



Exploring Parental Involvement in Education: The Experiences of Single Mothers in a Developing Country

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In the current study, we tried to explore how single mothers in Türkiye define and experience parental involvement in their children's education, addressing a gap in the literature that often overlooks non-dominant family structures. Using an interpretive qualitative research design, we conducted semi-structured interviews with ten single mothers to gain in-depth insights into their lived experiences. Guided by Epstein's parental involvement model, our thematic analysis revealed that while participants recognized most of Epstein's six dimensions, they frequently reinterpreted these forms of involvement as personal responsibilities rather than collaborative efforts with schools. Notably, none of the participants reported involvement in school decision-making processes. Moreover, a new form of involvement entitled "Sacrifice to Fill the Void" emerged, reflecting the emotional, financial, and logistical commitments these mothers undertook to compensate for the absence of a father as the second parent. Despite significant challenges, participants demonstrated a strong commitment to their children's education, underscoring the need to acknowledge and support diverse forms of family engagement. Our findings call for culturally sensitive and inclusive definitions of parental involvement that reflect the realities of single-mother households. We advocate for educational policies and school practices that validate the unique contributions of single mothers and create equitable opportunities for engagement, ensuring that all families, regardless of structure, can play a meaningful role in their children's educational journeys.

Introduction

For the last four decades, the significance of parental involvement in enhancing children's academic success and development has become increasingly recognized by researchers. Existing literature consistently demonstrates that parent involvement not only boosts school-centric outcomes such as academic performance and child development (Jeynes, 2011; Van Voorhis, 2003; Wilder, 2023) but also serves as a tool to address systemic inequalities and promote fair educational practices (DeMatthews et al., 2016; Edwards et al., 2020; Gil & Johnson, 2024). As these studies underscore the necessity for all families to actively participate in the educational process to ensure equitable access to high-quality

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educational opportunities, engaging all families in education has become a major concern for educational systems across the globe.

Despite the broad agreement on the importance of parental involvement, promoting parental involvement for non-dominant groups such as single-mother often faces significant challenges. The literature shows that current parental involvement models, heavily developed in the U.S., primarily cater to the needs of middle-class, two-parent household, western families, neglecting the unique circumstances and challenges faced by families from non-dominant groups (Gedik, 2021; Lareau, 1987; McKenna & Millen, 2013; Meyers et al., 2000; Ürkmez et al., 2023). In fact, a growing body of critical studies has been documenting how these models fail to address the systemic barriers that hinder effective parental involvement for families from non-dominant groups. These studies advocate for a reevaluation of conventional frameworks to incorporate more inclusive understandings of family dynamics and socio-economic factors that influence families' educational involvement (Auerbach, 2010; Baxter & Kilderry, 2022; Baquedano-López et al., 2013; Green, 2015; Johnson, 2015; Khalifa, 2012; Robinson & Harris, 2014). This call requires that educational systems not only acknowledge but actively mitigate the inequalities that prevent non-dominant families from fully engaging in their children's education (Kim, 2009).

Addressing a critical issue regarding the inclusivity of parental involvement, this growing literature often remains indifferent to single-mother families. Although existing research has explored the challenges of non-dominant families, studies specifically focusing on single mothers' involvement in education remain limited, particularly in Türkiye. International research highlights barriers such as time constraints, financial stress, and limited institutional support (Blake Berryhill, 2018; Nonoyama-Tarumi, 2017), yet few studies examine how single mothers interpret their roles, define and practice involvement in their children's education or develop strategies to remain involved. This oversight is concerning, given that single parents face distinct barriers that can impede their engagement in their children's education, potentially leading to educational disparities (Blake Berryhill, 2018; Desmarchelier et al., 2022; Martindale & Lacey, 2017; Nonoyama-Tarumi, 2017; Tsz-lok Lee, 2023). Given that the number of single-parent families is steadily increasing both globally and in Türkiye (OECD, 2024; TUIK, 2024), it becomes even more essential to understand how this growing group experiences and navigates parental involvement in education. Addressing this gap, our study explores how single-mother families experience and navigate parental involvement, identifying the strategies they employ in supporting their children. This research contributes to a more nuanced understanding of single mothers' roles in educational environments and aims to inform more inclusive practices and policies. To these ends, our study was guided by one main research question:

- How do single mothers define and experience parental involvement in their children's education?

Related Literature and Conceptual Framework

In the previous section, we have outlined the need for employing more inclusive definitions that are reflective of diverse family structures, cultural contexts, and socio-economic backgrounds to better capture the experiences and contributions of non-dominant groups in educational settings. In this section, we first begin by explaining the importance of family structure for parental involvement and explore the evolution of Turkish family structure, highlighting the rise of single parenting as an important phenomenon. Then we began to explore parental involvement and efforts to define it, highlighting the seminal work



of Joyce Epstein (1995; 2011). By examining the shifts in family dynamics, especially the rise and challenges of single-mother families and tracing the theoretical developments in parental involvement, this section aims to embed our research within the wider academic discourse. It seeks to demonstrate how our study not only draws upon but also contributes to existing literature by offering a nuanced understanding of how single-mother families navigate the educational landscape, thereby informing more inclusive educational policies and practices.

The Evolution of Turkish Family Structures and Emergence of Single-Parent Families

Before exploring the evolution of family structures in Türkiye, it is crucial to understand the significance of these changes with respect to parental involvement. The term “family” could refer to different structures and roles that directly influence how educational institutions interact with families and involve them in the educational processes. In fact, there is growing discourse against the narrow and often marginalizing understandings of the concept, calling for a more inclusive understanding of what family is and what it is composed of. According to this literature, inclusive definitions of the concept, “family,” ensures that educational policies and practices can adapt to various familial settings, from nuclear families to extended kin networks and single-parent households (Grant & Ray, 2018; Sharma, 2013; Slaughter & Epps, 1987). This adaptability is vital because different family structures might necessitate and warrant different types and levels of involvement, affecting children’s educational outcomes (Colpin et al., 2004). Literature already shows that when schools recognize and try to adapt to the unique challenges faced by single-parent families, they can better support the parent’s involvement (Colpin et al., 2004; Slaughter & Epps, 1987; Tsz-lok Lee, 2023). Therefore, a comprehensive understanding of what constitutes a family can help educators create more effective partnerships with all families, ensuring that no group is marginalized or overlooked in the quest for educational equity.

Now, we can focus on how this concept has evolved in Türkiye. As a general characteristic of a developing country, the family structures in Türkiye have gone through extensive changes during the last century. In the early stages of this transformation, Türkiye was an agricultural society, where families predominantly lived in rural areas and were largely self-sufficient. Later, the society transformed into a more urbanized and industrialized one. This shift has led to a decrease in extended family structures and an increase in nuclear families, which have become more prevalent as society modernized (Tekin Epik et al., 2017; Yapıcı, 2010). However, recently, it has become apparent that even the structure of the nuclear family has begun to dissolve and change for various reasons (Talay, 2022). Single-parent family structure can be viewed as one of the rising trends in Türkiye (Demir & Çelebi, 2017) as well as in other OECD countries (OECD, 2024). Generally, a single-parent family is a type of family where either the mother or father alone is responsible for childcare. This type of family arises from various causes such as death, divorce, or having children out of wedlock, leading to the dissolution of the nuclear family unit and the consequent concentration of all responsibilities on the remaining partner (Boylu & Öztop, 2013; Bozatay, 2011; Demir & Çelebi, 2017; Gladding, 2012).

The Evolution of Parental Involvement into A Partnership

Four decades of research has made it clear that parental involvement plays a crucial role in education, leading to a conclusion that all families must be included in this journey. To accomplish this, researchers have developed various models to explain families’ roles in education. Depending on the model, families are given different roles and responsibilities.

Historically speaking, traditional models positioned schools as professional institutions where education was carried out by trained experts (teachers), tasking parents as passive supporters or passive recipients of the experts' endeavors (Auerbach, 2010; Boutte & Johnson, 2014). In such models, the focus was predominantly on school-based tasks and activities as well as formal communications between parents and teachers (Baquedano-López et al., 2013; Ishimaru, 2014).

Deriving from Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), partnership models positioned homes, schools, and communities as microsystems in which children learn and grow (Epstein, 2011). According to this, all three microsystems are seen critical in supporting children, being effective when they overlap and operate collaboratively (Epstein, 2011). According to this model, the overlap between home, school, and community creates a richer, more supportive environment for students, facilitating better educational outcomes through shared responsibilities. Models relying on this theory emphasize partnership that should occur between these three systems, tasking families and schools with active and cooperative engagement to facilitate optimal educational outcomes for children.

At this point, Joyce Epstein's (1995; 2011) model is without a doubt one of the most famous and widely used frameworks building upon this theory. In transforming this concept into actionable strategies, she identifies six types of involvement: parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision-making, and collaborating with the community that operationalize the interactions among these spheres. Each type of involvement provides a framework for how schools, families, and communities can support students' learning and development effectively. These six types of parental involvement dimensions, according to Epstein (2011), are as follows:

Parenting. Viewed as essential to support all children's growth and learning, parenting can be briefly described as helping families to develop the necessary skills so that they can support their children's learning and development, such as creating home environments conducive to homework and learning activities.

Communication. Central to Epstein's model, effective communication between schools and families is seen as mainly a school responsibility to establish "two-way communication channels," allowing for a bidirectional information flow between home and school. This requires schools to implement strategies that not only keep parents informed about their children's progress and school events but also actively solicit parents' insights and concerns. This approach encourages a partnership where parents feel genuinely involved and valued in the educational process, fostering an environment of mutual respect and collaborative problem-solving.

Volunteering. Volunteering can be described as creating opportunities and empowering parents to become actively involved in school life, which can enhance the educational experience for students and create a supportive school community. In this regard, schools can encourage parents to participate in school events, assist in classrooms, or contribute to special projects.

Learning at Home. Learning at home is simply about providing parents with resources and guidance to support learning at home. This includes offering parents with strategies on how to assist with homework, suggesting educational activities that reinforce school learning, and sharing information on how to create a conducive learning environment at home.



Decision Making. This is about creating a school setting where parents are actively engaged in decision-making processes to allow for a more inclusive school community so that parents' voices are heard. Encouraging participation in parent councils, feedback initiatives, and policy development can help align educational strategies with community needs and expectations.

Collaborating with the Community. Strengthening partnerships with community resources enhances the educational landscape for students by providing additional support and opportunities. Schools can collaborate with local businesses, non-profits, and cultural organizations to bring new learning experiences, expand educational resources, and foster a supportive network around students.

As it can be seen from these specific dimensions, Epstein (2011) draws attention to the schools' roles and operationalizes parental involvement as a collaborative effort rather than placing the responsibility solely on parents to support their children's education. The next section will further elaborate on the critical roles that school leadership play in fostering collaborative and inclusive partnerships, highlighting how effective leadership practices can shape the nature of school-family relationships and promote equitable engagement for all families.

Emphasis on School Leadership as A Key Component

Research has firmly established that school leadership plays a crucial role in shaping the nature and efficacy of school-family partnerships (Gil, 2019; Ho, 2009; Shaked, 2022). The leadership approach adopted by school administrators, educators, and community leaders sets the tone for parental involvement and determines how this involvement is defined, developed, and maintained. School leaders not only influence the types of parental involvement that is fostered but also determine the benefits or disadvantages these involvements might entail for different families (Baquedano-López et al., 2013; Gedik, 2021; Ishimaru, 2014).

Therefore, the responsibility of enhancing the inclusiveness and effectiveness of these partnerships largely falls on school staff, with school leaders at the forefront. This underscores the importance of leadership in promoting, implementing, and sustaining family engagement practices that are equitable and effective (Ho, 2009; Ürkmez et al., 2023). Reflecting this perspective, Epstein's (2011) model categorizes the home-school-community partnership as an initiative that should be school-driven, emphasizing the responsibilities that schools must assume to lay a foundation for successful collaboration. This enhanced focus on school leadership underscores the necessity of proactive and strategic leadership in achieving the goals set forth by Epstein's model and in fostering an environment where educational partnerships can thrive, enhancing student learning and community involvement.

Method

We employed an interpretive qualitative research design (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) to explore the experiences and perspectives of single-parent families regarding their involvement in their children's education. Building "... on the belief that knowledge is constructed by people in an ongoing fashion as they engage in and make meaning of an activity, experience, or phenomenon," this approach not only allowed us a nuanced exploration of the dynamic and diverse ways in which these parents engage with educational systems and advocate for their children's needs but also facilitated an in-depth understanding of individual narratives and the unique challenges they faced (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 50).

Participants

Our participants consisted of ten single mothers from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds, selected through purposive (snowball and convenience) sampling to ensure a focus on those directly experiencing single parenthood in the context of supporting their children's education (Huberman, 2014; Patton, 2015). These participants were chosen based on their unique position to provide insights into the interplay between single parenthood and educational involvement. The mothers varied in educational background, employment status, and income levels, which provided a range of perspectives on navigating the educational landscape as single parents (see Table 1 for details).

Table 1. Participant Demographics

Participants	Education Level	Occupation	Perceived Income Level
Mother 1	Middle school	Waitress	Middle
Mother 2	Elementary school	Unemployed	Low
Mother 3	University	Unemployed	Middle
Mother 4	Elementary school	Unemployed	Low
Mother 5	High school	Nurse	Middle
Mother 6	Middle school	Unemployed	Middle
Mother 7	Middle school	Unemployed	Low
Mother 8	Elementary school	Caregiver	Low
Mother 9	Elementary school	Unemployed	Low
Mother 10	University	Unemployed	Middle

To reach out to these parents, we first conveniently identified schools from which we could collect data. Then, we reached out to school administrators upon receiving the Institutional Review Board approval from our university and data collection permission from the Turkish Ministry of National Education. The school administrators connected us with school counselors, and they helped us identify children from single-parent families. As a result of this process, all ten parents we reached happen to be mothers (not fathers), which can be explained by both legal and cultural factors in Türkiye (Abugalı, 2018; Aksakal, 2003). Although Turkish custody law is gender-neutral in principle, judicial practice overwhelmingly favors awarding custody to mothers, particularly for younger children (Aksakal, 2003; Kalkavan & Büken, 2017) and thus, they are typically more accessible to schools for family-related communications and research. While this sampling outcome was not intentional, we acknowledge that the absence of single fathers in our participant pool is a limitation of the study. Future research should aim to include the perspectives of single fathers to provide a more comprehensive understanding of single-parent involvement in education.

Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews were the primary data collection method used in this study. Taking a keen interest in our participants' own interpretations of the phenomenon and the ways in which they experienced it, semi-structured, in-depth interviews allowed us to probe



further into the contextual and emotional aspects of their experiences (Merriam, 2009; Patton, 2015). We developed an interview guide to explore several key areas: parent perceptions of their roles in their children's education; the ways in which parents tried to get involved in their children's education; and parent interactions with educational institutions. Our interview guide also included an area focusing on the difficulties parents had encountered and the strategies they had employed to overcome these difficulties. Each interview was conducted in a location convenient and comfortable for the participant. All interviews were conducted by the lead author, recorded with consent, and subsequently transcribed for analysis.

Data Analysis

To make sense of our data along the way and to further inform our data collection process, we began the analysis simultaneously with data collection and continued throughout (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In the first phase, which coincided with the data collection stage and continued a little longer afterwards, the lead author transcribed the interview records verbatim and highlighted all the sections that related to the research question (How do single parents define and experience parental involvement in their children's education?). During the first initial coding phase, we followed a deductive approach and used Epstein's six types of parental involvement dimensions attempting to capture how these parents understood and experienced parental involvement. This was followed by an inductive coding phase that aimed to identify additional themes that emerged from the data. In this stage, we employed latent coding to delve deeper and uncover the underlying meanings or assumptions that extend beyond the explicit or surface meanings of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2022). This process led us to our final theme, notably the "Sacrifice to Fill the Void" dimension in parental involvement.

Findings

Filling the Gap: How Single Mothers in Türkiye Navigate Parental Involvement Alone

Our study involved semi-structured interviews with 10 mothers who took on the responsibility of caring for their children when their families were disrupted by divorce or death. We tried to explore how these mothers continued to be involved in their children's education and how they adapted to the unique circumstances of single parenthood. Utilizing Epstein's framework, we explored how these single mothers interpret and implement each dimension in their unique contexts. Interestingly, while these mothers recognized five of the standard dimensions proposed by Epstein (2011), they often interpreted and experienced them differently. Furthermore, they not only did not refer to one of Epstein's dimensions ("decision-making") but also recognized a new dimension of involvement ("Sacrifice to Fill the Void"). Table 2 shows a comparison of parental involvement dimensions as defined by Epstein (2011) and the participants. Our analysis illuminates the critical role these mothers played in adapting to and overcoming the absence of a co-parent. The remainder of this section is dedicated to exploring each of these dimensions, while an emphasis is given to the new emerging one, "Sacrifice to Fill the Void".

Table 2. Comparing Epstein's Parental Involvement Dimensions with Participant Responses

Epstein (2011)	Findings
Parenting	Parenting as a parent responsibility
Communicating	Communication as a parent responsibility
Volunteering	Volunteering as a parent responsibility
Learning at home	Learning at home as a parent responsibility
Collaborating with the community	Collaborating with the community as a parent responsibility
Decision making	—
—	Sacrifice to fill the void

Parenting as a Parent Responsibility

In contrast to Epstein's (2011) model, which views parenting as a collaborative effort between families and schools to create supportive home environments, the single mothers in our study primarily perceived it as a personal responsibility. These mothers actively engaged in enriching their children's social and emotional development by trying to spend quality time in various settings outside of schools, such as movie theaters, theaters, cafes, and parks. One mother explained, "We often go on walks or bike rides, and I make time for us to sit in the park with a thermos or go out to see a movie." This approach was seen as essential for their children's emotional and social development, independent of school involvement. They also talked about encouraging their children's involvement in social activities, such as sports and other community programs. "I support my child's involvement in sport activities. Like Taekwondo and swimming lessons I find in our community to help him grow socially and succeed academically." reported another mother. They did not mention schools in regard to their parenting experiences. These narratives highlight how these parents saw parenting as personal responsibility that they had to fulfill independently, underlining the importance of personal involvement in fostering their children's educational and personal growth.

Communication as a Parent Responsibility

When the parents were asked about how they supported their children's education, their answers often included communication-related involvement. This communication was usually about stepping in to solve some school related problems. For example, one mother stated that "If there's a problem related to the class, we [my child and I] talk about it the same day. We don't leave it until the next day or pretend as if it is not important." Here she emphasizes parent-child communication that she engages in addressing school-related problems. The same mother also emphasized her communication with the teacher when she said, "Whenever there's an issue or a problem, I call and [the teacher] always answers my phone." Here in this example, the mother is calling the teacher to solve a problem her child is having at the school, also expressing the teacher's availability.

Similarly, another parent reported that, "Both our classroom teacher and the school counselor always like to inform me whenever something occurs, either good or bad. If they tell me that my support is needed, I do everything I can, ..." In this occasion, we can also observe a hint of school-to-home communication, intending to inform the parent about school-related problems and seeking her support. As it can be seen from these excerpts, these mothers felt that they needed to stay in touch with the school so that they could help solve school-related issues. Attending school meetings and keeping up with the teachers' WhatsApp groups were also mentioned as a parental involvement responsibility these parents tried to fulfill. In conclusion, although communication is typically seen as a shared responsibility between

parents and schools, these mothers perceive it primarily as their own responsibility. They felt the need to take the initiative to stay informed, maintain contact, and resolve issues related to their children's education. This underscores the unique nature of their experience, where communication was not seen as a collaborative effort but as another parental duty they were obliged to fulfil.

Volunteering as a Parent Responsibility

Volunteering was identified by only two out of ten mothers as a form of parental involvement, indicating its limited recognition as a key component of their engagement in their children's education. Briefly touching on this concept, these parents viewed it as attending various school-based events. For example, one of these mothers referred to it when she said, "We never miss a school activity. I mean, we have never missed out on anything, whatever is going on [in the school], we definitely go. We definitely try to participate in it." Similarly, the other mother stated that "We try to participate in all the school activities: festivals, school trips etc." Given these instances, attending school-based events and activities was perceived by these mothers as a form of parental involvement, one that they personally felt responsible for complying with. Yet, they did not mention instances where they were actively engaged in organizing or volunteering such activities.

Learning at home as a Parent Responsibility

Epstein (2011) conceptualizes learning at home as a collaborative effort, where schools support parents by providing the necessary resources to enhance children's education at home. Our participants believed that supporting their children's learning at home was an important parental responsibility they had to shoulder, despite the difficulties they faced in doing so. One mother articulated the sense of responsibility she felt by expressing, "Even though I work, when I come home, I try to help with homework." This statement reflects a common sentiment among the mothers, who often felt responsible for their children's educational activities at home. The challenges of aligning educational support at home were particularly pronounced for mothers with lower educational attainment or single mothers working long hours. They frequently utilized online resources like YouTube or Google to assist their children, a practice primarily initiated by the mothers themselves. For instance, one mother shared, "I don't fully understand his homework, but I still sit with him... When he can't do something, we usually look it up online together." Moreover, some mothers made substantial adjustments to their home environments to transform their homes into a productive learning environment. One mother explained this, "Our home has multiplication tables, a clock for learning time... I've set up our home to keep it conducive to learning." Overall, these mothers believed that creating a home environment supportive of their children's learning was an important responsibility they had to carry out, but they did not refer to an instance where their efforts were supported by the schools, nor did they complain about lacking such support in this regard. Rather they felt that it was their responsibility to overcome the difficulties they were facing and find a way to support their children's learning at home.

Collaborating with the Community as a Parent Responsibility

Epstein (2011) characterizes the collaboration with the community as a partnership where schools leverage local resources to support the educational and social development of students and families. However, the single mothers in this study, once again, interpreted their community involvement more as a personal responsibility than a collaborative effort. Lacking

schools' support in this regard, these mothers actively sought out and utilized community resources such as local workshops, courses, and activities to enhance their children's social and educational experiences and they talked about this as their personal responsibilities as parents. For example, one mother mentioned,

There are various workshops organized throughout our municipality, all free. I follow them as much as possible and always encourage my child to benefit from them. He has taken courses in mind games, robotics, and is currently enrolled in swimming.

Another explained her proactive approach to leveraging community resources: "In our region, there are Taekwondo classes currently offered as a summer course, and I make sure my child attends to staff like that." This perspective reveals that these mothers recognize the potential of community resources to enrich their children's lives, and they personally tried to secure these opportunities for their children without an explicit mention of partnership or support from schools. Once again, this underscores a divergence from Epstein's collaborative framework, reflecting parental involvement as a personal responsibility of parents.

Sacrifice to Fill the Void

This dimension of parental involvement emerged distinctly as these single mothers sacrificed their personal needs to fill the gap left by absent partners, ensuring their children's educational and social success. It can be viewed as an overarching theme that is present in all other forms of parental involvement mentioned so far. It simply underscores the extra responsibilities these mothers took on to ensure their children do not feel the void, aiming to provide a full spectrum of support. Thus, this dimension goes beyond traditional notions of parental involvement by illustrating the extent to which these mothers are prepared to prioritize their children's needs. Showing her commitment, one mother stated that, "When their needs are about school and education, I set aside my personal needs, my own issues, [I mean] everything, and focus on their schooling." Another mother similarly shared her readiness to make any sacrifice necessary for her child's future when she said, "I can't let challenges daunt me. I'm ready to make any sacrifice for my child's future." These statements underline the depth of commitment these mothers were ready to make to ensure their children receive the best education possible, even at significant personal costs.

Our participants associated being a single parent with various difficulties and problems that burdened them with significant emotional and logistical challenges that often went unnoticed in typical discussions about parenting. As one mother explained, "Every day feels like a balancing act between work, the kids' school needs, and just trying to keep everything together. It's exhausting. People don't see the half of it." Another mother similarly stated that, "Sometimes I was so exhausted that I wanted to give up. But I continued for my children, trying to overcome every difficulty for their future." These reflections underscore the physical and emotional toll of single parenting while also highlighting the silent resilience inherent in these families.

Despite these difficulties, our participants neither stopped valuing their children's education nor denied the vitality of their responsibilities as parents in supporting their children's education. This sense of duty was clear in their words, as one mother articulated the stakes involved: "Despite all the hardships, I have always valued and supported my child's education. It's my duty because if she doesn't receive a good education, her future will be at risk." This quote shows the unwavering commitment these mothers showed toward their

children's education. Another participant stated, "Challenges cannot intimidate me. I am ready to make any sacrifice for my child's future." These narratives not only highlight a profound dedication to education but also show the parents' belief in the transformative power of education and their role as the primary advocate and supporter in their children's learning journey.

Their unique circumstances also forced them to demonstrate adaptability and resourcefulness in supporting their children's education. Their narratives revealed an enduring commitment that transcended conventional expectations. As one mother shared, "Even when I can't be there in person because of work, I make sure we go over his homework via video calls in the evenings." This digital adaptation highlights her commitment to remain involved regardless of physical constraints. Another mother explained, "I've organized a carpool with neighbors to ensure my daughter never misses school events, even when my shifts overlap." Although this school-based event was organized in a way that was inaccessible to this single mother, her effort reflected a proactive, personal undertaking to make sure her daughter could attend. These adaptations not only ensured their active participation in their children's educational lives but also highlighted their innovative approaches to overcoming the systemic and personal challenges they faced. These examples underscore not only their commitment to their children's schooling experiences but also how, without the support of other partner and often managing additional burdens like working double shifts to support their families, single mothers experience these common challenges more intensely than dual-parent households.

To fill the void, these mothers employed a range of strategies, including stretching financial resources, adjusting work schedules, and leveraging community support. Financially, these mothers often cut back on their personal expenses to ensure they could afford educational materials and activities for their children. One mother highlighted this by saying, "I cut from myself to spend on my children because the money is insufficient." She further explained that "When it is about their schooling, I push everything, my needs aside to meet their school related needs." Commenting on financial sacrifices, another mother complained about the school being too demanding in this regard. She said,

I actually protest the school. They know my situation, but they still keep asking for things. My situation is obvious, but we had to spend a lot of money to buy stuff for school projects because the child gets grades from these. If he were to fail to complete it, his grade would have suffered.

Clearly, these single mothers who participated in this study tried to support their children by making various sacrifices, not only financially but also by reorganizing their entire lives around their children's schedules. Detailing how she re-organized her life, one mother stated, "I talked with my boss to change my work shift for a year so that I can spend more time with my child." Additionally, emotional support played a critical role, with mothers frequently stepping in to ensure their children do not feel the void left by the absent parent. As one mother expressed, "Even when I am exhausted, I make sure I am there for every school activity." For some mothers, extended family support played a crucial role in their strategy to fill the gap left by the missing parent as they relied on extended family to help manage both their children's needs and their own, with one mother noting the critical support she received from her parents. She stated that, "At home, the biggest supporters are my dad and mom, because they take care of my daughter and attend to her needs until I get home." These underscore the efforts of these mothers in trying to create a supportive environment that

compensates for the absence of the other partner, ensuring their children thrive academically and socially.

Discussion and Implications

Parental involvement models have been evolving to meet the diverse needs of different family groups. In an attempt to address these concerns, recent studies have been focusing on families with varied socioeconomic, racial, and cultural compositions (Baquedano-López et al., 2013; DeMatthews et al., 2016; Gedik, 2021; Gil et al., 2023; Green, 2015) as well as families of children with special needs (DeMatthews et al., 2020; Urkmez et al., 2023). Contributing to this critical literature, our study draws attention to the evolving family structures in Türkiye, notably the rise of impoverished single-mother households. With this, we intend to illuminate how single parents adapt their involvement strategies within the context of their unique family dynamics, highlighting their experiences. Consistent with the literature on advocating for more inclusive definitions of family (Grant & Ray, 2018; Sharma, 2013; Slaughter & Epps, 1987), our findings suggest that educational policies and practices must become more adaptable to these changing family landscapes to ensure no family is left behind.

First of all, it is important to note that our findings reveal the value single-parents families ascribe to their children's education. In other words, despite all the challenges and problems they were facing, these families continued to prioritize their children's education and accepted the vitality of their support in this matter. Aligned with the literature focusing on other minoritized groups of families (Baquedano-López et al., 2013; Demathews et al., 2016; Gil et al., 2023; Khalifa, 2012; Urkmez et al., 2023), this finding is especially important for educators who are dedicated to promoting inclusive parental involvement practices for all their families. Previous literature shows that educators, especially school administrators, serve as the gatekeepers to parental involvement (DeMatthews et al., 2016; Green, 2015; Ho, 2009) and when parents fail to perform their expectations regarding the parental involvement practices, they often get labeled as uncaring and indifferent parents, further being marginalized from school spaces (Ahmed, 2015; Bilaloğlu & Arnas, 2019; Lareau, 1987). Even worse, this often happens to historically marginalized families who need the support of educators more than others (DeMatthews et al., 2016; Gedik, 2021). Therefore, our study once again highlights the fact that single-parent families deeply care about their children's education and struggle to support them in every way possible. Thus, educators need to be able see these parents' commitment and try to find inclusive ways that are appropriate to them and their needs. Only by doing so can educators fully harness the potential of their most dedicated allies.

Another finding worth mentioning here is that although these families seemed to recognize most of Epstein's (2011) parental involvement dimensions, they often understood them as a parental responsibility rather than a collaborative effort. Given the evolution of parental involvement models, the understandings of single parents in Türkiye seem to align with the traditional models which tend to define parental involvement as some sets of parental responsibilities or actions that parents need to fulfill to support some school-centric goals. Yet, a growing body of literature finds this problematic because this approach further minoritizes groups that do not have the necessary means to meet the expectations in this regard (Auerbach, 2010; Baquedano-López et al., 2013; Baxter & Kilderry, 2022; Grant & Ray, 2018; Ishimaru, 2014; Johnson, 2015; Özlen Demircan, 2018; Robinson & Harris, 2014). Given the height of other problems these families have to shoulder (Nonoyama-



Tarumi, 2017; Martindale & Lacey, 2017), it just made it burdensome for the single moms in this study to sustain their support. Thus, this finding underscores the need for a community-centered approach to parental involvement, featuring proactive school efforts to support parental involvement, especially for groups that have been historically marginalized (Gedik, 2021; Johnson, 2006; 2015; Kim, 2009; Khalifa, 2012; Leddy, 2018; Townsend & Bayetto, 2022).

Thirdly, we found that decision making was missing in all interviews as a form of parental involvement. These families did not mention an instance where they tried to engage in school decision-making processes, nor did they express concerns about the lack of such opportunities, indicating a possible normalization of their exclusion from these processes. Once again, this finding is also aligned with the previous research that associates this result with the centralization of education systems (Bæck, 2021; Hakyemez, 2015). Developing countries with highly centralized education systems such as Türkiye tend to leave very little room for schools regarding decision-making, even discouraging local involvement in this regard (Gumus & Akcaoglu, 2013; Hakyemez, 2015). As a result of this, involving parents in decision-making in such contexts remains as an artificial effort that is often merely found on policy discourses than in practice. This finding underscores the challenges associated with importing Western educational theories and practices into contexts like Türkiye (Gumus & Akcaoglu, 2013). Because in Western nations, schools often enjoy more autonomy and are encouraged to engage in inclusive decision-making processes (OECD, 2018) while Turkish educators prefer to stay committed to the limits drawn by the Ministry of National Education in Ankara (Karakaya, 2004). Therefore, when a country such as Türkiye attempts to borrow a model from a western nation, structural and cultural differences may impede their successful adoption and implementation (Gumus & Akcaoglu, 2013). Given this nuanced landscape, further investigation is needed to determine whether Türkiye should adapt these models to foster genuine and effective parental involvement in school governance.

Finally, we found that the most pressing parental involvement these single mothers demonstrated was beyond one of Epstein's dimensions. Termed as "Sacrifice to Fill the Void," this dimension extends beyond Epstein's model by capturing the personal sacrifices these single mothers put forward to support their children's education. Building on the value these parents ascribed to their children's education, this form of parental involvement verifies the extent to which these single mothers were willing to go in support of their children's education. This finding suggests that when trying to promote parental involvement for single-parent families, educators need to be ready and willing to go beyond what Epstein's model has to offer, and try not only to recognize, but also to validate and integrate the unique, often sacrificial efforts of single mothers into the fabric of school community engagement and leadership strategies. Aligned with a growing critical literature, we advocate for a shift towards community-centered school leadership that not only acknowledges but also leverages the unique contributions of single moms. This approach should involve creating inclusive, respectful partnerships that value diverse forms of parental involvement and enhance the educational environments to reflect and support the real challenges faced by single-parent families (Auerbach, 2010; Baquedano-López et al., 2013; Green, 2015; Khalifa, 2012).

In conclusion, this study explored how single mothers in Türkiye define and experience parental involvement, revealing that their understandings often diverge from conventional models by framing involvement as a personal responsibility rather than a shared effort with schools. In addition, participants recognized a new form of involvement: sacrifice to fill the void. These findings highlight the need for more inclusive and context-sensitive approaches to

family engagement that acknowledge the lived realities of single-parent households. By centering on the voices of single mothers, this study contributes to the critical parental engagement literature by providing a deeper understanding of how parental involvement is enacted under structural and emotional strain.

Note

This article is based on the first author's master's thesis, supervised by the second author. Preliminary findings, drawn from a subset of the data and analyzed using a phenomenological approach, were previously presented at the IXth International Eurasian Educational Research Congress (EJER) under the title "A Phenomenological Investigation on the Participation of Single-Parent Families in Their Children's Education" (Sen & Gedik, 2022).

Declarations

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Conflict of Interest: We have no conflict of interest to declare, and there is no financial interest in reporting. We certify that the submission is original work and is not under review at any other publication.

Informed Consent: Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to their inclusion in the study. Participation was voluntary, and participants were informed about their right to withdraw at any time without consequence.

Data availability: Due to confidentiality agreements and the sensitive nature of the data, the interview transcripts are not publicly available. However, excerpts relevant to the study's findings have been included in the article. Further details can be provided upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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