hopes of eliminating potential barriers to adoption. As such, it is important to illustrate characteristics typical of LG adoptive parent families, and what we know of such families formed through foster care.

LG adoptive parents look demographically similar to heterosexual adoptive parents—they tend to be white, relatively well educated, middle to upper-middle class,

and older in age than non-adoptive parents (Brodzinsky, 2015; Davis, 2013; Farr et al., 2010b; Gates, 2011; Goldberg, 2009b; Vandivere, Malm, & Radel, 2009). The adoptees in these families tend to be more racial-ethnically diverse than their parents (Brodzinsky, 2015; Farr & Patterson, 2009; Goldberg & Smith, 2016; Lavner et al., 2012; Raleigh, 2012). In 2017, children adopted from foster care were primarily white (49%), followed by Hispanic (21%), Black (17%), and multi-racial (9%; U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2018)².

Consistent with the broader literature on LG parenting, research has primarily compared LG parent adoptive families to those headed by heterosexual parents. This body of work has provided overwhelming evidence that there are no observable differences from heterosexual parent adoptive families related to children's overall psychological adjustment (Farr, 2017; Goldberg & Smith, 2013; Lavner et al., 2012). For example, in a study examining L ($n = 27$), G ($n = 29$), and heterosexual ($n = 50$) couples and their children adopted at infancy through private domestic agencies ($N = 106$ children / families; 212 total parents), children's psychosocial adjustment and parenting stress levels did not differ by parental sexual orientation (Farr et al., 2010b). In Farr's (2017) longitudinal follow-up study of this same sample of LG and heterosexual parent adoptive families, results indicated that child behavioral issues and parenting stress levels at the first wave of data collection were the best predictors of child and family functioning at the second wave—these findings were unrelated to family type. In a separate longitudinal

² This reporting is for all children adopted from foster care in 2017—not just those adopted by LG parents. Unfortunately, information on parental sexual orientation in this report is unavailable.

study examining LG and heterosexual parent adoptive families, Goldberg and Smith (2013) also found no differences by family type in children's internalizing and externalizing behavioral issues. Similarly, in a sample of LG and heterosexual adoptive parent families in the United Kingdom, Golombok and colleagues (2014) found that family processes (e.g., parenting stress), rather than family structure (e.g., parents' sexual orientation), was more strongly associated with children's externalizing behaviors.

Not only has research on LG parent adoptive families demonstrated that these children develop on par with heterosexual parent families—but also that these families may possess unique strengths despite potential adversity related to societal stigma (Farr & Patterson, 2013; Golombok et al., 2014). For example, in a study examining the school experiences of elementary school-aged children adopted by LG parents, children reported feelings of warmth toward their family despite potential bullying based on their parents' sexual orientation (Farr et al., 2016a; Farr et al., 2016b). Relatedly, some youth adopted from foster care have reported feeling more tolerant of, and open to, diversity because of their LG adoptive parents' sexual orientation (Cody, Farr, McRoy, Ayers-Lopez, & Ledesma, 2017). The importance of examining the variability within these unique families, how development is hallmarked by different features throughout the lifespan, and the importance of the home- and school-contexts are echoed by these findings.

1.3 Children's Academic Achievement

Broadly, children's academic achievement is associated with numerous educational and developmental outcomes such as education attainment (Marsh & O'Mara, 2008), drop-out rates (Alivernini & Lucidi, 2011), social adjustment (Shernoff, 2010; Welsh et al., 2001), and socioeconomic growth (Steinmayr et al., 2014). A large body of research

has examined individual (e.g., gender; Tan & Goldberg, 2009) and family (e.g., socioeconomic status and nationality; Gilbert, Brown, & Mistry, 2014) level characteristics that affect family (e.g., racial-ethnic socialization; Seol et al., 2016) and home-school processes (e.g., achievement motivation; Bempechat & Shernoff, 2012), which in turn facilitate academic-related outcomes (e.g., standardized reading and math assessments; Davis-Kean, 2005). Children who have experienced foster care are at greater risk for negative academic outcomes such as problematic classroom behavior, failing grades, and dropping out (e.g., Casey Family Programs, 2003; Yates & Grey, 2012; Zetlin & Weinberg, 2004; Zima et al., 2000). However, like other demographic factors related to academic achievement (e.g., gender, racial-ethnic identity, socioeconomic status; Hill & Taylor, 2004), it would be simplistic and reductionist to assume that merely the status label of foster care would have a direct effect on such outcomes. Rather, these outcomes likely are indirectly affected by such demographic factors through intervening variables (e.g., foster care stigma, systemic racism; Martin & Jackson, 2002). As such, it is important to examine the processes which contribute to academic achievement.

Indeed, the construct of academic achievement encompasses many outcomes across multiple domains of learning— “[it] represents performance outcomes that indicate the extent to which a person has accomplished specific goals that were the focus of activities in instructional environments, specifically in school, college, and university” (Steinmayr et al., 2014). Because of its broad definition, academic achievement is often operationalized through the measures used to assess it (Steinmayr et al., 2014). Therefore, academic achievement will hereafter be understood as school grades, scholastic awards,

and social competence for the context of this study based on the measures used. Below I provide an overview of two important predictors of academic achievement—parent school involvement and student school engagement. Given the primary foci of this study, I present this information while considering the contexts of middle childhood, adoptive families, and LG parent families.

1.3.1 Middle Childhood

Middle childhood (e.g., ages 6-12; U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2019) is an important period in overall child development. This developmental stage is often coined the “school-age” period, as children at this age are typically enrolled in full-time formal schooling. This stage of human development is marked by a multitude of changes and growth in cognitive, social, emotional, fine and gross motor abilities, and spatial reasoning (e.g., Eccles, 1999; U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2019). Children in middle childhood tend to become more involved in extracurricular and performance-based activities such as sports, art, dance, and theatre (Tomonari, 2019), as well as after-school programs (Shernoff, 2010), which further enhance these developing skills (e.g., prosocial behavior, emotion regulation). This period also marks a time in which children become more intrinsically motivated to perform well in school and are invested in their own academic achievement (e.g., Dotterer, McHale, & Crouter, 2009; Eccles, Roeser, Wigfield, & Freedman-Doran, 1999; Gottfried, Fleming, & Gottfried, 2001). Further, many factors contributing to academic achievement (e.g., parent school involvement, student school engagement) primarily develop and peak in middle childhood (e.g., Bempechat & Shernoff, 2012; Eccles, Adler, & Kaczala, 1982; Mahatmya, Lohman, Matjasko, & Farb, 2012).

Beyond middle childhood, a host of environmental factors, including parenting style and academic socialization, contribute to further development of these skills, abilities, motivations, and achievement (Hill & Taylor, 2004; Hill & Tyson, 2009). Moreover, longitudinal data have demonstrated that sensitive parenting in middle childhood may help ameliorate negative effects on academic and social competence from early childhood abuse and neglect (Raby et al., 2019), which in turn may help reduce the catalyzing effects of problematic behaviors in subsequent developmental stages such as early adolescence (Moilanen, Shaw, & Maxwell, 2010). Therefore, examining the processes related to academic achievement in LG parent families with children adopted from foster care within the developmental context of middle childhood could hold important implications for developing time-sensitive home-school interventions—especially considering that the average age of children both entering foster care, and within foster care, fall within this developmental stage (i.e., 7-8 years old).

1.3.2 Parent School Involvement

Parent involvement has been broadly defined as a parent's investment in their child's development through resource allocation in a particular domain, such as schooling (Grolnick & Slowjaczek, 1994). Parent school involvement (PSI) has been further delineated into three distinct domains: parent-teacher relationships, attendance and involvement in their child's school, and promoting the intellectual development of their child at home (Kohl, Lengua, & McMahon, 2000). PSI is typically measured through parent or teacher reports and many PSI measures have versions for both (e.g., Parent-Teacher Involvement Questionnaire; Conduct Problems Prevention Research Group, 1991), however, student reports on similar measures have also been utilized (e.g., Al-

Alwan, 2014). It is suggested to examine the contexts of PSI which are most relevant to the outcome of interest (e.g., Tan & Goldberg, 2009) because PSI is influenced by many factors (e.g., child and parent gender) and may have differential effects on outcomes depending on type (e.g., promoting intellectual development at home vs parent-teacher relationships).

Empirical work has found that demographic factors, such as parent education and income, have positive associations with some aspects of PSI (Benner, Boyle, & Sadler, 2016; Davis-Kean, 2005; Sirin, 2005). For example, economic strain has been linked to greater depressive symptoms, lower academic monitoring, and decreased academic values transmission among immigrant parents of Mexican-heritage children (Gilbert et al., 2017). Parents from a lower socioeconomic background may feel less equipped to intervene in their child's schooling and may experience other obstacles in participating in school-related activities such as having a less flexible work schedule or lack of transportation (Hill & Taylor, 2004). Children's developmental stage also influences parent's involvement with their child's schooling. PSI often declines or changes in type after elementary school, likely because of the increased autonomy that comes with adolescence (Singh, Bickley, Trivette, & Keith, 1995) and parents' perceived inability to help with more advanced school subjects (Hill & Taylor, 2004). Thus, the age and developmental stage of a child could be important moderators for PSI's effect on academic achievement, such that PSI may have a greater association with academic achievement in middle childhood than during other developmental stages. Moreover, possible effects of PSI on academic achievement in one stage of development (e.g.,

middle childhood) may be carried into later stages (e.g., adolescence; Moilanen et al., 2010).

Some research has examined the role that parental sexual orientation may play in PSI. Economic resources and the intersecting identities of parents and their children (e.g., sexual and racial identities) play important roles in school enrollment decisions that LG adoptive parents make regarding their children (Goldberg et al., 2018). Relatedly, LG parents' relationships with their children's teachers and school administrators may be linked to perceived stigma and exclusion (Goldberg & Smith, 2014a). PSI does not seem to vary, however, as a function of parental sexual orientation in studies examining LG and heterosexual parent families (Fedewa & Clark, 2009; Goldberg & Smith, 2014b). To my knowledge, there is no published research to date examining how PSI may relate to student school engagement and the academic achievement of children adopted from foster care by LG parents. Filling this gap could be important in informing home- and school-based interventions for children in care.

1.3.3 Student School Engagement

School engagement is composed of three overlapping dimensions related to school activity: behavioral, emotional, and cognitive (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, Friedel, & Paris 2005; Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004). Behavioral engagement is characterized by participation in activities, conduct in the classroom, effort, and attention (Fredricks et al., 2004; Fredricks et al., 2005). Emotional engagement is characterized by a sense of belonging and emotional responses to school (Fredricks et al., 2004; Fredricks et al., 2005). Finally, cognitive engagement is characterized by a student's investment in their academic success and corresponding strategies to maximize achievement (Fredricks

et al., 2004; Fredricks et al., 2005). Many measures of student engagement are child or teacher reports and classroom observations, but parent reports have been deemed important as well (Fredricks et al., 2005). Indeed, many of these surveys have child, teacher, and parent versions (e.g., Rochester Assessment Package for Schools; Wellborn & Connell, 1987). Research on student engagement has found associations with academic achievement (e.g., Benner, Graham, & Mistry, 2008; Marks, 2000), student drop-out rates (e.g., Connell et al., 1995), and social competence (e.g., Shernoff, 2010)—indicating the importance that engagement plays in children’s academic and developmental outcomes. Fredricks and colleagues (2004) suggest that if the goal of a study is to examine the relationship of student engagement with outcome variables such as academic achievement, rather than exploring one aspect of engagement (e.g., cognitive), it is important to utilize a measure incorporating all three constructs which compose student engagement.

Research has consistently demonstrated that PSI is a strong predictor of student engagement (Bempechat & Shernoff, 2012; Fredricks et al., 2004). Similar to PSI, we know that student engagement looks different across developmental periods and tends to peak in middle childhood—likely in conjunction with children’s increasing competency in social and other domains (Mahatmya et al., 2012). As such, understanding the role that PSI and student engagement play in academic achievement during middle childhood can be particularly elucidating to understanding how these constructs relate to each other. Empirical work on student engagement has been conducted in many contexts—including large samples diverse in racial-ethnic composition and socioeconomic status (e.g., Connell, Spencer, & Adler, 1994; Connell et al., 1995) and in international settings (Al-

Alwan, 2014; Archambault, Janosz, Morizot, & Pagani, 2009). Little research, however, exists on how student school engagement functions in adoptive families (Seol et al., 2016). Further, no research to date has examined student school engagement in LG parent adoptive families formed by foster care. Thus, the current study may provide an important first step in the contribution of educational policies and practices that promote children's academic growth through supporting family processes. By exploring these variables within the context of this unique family system, we may contribute to the refinement of existing theoretical and practical applications of academic achievement and child development.

1.4 Bioecological Theory of Development

The bioecological theory of development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) has been commonly applied to empirical work on LG parent families (Farr et al., 2017), parent school involvement (Bempechant & Shernoff, 2012), and student school engagement (Mahatmya et al., 2012). Bioecological theory posits that human development must be examined in accordance with its environmental context and that this development is bi-directional with reciprocal effects. Simply put, an individual's environment shapes their development and individuals also influence their environment. Bioecological theory has four core underlying concepts: *process*, *person*, *context*, and *time* (P-P-C-T model).

Bioecological theory is concerned with *how* people develop and states that *processes* are the primary force which drive development. Processes are dependent on individual (e.g., racial-ethnic identity) and environmental (e.g., neighborhoods) factors and their (in)stability across time. Thus, processes are a function of the interactions between person, context, and time. Using this framework, developmental outcomes (e.g.,

academic achievement) may be understood as the product of such processes (e.g., parent school involvement and student school engagement).

The principle of *person* has three components: behavioral dispositions (e.g., motivation), biopsychological and material resources (e.g., stress, family income), and demand characteristics of the individual (e.g., gender) that invite or dissuade responses from their environment, and these personal characteristics interact with their context. For example, how an individual enacts and performs gender influences their environment (e.g., girls behaving in class because of the expectation that they are to do so; Roorda, Koomen, Spilt, & Oort, 2011), and their environment, in turn, influences their personal development (e.g., receiving positive attention from teachers because of good behavior; Blankenmeyer, Flannery, & Vazsonyi, 2002). Indeed, the relationship between person and process highlights the importance of children's role in their own development.

Context is understood as the interconnected ecological systems in which children are embedded and develop; such systems are nested within each other and are as follows: micro-, meso-, exo-, macro-, and chronosystems (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). The microsystem is the innermost system and is composed of the most immediate environmental forces influencing child development (e.g., family, peers, school, neighborhood). The mesosystem contains the interactions between and across multiple microsystems (e.g., home-school programs). The exosystem contains aspects of microsystems that do not directly involve the child (e.g., parent's work, family income). The macrosystem is composed of cultural values (e.g., attitudes toward LGBTQ+ people) and their transmission (e.g., portrayals of LGBTQ+ people in the media). The chronosystem includes how sociohistorical context (e.g., time period, technological

advances) and transitions through stages of life (e.g., middle childhood, divorce) affect development across time therefore affecting all underlying systems.

The principle of *time* is perhaps the most intuitive core concept because it simply underscores the defining principle of development—the stability and changes of individual and structural processes across the lifespan (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). Because the sample of children in this study are primarily composed of those in middle childhood, it would be ideal to recognize how such processes are influenced by this specific stage of development, and how processes at this stage may be informed by previous stages of development, and in turn, how this may inform future stages of development (e.g., adolescence). This is an important consideration given how influential the period of middle childhood is in preparing children for adolescence and future academic achievement (e.g., Hamburg & Takanishi, 1989). Unfortunately, it is beyond the scope of this paper to address the element of time since the data from this study are cross-sectional. Therefore, I contextualize study findings within the developmental stage of middle childhood. Below I describe the research questions and hypotheses of the current study using the bioecological theory of human development as a guiding conceptual framework.

1.5 Current Study

Given the dearth of research in the areas of LG parent families formed through public adoption (e.g., Goldberg et al., 2012; Lavner et al., 2012) and school-related outcomes of children within these families (Goldberg & Smith, 2014a, 2014b), the current study has two primary goals. The first is to present basic descriptive information about these families in comparison with large published nationally representative datasets

on similar family structures to shift the focus from using heterosexual parent families as the normative benchmark for child development (Fish & Russell, 2018). The second goal is to explore the processes, specifically parent school involvement and student school engagement, within this unique subsample that contribute to academic achievement.

1.5.1 Research Questions and Hypotheses

In accordance with my study goals, and based on existing models of parent school involvement, student school engagement, and children's academic achievement, I address the following research questions:

1. *Are the demographic characteristics observed in this sample consistent with what is known about LG parent adoptive families, and children adopted through foster care, broadly? LG parents may be more likely to adopt children with special needs (Brodzinsky, 2011) and background risk (Lavner et al., 2012), or complete transracial adoptions (e.g., white parents adopting children of color; Farr & Patterson, 2009)—and these child characteristics are also overrepresented in foster care (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2020). I hypothesized that the study sample may include significantly more children of color (e.g., racial-ethnic identities outside of being white), compared to nationally representative samples of adopted families formed through foster care (Vandivere et al., 2009) and adoptive families diverse in pathway type including LG parents (Brodzinsky, 2015). I also hypothesized that the children in the study sample may have greater rates of learning disabilities, developmental delays, and enrollment in special education than broader samples of LG adoptive families (Brodzinsky, 2015).*

2. *Does parent school involvement have a direct relationship with children's academic achievement in this sample?* The literature provides mixed results on if, and when, parent school involvement has a direct effect on children's academic achievement (e.g., Al-Awan, 2014; Fan, 2001; McNeal, 2014). Such findings are often dependent on contextual moderators such as racial-ethnic identity (Dotterer & Wehrspann, 2016) as well as the specific domain of parent school involvement analyzed (e.g., homework help and monitoring; Tan & Goldberg, 2009). These discrepant findings indicate that direct effects on children's academic achievement may be found in *some* types of parent school involvement and only for *some* families. Because these variables have not yet been empirically explored in a sample of children adopted from foster care by LG parents, the corresponding hypotheses are exploratory despite their directionality. I hypothesized that increased parent school involvement would positively predict children's grade point average (GPA), social competence, and odds of receiving a scholarly award.
3. *Does student school engagement mediate an indirect relationship between parent school involvement and children's academic achievement in this sample?* Many empirical and theoretical models of parent school involvement, student school engagement, and academic achievement suggest that parent school involvement *indirectly* affects academic achievement *through* its relationship with student school engagement (e.g., Bempechat & Shernoff, 2012; Benner et al., 2008; Hill & Taylor, 2004). Consistent with bioecological theory, these models are based on the notion that the process of student engagement is proximal to academic outcomes, whereas parent school involvement is a process distal to these

outcomes. I hypothesized that student school engagement will mediate an indirect relationship between parent school involvement and academic achievement such that increased parent school involvement would have a positive relationship with student school engagement and increased student school engagement would have a positive relationship with children's academic achievement.

CHAPTER 2. METHODS

2.1 Participants

These data are from the seventh time point in the Transition to Adoptive Parenthood Project (TAPP), a larger ongoing longitudinal study examining adoptive families headed by LG and heterosexual couples (e.g., Goldberg, Smith, & Kashy, 2010). This wave of data collection took place between 2015-17 and happened eight years post-adoption. Participants for the TAPP study were recruited through 30 adoption agencies across the U.S. Agencies in states with large populations of LG couples were prioritized. The researchers contacted these agencies asking them to forward study invitations to clients that would be first-time parents. The researchers also contacted LGBTQ+ organizations to help with recruitment. Couples were eligible to participate in the first wave of the original study if they were new parents adopting their first child. The current study only includes the subsample of LG parent families in TAPP that adopted their first child through the U.S. foster care system. A lesbian couple residing outside of the U.S. at this wave of data collection were excluded from all analyses and sample descriptions due to the large variance found in educational (Woessmann, 2016) and child welfare systems (Gilbert, Parton, & Skivenes, 2011) across countries. Additionally, a gay couple with a 21-year-old adult adopted as a child from foster care was also excluded from all analyses and sample descriptions because the primary developmental period of interest is middle childhood.

Participants are 20 lesbian and 11 gay couples and data from both parents were available from 26 of the 31 families ($N = 57$ parents reporting on 31 children); only one parent provided data in three lesbian mother and two gay father families. Consistent with

the racial-ethnic identity composition of adoptive parents broadly (e.g., Vandivere et al., 2009), the parents in this study were primarily white (84.21%), followed by Black (3.50%), Latino/a/x (3.50%), and Asian American (1.75%)—four parents did not provide a response (7.01%) for their racial-ethnic identity. Also consistent with the demographic characteristics of adoptive parents in the U.S., the study participants were mostly college educated, middle to upper middle class, and middle aged (Davis, 2013; Gates, 2011; Vandivere et al., 2009). Most participants held a bachelor's degree or higher (82.4%) and lived in the Western region (35.5%) of the U.S. as defined by the Census. Parents in this study were 46.5 years of age on average ($SD = 4.33$) and had a median annual household income of \$140,000 ($SD = 74,719$).

Their children were 10.56 years of age on average ($SD = 2.62$), ranging from 7 to 17.5 and a median age of 9.5. Children were enrolled in the 2nd through 11th grades, with 3rd grade being the most common (45.2%). Participants' children were also more racially and ethnically diverse with Multiracial/Multiethnic (38.7%) and Latino/a/x /Hispanic (25.8%) being the most represented racial-ethnic groups followed by white (19.4%) and Black (16.1%).

2.2 Procedure

Participants were contacted by the research team and asked if they would like to participate in this wave of data collection. I focused on this time point because this was the only wave where all variables of interest considered in this study were assessed. Surveys and measures included in the current study were all completed online by parents individually. All study materials and procedures were approved by Clark University's

Institutional Review Board (IRB). I was not involved in any aspect of study design or data collection and therefore conducted a secondary data analysis.

2.3 Measures: Predictor Variable

2.3.1 Parent School Involvement

Parent school involvement was assessed using the Parent Involvement and Volunteering at School (PIVS) subscale of the Parent-Teacher Involvement Questionnaire (PTIQ; Conduct Problems Prevention Research Group, 1991). The PTIQ measures four distinct constructs of parent's involvement with their child's school and each has a corresponding subscale: Quality of the Relationship between Parent and Teacher, Frequency of Parent-Teacher Contact, Parent's Endorsement of Child's School, and Parent's Involvement and Volunteering at School (PIVS). It is suggested that researchers select a subscale based on their variable of interest given that they represent different constructs (Kohl et al., 2000; Miller-Johnson & Maumary-Gremaud, 1995), have unique predictors (Goldberg & Smith, 2014b), and may differentially affect outcomes (Tan & Goldberg, 2009). Thus, I only utilized the PIVS subscale of the PTIQ.

The PIVS subscale contains nine items designed to assess how much of an active role parents play in their child's schooling through participation in school-based activities (e.g., *In the past year, have you visited your child's school for a special event such as a book fair*) and facilitation of intellectually stimulating activities at home (e.g., *You play games at home with your child to teach him/her new things*; see Appendix A for full PIVS subscale items). Items are scored on a 5-point Likert scale with 1 = *never / not at all* and 5 = *more than once per week / a great deal*. A mean score was computed by

summing and averaging the scores across the nine items with higher scores indicating higher levels of involvement. To assess reliability, the Cronbach's α was assessed separately for each parent and then the two α 's were averaged because the data come from indistinguishable dyads. This measure demonstrated good reliability, Cronbach's $\alpha = .85$. Because parent reports within families were significantly positively correlated, $r = .57, p < .01$, individual parent scores were averaged so that each family had one mean score per item. These mean scores were then averaged such that each family had one total mean score for the scale.

2.4 Measures: Mediating Variable

2.4.1 Student School Engagement

Student school engagement was assessed using the School Engagement Scale (SES; Fredericks et al., 2005). Participants completed an adapted version of the scale to accommodate for parent reports (see Appendix B for adapted measure). Items were scored on a 5-point Likert scale with scores ranging from 1 = *never* to 5 = *all of the time*. The scale includes items assessing the behavioral (e.g., *My child follows the rules at school*), emotional (e.g., *My child feels happy in school*), and cognitive (e.g., *My child checks his/her schoolwork for mistakes*) domains of student school engagement. Scores are summed and averaged to calculate a total school engagement score with higher scores indicating higher levels of student school engagement. Since I was interested in how student school engagement relates to specific outcomes (i.e., school grades, social competence, scholastic awards), I utilized the full SES measure rather than a construct subscale, as suggested in the literature (Fredricks et al., 2004). To assess reliability, the

Cronbach's α was assessed separately for each parent and then the two α 's were averaged because the data come from indistinguishable dyads. This measure demonstrated good reliability, Cronbach's $\alpha = .82$. Because parent reports within families were significantly positively correlated, $r = .74, p < .001$, individual parent scores were averaged so that each family had one mean score per item, which were then averaged such that each family had one total mean score.

2.5 Measures: Outcome Variables

2.5.1 School Grades

Participants were asked about their child's grade performance in the subjects of English, Math, Science, and Social Science during the past year. They were asked to select the one grade category in each of the four subjects as follows: *Mostly A's* (coded as 4), *Mostly B's* (3), *Mostly C's* (2), and *Mostly D's* (1). This method of assessing children's school grades from parent reports was adapted from another study (Tan & Goldberg, 2009). A combined total GPA was calculated by averaging the four subject grades provided by each parent. Because parent reports within families were significantly positively correlated, $r = .92, p < .001$, individual parent scores were averaged so that each family has one mean score.

2.5.2 Scholastic Awards

Parents responded yes or no to the question, "*Did your child receive any special recognition or awards at school in the past year?*" Because parent reports within families were significantly positively correlated, $r = .65, p < .001$, individual parent scores were combined into a single measure. Rather than averaging parent reports, children were

given a score of zero if both parents indicated no award was received and a score of 1 if at least one parent indicated an award was received.

2.5.3 Social Competence

Parents completed the Social Competence Scale (Conduct Disorders Prevention Group, 1999). This scale contains 12 items assessing prosocial behavior and communication skills (e.g., *Your child listens to other's points of view*) and emotion regulation skills (e.g., *Your child can accept things not going their way*; see Appendix C for all items). Responses were scored on a 5-point Likert scale with 1 = *never / not at all*, 3 = *moderately well*, and 5 = *very well*. A mean score was computed by summing and averaging the scores across the 12 items with higher scores indicating higher levels of social competence. Higher scores indicate greater social competence. Because parent reports within families were significantly positively correlated, $r = .69, p < .001$, individual parent scores were averaged so that each family has one mean score. To assess reliability, the Cronbach's α was assessed separately for each parent and then the two α 's were averaged because the data come from indistinguishable dyads. This measure demonstrated excellent reliability, Cronbach's $\alpha = .91$.

2.6 Measures: Covariates

A range of possible covariates were examined in preliminary analyses. An examination of the data indicated that very few children ($n < 5$) exhibited emotional problems, behavioral problems, or physical health conditions. Therefore, these measures were not examined as covariates. A greater number of children, however, exhibited ADHD, speech difficulties, and learning disabilities, and were enrolled at least part-time

in a special needs classroom—these variables were considered as possible covariates as they may have an impact on school performance and engagement. Children were given a score of 0 if neither parent indicated that their child was enrolled in a special needs classroom at least part-time, or 1 if at least one parent indicated yes. Other potential covariates that were tested include parent sexual orientation, child race, child age, child age when placed with couple, child gender, and total household income. Total household income, child age at time of study, and child age at placement were averaged across parent reports given their significant positive correlations ($r = .94-.99, p < .001$). As stated previously, student school engagement peaks in middle childhood (Mahatmya et al., 2012) and parent school involvement declines after elementary school (Singh et al., 1995). Therefore, child age is an appropriate covariate. Because girls are often more engaged in school than boys (Hughes et al., 2012; Roorda et al., 2011), it is important to include child gender as a covariate. Finally, socioeconomic status, as measured by parent income, has been consistently correlated with children's academic achievement, student school engagement, and parent school involvement (Davis-Keane, 2005; Goldberg & Smith, 2014a, 2014b; Sirin, 2005). As such, it was important to examine these variables as potential covariates.

CHAPTER 3. ANALYSIS PLAN

If only one parent report was available per household in the current sample then that report was used for analyses. If both parent reports were present, then parents' scores within the family were averaged to provide a single score for analyses. The demographic characteristics and study variables of the sample were compared to those from other published samples of similar family structures to answer research question 1 (RQ1; is our sample consistent with similar samples?). The Modern Adoptive Families (MAF) project (e.g., Brodzinsky, 2015), is a large published sample of non-relative adoptive families ($N = 1,616$) diverse in adoption pathway type and geographic region, including a sizeable subsample of same-gender couples ($n = 209$). The following study variables were primarily compared to those from the MAF: child race, child gender, child special education, child age at placement, child learning disability, child developmental delay, child ADHD status. Comparisons were made to the entire MAF sample because of the lack of accessible data or published information highlighting the variables of interest specific to the subsamples of LG parents or LG parent foster to adopt families. The following variables were compared to families formed through public adoption ($n = 763$) in the National Survey of Adoptive Parents (NSAP; Vandivere et al., 2009): child race and child gender. All comparisons were done using chi-square tests for independence.

For research questions 2 and 3 (RQ2 & RQ3), distributional properties of primary variables were first examined. Then means and standard deviations of the primary study variables and covariates were calculated. Correlations between covariates and primary study variables were tested. Covariates significantly associated with independent and dependent model variables were retained in subsequent analyses (Cohen, Cohen, West, &

Aiken, 2003). Data were then analyzed using multiple regression in SPSS v27 (IBM Corporation, 2020). Preferred models were evaluated to ensure assumptions of multiple regression were met and to identify potential multivariate outliers. If needed, remedial actions were taken. Since scholastic awards is a dichotomous variable, models predicting this variable involved logistic regression.

To answer RQ2 on whether parent school involvement has a direct effect on children's academic achievement, three models were fit hierarchically: one for GPA, one for social competence, and one for scholastic awards. In the first step of the hierarchy, appropriate covariates were entered. In the second step, parent school involvement was entered and the difference in model R^2 was tested. The significance of the regression coefficient for parent school involvement was also interpreted.

To answer RQ3 about whether student school engagement mediates an indirect relationship between parent school involvement and children's academic achievement, three indirect effects were tested: the indirect effect of parent school involvement on GPA, social competence, and scholastic awards. All indirect effects are through student school engagement. Thus, path a in the mediation model is the association between parent school involvement and student school engagement and path b is the association between student school engagement and GPA, social competence, or scholastic awards. Indirect effects were estimated as the product of these two associations (ab). Procedures for the first two mediation models were conducted using the Hayes PROCESS macro for SPSS (Hayes, 2012); significance of indirect effects were tested using bias corrected bootstrapping with 1,000 samples. PROCESS uses ordinary least squares regression which is inappropriate for logistic regression (Hayes, 2012). Therefore, the significance

for the indirect effect on scholastic awards was calculated using Sobel (1982) tests, which are known to be overly conservative. Appropriate controls as determined in preliminary analyses were included in all models.

Statisticians recommend testing the indirect effects of mediation using bootstrapping techniques or Sobel tests (e.g., Hayes, 2017; Pek & Hoyle, 2026; Preacher & Hayes, 2004; Shrout & Bolger, 2002) instead of Baron and Kenny's (1986) causal step approach (i.e., step one requires direct effect of predictor on outcome to be significant and all other paths must be significant for mediation to occur in this approach) when: (1) the sample is small, (2) there is an anticipated indirect effect through a mediating variable, (3) when there is no evidence of quick temporal succession (e.g., priming on memory recall), or the mediator is not manipulated. Therefore, testing indirect effects through bootstrapping and Sobel tests is most appropriate for the current study given the small sample size, an expected indirect effect of a mediator, and lack of temporal or experimental evidence to support the hypotheses (Benner et al., 2008; Shrout & Bolger, 2002).

CHAPTER 4. RESULTS

4.1 RQ1: Is this sample similar to published samples of similar family structures?

Means, standard deviations, and the minimum and maximum values for all variables are shown in Table 4.1. First, comparisons to the MAF study were made. The racial composition of the current study is significantly different than the racial-ethnic composition of children within the MAF, $\chi^2(3) = 13.08, p = .004$. In the current study sample, there appeared to be more multi-racial/multi-ethnic children and more Hispanic/Latino/a/x children. Child gender, child special education, child age at placement, child learning disability, child developmental delay, and child ADHD status did not significantly differ between the current study and the MAF study. The current study also had a significantly different racial-ethnic composition of children compared to the children in NSAP who were adopted from foster care, $\chi^2(3) = 15.62, p = .001$. Similar to the comparisons with the MAF sample, the current study sample appears to include more multi-racial/multi-ethnic and Hispanic/Latino/a/x children. The NSAP appears to have more Black children than the current study. Child gender did not significantly differ between the current sample and the NSAP foster to adopt sample.

4.2 Preliminary Analyses for RQ2

There were no skew or univariate outliers (as defined by being +3 or -3 standard deviations from the mean) on the primary variables. The only primary variable exhibiting missing data was social competence, for which 1 case was missing. Bivariate correlations between covariates and primary study variables are shown in Table 4.2. Children with learning disabilities and who were in a special needs classroom at least part-time had

significantly lower GPAs than children who were not enrolled in a special needs classroom. Children with learning disabilities were also less likely to receive awards, were less engaged in school, and their parents were less involved in school than children without learning disabilities. Parents of older children, including of those who were placed at an older age, were less involved in school than parents of younger children. There were no differences found in primary study variables between lesbian and gay parents, between male and female children, or between white children and children of color. Only variables correlated with a dependent variable and the independent variable were retained as covariates in further analyses. Therefore, learning disabilities was the only covariate retained in the models.

4.3 RQ2: Does parent school involvement have a direct effect on academic achievement?

In the first step of the model predicting child GPA by parent school involvement and child learning disabilities, child learning disabilities accounted for 19.1% of the variability in child GPA, $F(1, 29) = 6.85, p = .014$. The addition of parent school involvement did not account for any additional variance in GPA, $\Delta R^2 = .01, F(1, 28) = .21, p = .655$. Parent school involvement was not significantly associated with child GPA, $\beta = .08, p = .655$. One case had values indicating status as a multivariate outlier on numerous indices: Cook's D, DFBETAS Learning Disabilities, DFBETAS Parent School Involvement, and Studentized Deleted Residual. Examination of this case indicated that this child was adopted at the oldest age (108 months; a full year older than the next oldest placement age) and was the oldest child in the sample (17.5 years) by two years. Thus, this child was removed from further analyses. The first model was refit without this child.

In the first step of the model, child learning disabilities accounted for 28.2% of the variability in child GPA, $F(1,28) = 10.99, p = .003$. The addition of parent school involvement did not account for any additional variance in child GPA, $\Delta R^2 = .01, F(1,27) = .28, p = .604$. Parent school involvement was not significantly associated with child GPA, $\beta = -.09, p = .604$.

Evaluation of this model indicates that the assumption of normality of residuals was violated (see Figure 4.1), but the residuals for the model are homoscedastic (see Figure 4.2). Given that they are homoscedastic and that the variables appear to be normally distributed, no attempt at nonlinear transformation was undertaken as a remedial action to address the non-normality of the residuals. However, I considered a polynomial association between parental involvement and child GPA, but conducting this did not improve model fit or residual normality.

In the model predicting child social competence by parent school involvement, child learning disabilities was not included since it did not significantly correlate with child social competence. Parent school involvement was not significantly associated with child social competence, $F(1, 27) = 1.10, \beta = .20, p = .304, R^2 = .039$. Evaluation of several indices of multivariate outliers indicated that no outliers needed to be removed (the outlier removed from the prior model was not included in this or any other model). Evaluation of this model indicated that the assumption of normality of residuals was met (see Figure 4.3). The residuals for the model were homoscedastic (see Figure 4.4).

For the logistic model predicting scholastic awards by parent school involvement, learning disability status was entered as a covariate in the first step. Coefficients for child learning disabilities signified a problem with the data (i.e., extremely large *SE* for the

regression coefficient and an odds ratio of .00). Exploration of the data revealed that there were no children with a learning disability who also won an award. Therefore, a model was run without children who had a learning disability ($n = 22$ remaining children). The association between parent school involvement and the log odds of a child receiving an award was not significant, $B = -.81$, $p = .341$, $OR = .45$.

4.4 RQ3: Does student school engagement mediate an indirect effect of parent school involvement on academic achievement?

Learning disabilities was included as a covariate for all three mediation models because it was significantly associated with the mediator, student school engagement. No other covariates were used in these analyses. Analyses indicated that there was a multivariate outlier when predicting the mediator. Examination of this case indicated that this child had several missing values (i.e., social competence) and an unusual combination of values for parent school involvement (high), student school engagement (low), and child GPA (low). Further, removal of the outlier dramatically changed the model results. Therefore, all mediation models excluded this case.

For the analysis of child GPA, there was a significant indirect effect of parent school involvement (see Figure 4.5). Parent school involvement was significantly associated with greater student school engagement, $B = .45$, $p = .016$. Student school engagement was associated with significantly higher child GPA, $B = .57$, $p = .031$. The indirect effect of parent school involvement on child GPA through student school engagement ($ab = .2580$) had a 95% CI that did not include 0 (.05, .45).

For the analysis of child social competence there was a significant indirect effect of parent school involvement (see Figure 4.6). Parent school involvement was

significantly associated with greater student school engagement, $B = .45, p = .016$.

Student school engagement was significantly associated with greater social competence, $B = .84, p = .002$. The indirect effect ($ab = .3767$) had a 95% CI that did not include 0 (.08, .74).

For the analysis of scholastic awards there was no indirect effect of parent school involvement based on the Sobel test. Parent school involvement was significantly associated with greater student school engagement, $B = .45, p = .016$. Student school engagement was not significantly associated with the log odds of whether a child received an award, $B = 3.11, p = .09$. The indirect effect ($ab = 1.400$) was not significant, $Z_{SOBEL} = 1.43, p = .154$.

Table 4.1 Descriptive Statistics for Demographic and Study Variables

Variables ^a	Current				
	Study	MAF	NSAP		
Child of Color	80.65%	65.7%	63%		
Black	16.1%	17.3%	35%		
Hispanic/Latino/a/x	25.8%	12.6%	16%		
Multi-Racial/Ethnic	38.7%	14%	12%		
Current Study Variables ^b	<i>M</i> (%)	Median	<i>SD</i>	Min	Max
Child Age (years)	10.56	9.5	2.62	7	17.5
Child Placement Age (months)	25.38	1.50	33.3	0	108
Total Household Income (\$)	146,741.38	140,000	74,719.79	21,000	325,000
Parent Age	46.50		4.33	36	57
Parent Work Hours	37.26		8.30	20	52.50
GPA	3.04		0.81	1.25	4.0
Social Competence	2.09		.72	.54	3.25
Parent School Involvement	4.02		.59	2.75	5.00
Student School Engagement	3.16		.64	1.24	4.24
Learning Disabilities	25.81%				
ADHD	35.48%				
Speech Delays	12.90%				
Special Needs Classroom	29.03%				
Scholastic Awards	38.71%				

Table 4.1 (continued)

Male Child	67.74%
Residing in Northeast U.S.	25.8%
Residing in Midwest U.S.	16.1%
Residing in Southern U.S.	22.6%
Residing in Western U.S.	35.5%

Note. ^aOnly variables which had a significant difference between the current study and the MAF and NASP are shown in the first four rows. ^bVariables listed under this heading are from the current study sample only.

Table 4.2 Correlations between Covariates and Primary Study Variables

	GPA	Awards	Social Competence	Parent School Involvement	Student School Engagement
Learning Disabilities	-.44*	-.47**	-.27	-.36*	-.47**
ADHD	-.40*	-.31	-.31	-.26	-.35
Speech Delay	-.05	-.31	-.21	.04	.03
Special Needs Class	-.76***	-.22	-.28	-.29	-.32
Gay Parents	.12	-.04	.22	-.35	-.11
Child of Color	.23	.05	-.01	.21	.00
Male Child	-.11	-.16	-.03	-.18	-.16
Child Age	-.13	.01	-.30	-.63***	-.24
Child Placement Age	-.22	-.06	-.34	-.59**	-.33
Household Income	-.06	-.11	.30	-.09	.16

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$; learning disabilities, ADHD, speech delays, special needs classroom, child of color, and male child are dichotomous variables in which 1 = yes and 0 = no. Gay parents is a dichotomous variable in which 1 = parents are gay and 0 = parents are lesbian.

Figure 4.1 Normal Probability Plot of Residuals for Model Predicting Child GPA

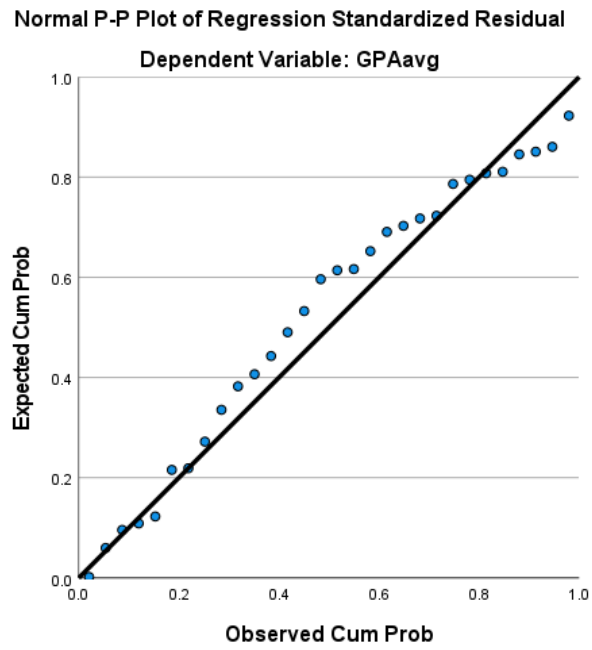


Figure 4.2 Residual Plot of Model Predicting Child GPA

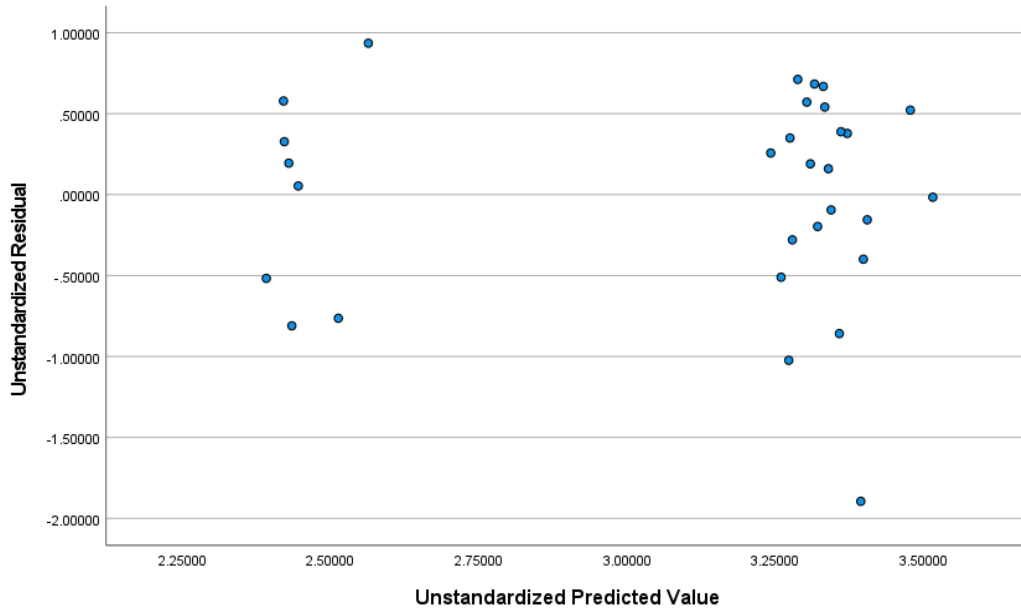


Figure 4.3 Normal Probability Plot of Residuals for Model Predicting Child Social Competence

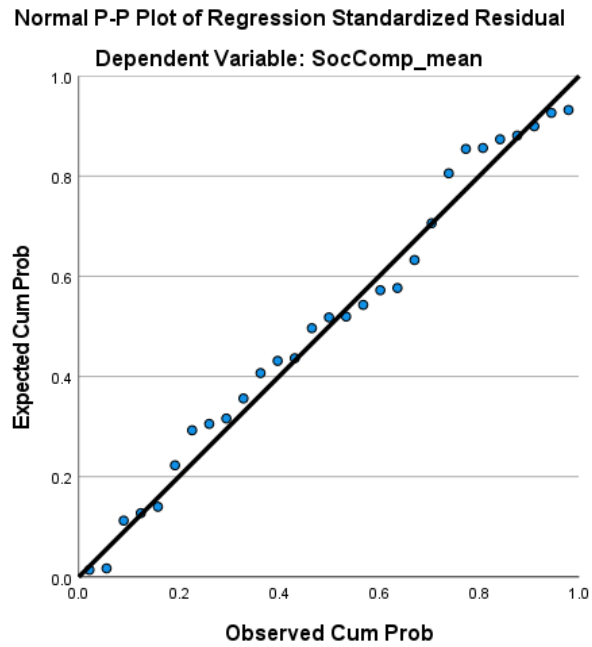


Figure 4.4 Residual Plot of Model Predicting Child GPA

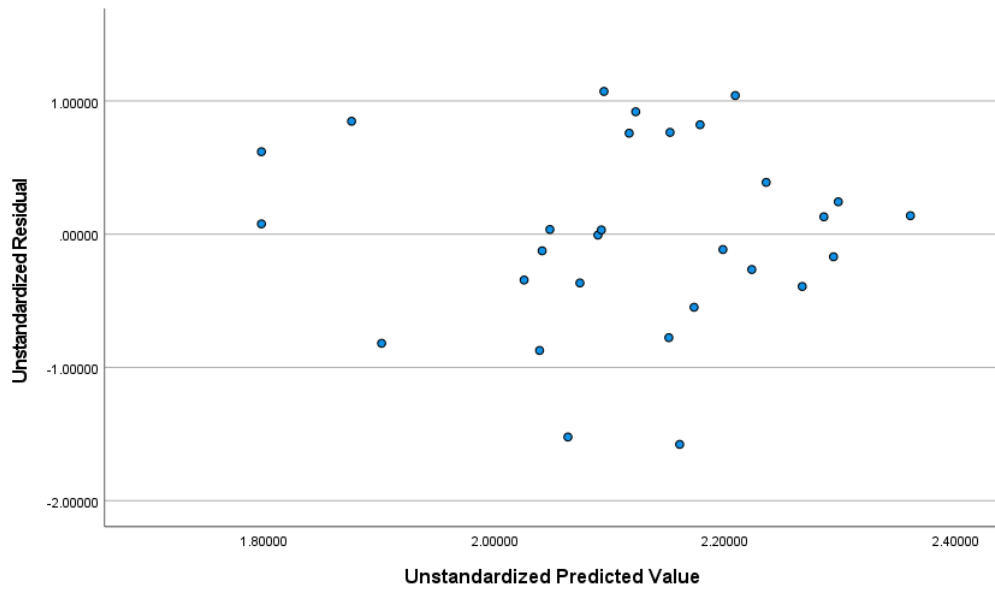


Figure 4.5 Mediation of Student School Engagement on Parent School Involvement and GPA

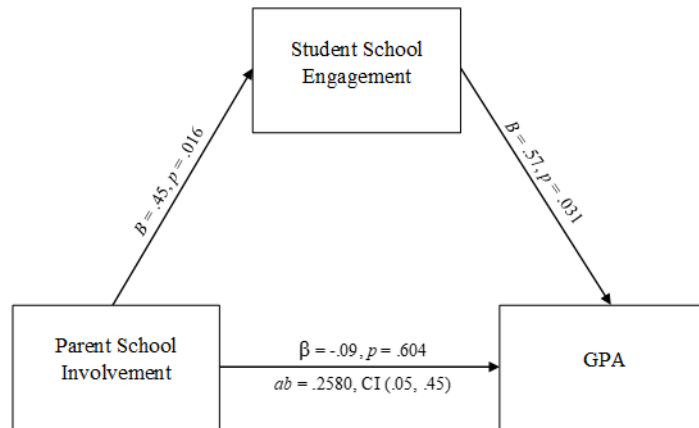
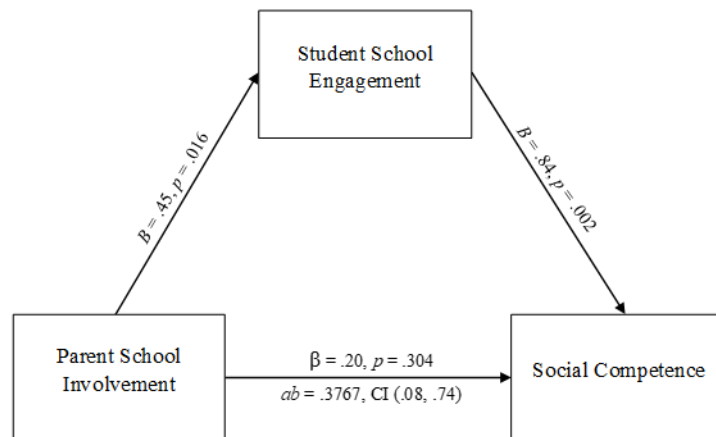


Figure 4.6 Mediation of Student School Engagement on Parent School Involvement and Social Competence



CHAPTER 5. DISCUSSION

Academic achievement is an important contributing factor to children's development and is often an at-risk area for children in foster care. Further, LG parents are more likely than heterosexual parents to have an adopted child (Goldberg & Conron, 2018) and may be more inclined to adopt children that are "hard to place" (e.g., special needs, older children, children of color; Lavner et al., 2012)—such children are overrepresented in the U.S. foster care system (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2020; Vandivere et al., 2009). Thus, this study had two primary goals: (1) to present basic descriptive information about children adopted from foster care by LG parents in comparison with large published nationally representative datasets on similar family structures; and (2) to explore the processes, specifically parent school involvement and student school engagement, within this unique family system that contribute to children's academic achievement (defined as school grades, social competence, and scholastic awards). Using the bioecological theory of human development as a guiding theoretical framework (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006), the present study provides evidence consistent with pre-existing models of student school engagement and parent school involvement in predicting the academic achievement of children within this unique family system. The study hypotheses were mostly supported and are described further below.

5.1 RQ1: Is this sample similar to published samples of similar family structures?

My descriptive hypotheses were partially supported. In the current study sample, there appeared to be more multi-racial/multi-ethnic children and more

Hispanic/Latino/a/x children compared to both the MAF study of LG adoptive parent families (Brodzinsky, 2015) and the NSAP foster to adopt subsample (Vandivere et al., 2009). However, child learning disability, developmental delay, and special education enrollment did not significantly differ between the current study and the MAF study (no comparisons to the NSAP study were made with these variables because no comparable data were available). These demographic differences may be the result of the sampling strategies used in each study and the relatively small sample size of the current study. The current study recruited all participants by asking various adoption agencies across the U.S. to forward study invitations to potential participants. The NSAP randomly selected eligible households across the U.S. and the MAF study used multiple methods of recruitment such as contacting adoption agencies, adoption attorneys, and emailing relevant adoption organizations. Additionally, the current study and the MAF utilized targeted recruitment strategies to oversample LG parent families. Overall, the parents in the current sample had high levels of involvement with their children's schooling, children had moderate social competence, above average grades, and above average levels of student engagement indicating that the children in these families appear to be doing well academically.

5.2 RQ2: Does parent school involvement have a direct effect on academic achievement?

The hypothesis that there would be a direct effect of parent school involvement on children's academic achievement was not supported by the data in this sample. This is somewhat consistent with the literature on parent school involvement such that PSI's direct effect on children's academic achievement is often moderated by contextual factors

such as racial-ethnic identity and socioeconomic status (Dotterer & Wehrspann, 2016); a direct effect of PSI may only be observed in families with a specific combination of structural characteristics not found in this sample, such as living in poverty (Hill & Taylor, 2004). Relatedly, because our sample was nearly homogenous in demographic traits (i.e., mostly white parents of middle to upper middle class with children of color), a different pattern of results may have been uncovered if there were more variability in such traits. This is also consistent with bioecological theory (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) such that help individuals shape their environment and corresponding processes; since our study sample is unique from other studies examining PSI and children's academic achievement, our results are therefore likely a product of such differences.

Further, there may be direct effects of other types of PSI (e.g., parent-teacher relationships) on children's academic achievement that were not evaluated in the current study. The current study also used the full PIVS subscale of the PTIQ to examine PSI which includes items related to both home (e.g., *You read to your child*) and school-based contexts (e.g., *In the past year, you have attended PTA meetings*). Results may differ based on the specific context of schooling in which parents are involved. For example, Tan and Goldberg (2009) found that parents' interpersonal involvement in their children's schooling at home (e.g., homework help) had a greater direct effect than involvement at the school directly (e.g., attending parent-teacher meetings) on children's school affective adjustment (i.e., school-based anxiety and school enjoyment).

5.3 RQ3: Does student school engagement mediate an indirect effect of parent school involvement on academic achievement?

Lastly, I expected there would be significant indirect effects of parent school involvement on academic achievement through the mediating variable of student school engagement for RQ3. These data supported my hypotheses in all measured domains of academic achievement except for scholastic awards. The lack of significant findings for parent school involvement's indirect effect on children's likelihood of receiving a scholarly award may have been the result of our underpowered sample and the conservativeness of Sobel tests (Sobel, 1982)—especially given that we had to exclude 25% of the sample for this analysis since no child with a learning disability ($n = 7$) also won an award.

My findings on children's GPA and social competence suggest that parent school involvement *indirectly* affects children's grades and social competence *through* its relationship with student school engagement in this sample. These results are consistent with current empirical and theoretical models of parent school involvement, student school engagement, and academic achievement (e.g., Bempechat & Shernoff, 2012; Benner et al., 2008; Hill & Taylor, 2004) and bioecological theory (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). This pattern of results suggest that the process of parent school involvement is likely distal to children's academic achievement, whereas the process of student school engagement is likely proximal to such outcomes. In other words, as parents' involvement in their children's schooling increases, student school engagement increases, which may in turn have a positive effect on their academic achievement. Disentangling such direct vs. indirect effects of family *processes* on academic achievement can aid in designing the most effective intervention strategies given that

structural changes in *context* (e.g., systemic racism, heteronormativity) and *personal* characteristics (e.g., race, sexual orientation, developmental delay) are harder, and sometimes impossible, to change (Benner et al., 2008).

5.4 Study Limitations and Directions for Future Research

The current study is not without limitations. According to Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006), an appropriate application of the bioecological theory to research design, and corresponding interpretations of empirical findings, incorporates all four components of the P-P-C-T model. As such, the conclusions drawn from this study may be obscured since only specific facets of the P-P-C-T model were observed. We cannot determine the specific direction of the processes and outcomes (i.e., their bidirectionality) of interest and their stability across development because our data were cross-sectional. For example, students experiencing difficulties in school or with low school engagement may influence the type and frequency of parent school involvement in some families (e.g., parents may be more involved in school-based contexts such as parent-teacher meetings) and such processes could change across developmental periods. A longitudinal design is necessary to better understand how children's academic achievement develops over time within this family system.

There are also several limitations related to the recruitment strategy, sample size, and statistical methods used which may threaten the internal and external validity of the study results. As such, all statistical analyses should be interpreted with caution. Participants self-selected to be in the study and therefore the results may be subject to self-selection bias (Madden et al., 2017). Further, the current sample was mostly

homogenous in terms of some key demographic variables (e.g., parent racial-ethnic identity and socioeconomic status) related to the constructs of interest, so the study results may not be well generalizable to the population of LG parent families formed through public adoption. Individual parent reports were also combined into average family scores because our sample was too small to be adequately powered for recommended statistical methods using nested family data (e.g., Hierarchical Linear Modeling or Structural Equation Modeling); this practice may have compromised important patterns of variation within these families given that individual and dyadic level contributions cannot be discerned. Lastly, the residuals were non-normal in the model predicting child GPA by parent school involvement and child learning disabilities for RQ2. Future research should incorporate random recruitment methods, recruit larger and more diverse samples, and utilize statistical methods that can examine nested family data to improve the internal and external validity of results and more thoroughly examine the factors (e.g., variability in socioeconomic status) that contribute to shaping the processes (e.g., parent school involvement) that influence children's developmental outcomes (e.g., student school engagement and academic achievement).

Our findings are also limited by using only parent-reported quantitative data. Researchers suggest using mixed-methods designs in studies examining parent school involvement's association with children's academic and developmental outcomes (Tan & Goldberg, 2009), as qualitative and observational data may be elucidating in why specific patterns of data are observed (e.g., motivations and reasons for why a parent is involved in their child's schooling)—this may be especially important in smaller sample sizes. Future work on parent school involvement, student school engagement, and academic

achievement would also benefit from incorporating the perspectives of children and their teachers. Finally, more research is needed related to the intersectionality of community and neighborhood aspects that influence school and home-based processes related to children's academic achievement (Goldberg & Byard, 2020). Indeed, the current study may aid in designing future studies examining the processes that promote children's academic achievement and related outcomes within LG parent families formed through public adoption.

5.5 Study Strengths

This work possesses many strengths despite its limitations. The novelty of this study is a strength in itself because of the difficulty in feasibly recruiting a large enough sample within this population to adequately power recommended statistical tests. Although the current study's sample size was small, our findings for the indirect effect of parent school involvement on children's academic achievement through the mediating variable of student school engagement were bolstered by using the bootstrapping technique to build confidence intervals which tested these indirect effects. Bootstrapping is a nonparametric resampling procedure which estimates the empirical approximation of the sampling distribution by simulating thousands of samples from the current data—it is therefore recommended for small samples and non-normal data because it does not conform to the assumption of normality (Hayes, 2013).

Another strength of the current study was utilizing a strength-based, rather than a deficits-comparison approach, to researching LG parent families and children adopted from foster care. Previous research has consistently demonstrated that disparities exist

between LG parent families and those headed by heterosexual parents (e.g., greater rates of discrimination among LG parents; Reczek, 2020) and between non-adopted children, children adopted at birth, and children adopted from foster care (e.g., children of color overrepresented in foster care, greater rates of mental health diagnoses for foster and adopted children; Pinderhughes & Brodzinsky, 2019). Consensus from these bodies of work (e.g., Farr, Vázquez, & Patterson, 2020) have concluded that these disparities are not specifically a function of family structural characteristics (e.g., parental sexual orientation), but rather contextual factors (e.g., stigma) that influence the processes (e.g., parent-child relationship quality) within these families, which in turn shape development (e.g., Farr & Vázquez, 2020). As such, the current study challenges the heteronormativity inherent in deficits-comparison approaches to studying LG parent adoptive families by examining the processes within these families instead of using heterosexual and non-adoptive parent families as the benchmark for normative development (Fish & Russell, 2018). Further, the current study expanded on traditional conceptions of academic achievement by including children's social competence. This could be important for children within this unique family system given that they may exhibit strengths related to school success that are not typically captured by traditional markers of academic achievement (e.g., grades, standardized test scores).

5.6 Implications for Policy, Law, and Practice

The current study provides preliminary evidence that the process of parent school involvement operates similarly within LG parent families formed through public adoption as it does in different-gender parent families raising biological children on student school engagement and related academic outcomes (Benner et al., 2008). As such, trainings for

child welfare workers and adoption professionals working with LG parent families perhaps should focus on the barriers that these families may face in educational settings (e.g., discrimination) and how such barriers may hinder parenting practices (e.g., parent school involvement). Additionally, schools should incorporate anti-bullying and anti-discrimination policies related to sexual orientation and adoption status to help improve social climate and promote parent social control (i.e., family-school coalitions; Goldberg & Byard, 2020). Student engagement is malleable and influenced by parental attitudes (Bempechat & Shernoff, 2012). Therefore, home and school-based interventions to promote children's academic achievement should also include resources which increase parents' social capital (i.e., how to navigate schooling), since this is an important predictor of parent school involvement (Hill & Taylor, 2004). School-based family centers and community supports may also serve as important academic interventions (Shernoff, 2010) for children adopted through foster care by LG parents.

The negative effects of early childhood abuse and neglect on social competence and other academic outcomes in later stages of development may be ameliorated by interventions in caregiving which promote the stability of positive parent-child processes such as adoption (Raby et al., 2018). As mentioned previously, LG parents are adopting at increasing rates (Gates, 2011), may be more likely to adopt "hard to place" children (e.g., special needs; Lavner et al., 2012), and such children are overrepresented in the U.S. foster care system (e.g., U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2020). Further, LGBTQ+ identified youth are disproportionately involved with child welfare services (Movement Advancement Project, 2018); often these children are placed because their families of origin do not accept their sexual or gender identity. As such, if

policies were in place to promote fostering and adoption by LGBTQ+ adults (e.g., anti-discrimination laws), the number of children awaiting placement may be reduced through the greater number of available family placements, including increasing the number of potential matching placements for LGBTQ+ youth (Bewkes et al., 2018; Gates et al., 2007; Kaye & Kovalanka, 2006)—ultimately benefiting their academic achievement and positive developmental growth.

CHAPTER 6. CONCLUSION

Academic achievement is an important contributing factor to children's development (Shernoff, 2010; Steinmayr et al., 2014) and is often an at-risk area for children in foster care (Raby et al., 2019). Investment in academic achievement could help buffer potential adversity in these children. LG parents are adopting at increasing rates (Gates, 2011; Goldberg & Conron, 2018) and adoption is an effective intervention for children in out-of-home placements (Grotevant & McDermott, 2014). Consistent with previous research (e.g., Benner et al., 2008), the current study found that parent school involvement *indirectly* affects children's academic achievement (e.g., grades and social competence) *through* its relationship with student school engagement in this sample of school-aged children adopted from foster care in the U.S. by LG parents. These findings lend support for anti-discrimination policies related to sexual orientation in adoption and educational settings that could benefit children's academic achievement within families headed by LG parents formed through public adoption as well as for interventions focusing on increasing parents' social capital (i.e., ability to navigate success in school) and control (i.e., coalition between families and schools; Hill & Taylor, 2004).

APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1. PARENT'S INVOLVEMENT AND VOLUNTEERING AT SCHOOL SUBSCALE

1. In the past year, you have visited your child's school for a special event (such as a book fair).
2. In the past year, you have been invited to your child's school for a special event (such as a book fair).
3. In the past year, you have attended a parent-teacher conference.
4. In the past year, you have attended PTA meetings.
5. You send things to class like story books and other things.
6. You read to your child.
7. You take your child to the library.
8. You play games at home with your child to teach him/her new things.
9. You volunteer at your child's school.

APPENDIX 2. STUDENT ENGAGEMENT SCALE

1. My child follows the rules at school.
2. My child gets in trouble at school. (reverse scored)
3. My child pays attention in class.
4. My child completes their work on time.
5. My child likes being at school.
6. My child feels excited by their work at school.
7. My child feels like their classroom is a fun place to be.
8. My child is interested in the work at school.
9. My child feels happy in school.
10. My child is bored by school. (reverse scored)
11. My child checks their schoolwork for mistakes.
12. My child studies at home even when they do not have a test.
13. My child tries to watch TV shows about things they do at school.
14. My child reads extra books to learn more about things they do in school.
15. If my child doesn't know what a word means when they are reading, they do something to figure it out (e.g., asks a parent).
16. If my child doesn't understand what they read, they go back and read it over again.
17. My child talks with people outside of school about what they're learning in class.

APPENDIX 3. SOCIAL COMPETENCE SCALE

1. Your child can accept things not going their way.
2. Your child copes well with failure.
3. Your child thinks before acting.
4. Your child resolves problems with friends or siblings on their own.
5. Your child can calm down when excited or all wound up.
6. Your child does what they are told.
7. Your child is very good at understanding other people's feelings.
8. Your child controls their temper when there is a disagreement.
9. Your child shares things with others.
10. Your child is helpful to others.
11. Your child listens to others' points of view.
12. Your child can give suggestions and opinions without being bossy.

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VITA

Cassandra P. Vázquez

Degrees Awarded:

University of Kentucky, B.A. Psychology, 2017

Professional Positions:

Primary Instructor, University of Kentucky, 2020

Lab Instructor, University of Kentucky, 2018-2020

Teaching Assistant, University of Kentucky, 2018-2021

Scholastic Honors:

Ford Foundation Predoctoral Fellowship, 2020-2021

Outstanding Teaching Assistant Award, 2020

Junior Scientist Fellowship, 2019

Center for Equality and Social Justice Graduate Fellowship, 2019

Lyman T. Johnson Graduate Diversity Fellowship, 2018-2021

LGBTQ* Resources Scholarship, 2018

Outstanding Psychology Major Award, 2017

Foster Care to Success Scholarship, 2017

Publications:

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