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Achieving Despite the Odds: A Study of Resilience Among a Group of African American High School Seniors

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This article reports on a study examining the phenomenon of resilience, or the manifestation of competence despite the presence of stressful life events or circumstances, as a factor leading to the academic success of 20 African American 12th-graders (10 females, 10 males) from impoverished backgrounds. Interviews were conducted with these at-risk but achieving urban California high school seniors, to identify internal and external forces contributing to the development of resilience among them. Interview data suggest that their academic success is largely attributable to three protective mechanisms: a supportive, nurturing family and home environment; the youths' interactions with and the involvement of committed, concerned educators and other adults in their lives; and the development of two key personality traits—perseverance and optimism.

INTRODUCTION

A large body of research reports the problems associated with educating poor African American children (Barbarin, 1993; Edwards, 1976; Mackler, 1970). To the further detriment of these youth, rarely does one see the terms “competent,” “resourceful,” “aspiring,” or “motivated” used to describe them or their performance in school (Barbarin, 1993). As a result, many teachers and parents begin to believe that failure is the norm for these students, and their expectations for the achievement of Black youth subsequently are lowered.

Yet, to focus primarily on the problems of any group of people in isolation from data that highlight possible solutions to their problems is to promote distorted and negative stereotypes that perpetuate defeat and pessimism. As Garmezy (1991) contends, the study of success is just as important as the study of failure, and focusing solely on problems frequently yields inaccurate and often unnecessary data. In contrast to the research emphasizing the negative, other studies have shown that poor Black children can achieve academically and that more such children, given their natural abilities and intelligence levels, should be having academic success but are not (Edmonds, 1979). Indeed, as Barbarin (1993), Freiberg (1993), Rutter (1987), and Werner (1989) maintain, many Black children learn and succeed in school despite circumstances that include low socioeconomic status, minimal teacher expectations, and inadequate representation of their successes. This finding, that some African American students from impoverished backgrounds successfully emerge from high-risk environments, has led many researchers to attempt to identify causes or elements that serve to assist them in coping with and overcoming dire circumstances (Rhodes & Brown, 1991). These studies suggest that the difference between success and failure for these young people, both inside and outside of school, often boils down to the presence or absence of factors associated with a specific character trait: resilience (Freiberg, 1993; Wang & Gordon, 1994).
Resilience and Risk

Resilience is concerned with individual variations in response to risk (Rutter, 1987). Certain attributes have been found to be operative in the lives of children possessing this trait, including the ability to get along with others and to develop and pursue one’s goals, a belief in the eventual success of one’s efforts paying off, and the presence of a strong sense of trust and respect for oneself and others (Clark, 1993; Garmezy, 1991; Rhodes & Brown, 1991). The research on resilience, although recent and complex, is consistent. Researchers in the field of psychopathology have probed for precursor conditions that enhance the chances of producing resilient children (Garmezy, 1991; Rutter, 1987; Werner, 1989). The aims of their research were to identify and promote coping mechanisms among nonresilient children and to provide a foundation for a psychology of wellness. Educational researchers have studied resilience in their quest to identify the factors that place some students at risk of academic failure and to promote those factors that prevent this failure (Wang & Gordon, 1994; Winfield, 1994). Further, they have sought to implement strategies for establishing and sustaining protective practices that shield or lessen the negative effects of stress, promote healthy adjustment, and foster resilience in students’ homes, schools, and communities. Similar protective factors have been found among resilient children across diverse populations and circumstances (Luthar, 1991; Wang & Gordon, 1994; Winfield, 1994). Among these are a supportive family that facilitates coping efforts; a warm, supportive social environment that reinforces coping attempts; high self-esteem and self-control; an internal locus of control; and the presence of educational and occupational opportunities (Rhodes & Brown, 1991; Rutter, 1987).

The importance of family support to individual academic successes is confirmed by several researchers (Garmezy, 1991; Rutter, 1987; Werner, 1989). Most of the literature on resilience agrees that the presence of one or more significant adults in the life of a child can make a significant difference. Shade (1983), for example, reports that African American mothers tend to be the primary source of affection, aspirations, and assistance with regard to their children’s educational plans and pursuits. Wang and Gordon (1994) note that most resilient children have at least one strong relationship with an adult, not always a parent, which diminishes the risks associated with family discord. Further, Dugan and Coles (1989) suggest that resilient children tend to have easy-going temperaments that promote positive parent–child and peer interactions, thereby minimizing unhealthy conflicts between themselves, their parent(s), and other youth. As Winfield (1994) attests, resilient children also tend to have parents who are concerned with and participate in their children’s education, who direct their children’s everyday tasks, and who are aware of their children’s interest and goals. Fostering resilience in children requires family environments that are caring and structured, hold high expectations for children’s behavior, and encourage their participation in the life of the family (Wang & Gordon, 1994). As Clark (1983) notes in his comparative study of African American low- and high-achievers:

We have pinpointed important differences between the family processes of two kinds of ghetto families. Families whose members are emotionally able to love, cooperate, support one another, and find some support outside the home are usually more satisfied with their lives. We were repeatedly struck by the strong mutual support systems and wide range of controlled structured activities in the homes of competent students. (p. 210)

Schools that foster student resilience have been found to emphasize academic learning and opportunity for all students, active student and parent involvement, and sensitivity to student diversity (Wang & Gordon, 1994). As Freiberg (1993) and Wang and Gordon (1994) maintain, teachers are critical protective factors in the lives of students whose socioeconomic status places them at risk of school failure. Indeed, the literature suggests that teachers who bridge the gap between home and school and are sensitive to and
knowledgeable of their students' cultural and community heritages (Wang & Gordon, 1994), who maximize learning time (Freiberg, 1993; Wang & Gordon, 1994), who believe that all students can learn (Edmonds, 1979; Leacock, 1969), and who provide engaging cooperative learning experiences (Slavin, 1989) promote resilience and foster success among these youth. Communities that foster student resilience are those that promote comprehensive, preventive child health care, recreational facilities, and job and educational opportunities (Winfield, 1994).

An internal locus of control, or the belief that forces shaping one's life are largely within one's own control, has been shown to be a protective factor for its role in helping children become more assertive in the classroom (Luthar, 1991). Luthar's study of the learned helplessness paradigm suggests that when children (and adults) believe they are powerless over what happens to them, they become passive and restricted in their coping abilities. Conversely, when individuals believe they can control the outcomes of their living, they make active attempts to overcome adverse situations. Internal locus of control thus serves as a protective (ameliorative) factor, and is important in counterbalancing the risks associated with stress (Dugan & Coles, 1989; Rhodes & Brown, 1991). According to Wang and Gordon (1994), resilient youth maintain healthy expectations of themselves and others. They set goals, and they have a clear sense of purpose about their future agency in controlling their own fate. They also have good feelings about themselves and their achievements.

Expanding children's opportunities to learn has also been shown to have a positive impact on the development of resilience in students from socioeconomically disadvantaged circumstances—a factor commonly associated with the label "at risk." As a result, several programs have been designed and implemented to promote early academic success and school continuance in children placed at risk of failure. Among the more successful have been Head Start (Winfield, 1994), Accelerated Schools (Levin, 1992), Success for All (Slavin, 1989), and the Comer Process (Comer, 1980).

**Purpose of the Study**

Resilient children are said to be those who beat the odds or bounce back under adverse circumstances. But how does this ability to bounce back—be it in education, employment, or other arenas—develop and become sustained within an individual such that he or she not only copes with adversity but excels? In an attempt to answer this question, I conducted interviews with 20 African American students from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds. These students, who were high school seniors at the time, attended school in an urban California community. Each was a high-achiever—that is, they were successful in their school, extracurricular, and social activities, and presumably on their way to college and career success. Yet each also came from homes whose material and monetary resources were minimal if not scarce. In their homes, there was limited money for extracurricular activities like football or basketball games, dances or senior proms, or even senior pictures. My objective, therefore, was to find out how these students managed to continue focusing on and excelling in their education, despite the occurrence or reoccurrence of serious problems due or related to socioeconomic insecurity.

During the course of my conversations and interactions with these 20 students, one fact became readily apparent: these were especially resilient young people. Similarities in beliefs, lifestyles, and attitudes among this group of students became apparent as

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1For the purposes of this article, "at-risk" students are those who qualify for free or reduced-price lunches in the public schools (Colvin, Hoagland, & Borquez, 1994).
well. Most notable among these shared characteristics was the students' general altruistic natures. Despite their limited resources, the majority of these young people were very giving of themselves and their time to service groups active in their churches, schools, and communities.

As the protective mechanisms operating in their lives were revealed through the students' comments, a conceptual framework emerged to help explain their survival and success in school. The examination of resilience was deemed significant because of its supportive influence on academic achievement. According to Rutter (1987), Werner (1989), and Wang and Gordon (1994), resilience helps some students transcend even the most challenging circumstances, while others in the same risk-filled environments, lacking this trait, fall by the academic wayside. Second, three specific protective factors were found to be operant in the lives of these students that enabled them to rise above difficult circumstances: favorable personality traits; a warm, supportive family; and external supports. Although these protective factors moderated the effects of stress on these youth, they did not eliminate them. Rather, they provided a means for these students to excel in school despite the presence of numerous obstacles and barriers to their success.

**Methodology**

**Sample**

African American youth were chosen for this study based on their meeting certain criteria of academic success, as defined by the researcher: (a) they were high school seniors, (b) they had taken a minimum of one college preparatory class, and (c) they had qualified for college entrance. Data on the students was provided by their school counselors. Twenty students meeting these criteria agreed to be interviewed for this study.

The sample was comprised of 10 males and 10 females. The family incomes of all 20 youths varied but qualified their children for free or reduced-price school lunches according to the high school district's criteria. Five of the students lived with their mothers; 5 lived with their mother and stepfather; 4 lived with their mother and father; 4 lived with a guardian; 1 girl lived with a stepfather; and 1 boy lived with his father. Nine of the students came from families headed by single parents; seven of these parents were single mothers, two were single fathers.

**Survey Questions**

During the interviews, the students were asked to identify the adults who exerted the most influence in their lives and on their sustained academic efforts and achievements. They were also asked to describe the specific influential behaviors that these adults performed that contributed to their success. Additional questions sought information on the students' concerns about satisfying family expectations for their continued educational and career achievements. Other items solicited responses that shed insight into the specific character traits leading to these youngsters' resilience despite the odds against their achieving success in school.

**Procedures**

The students were interviewed five times during the months of January through May 1994. The interviews averaged 45 minutes each. Four of the interviews were conducted

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Footnote: Parents and guardians were also interviewed; however, this data will not be discussed in the present article.

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individually. The fifth interview involved the entire group of students in a collective dialogue with the author.

FINDINGS

The Influence of Supportive Family Members

Mothers in particular were credited by this group of disadvantaged high-achievers for always “being there” for them and for instilling morals and the desire to achieve. When asked what person had influenced her the most, 17-year-old Katasha, the youngest of three children who has lived with her stepfather since the death of her mother the summer before her senior year, offered the following response:

The one person who influenced me the most was my mom, because she was always there for me and pushing me. Not necessarily pushing me to go the way she wanted me to go, but pushing me to have my own mind and to make my own decisions and to live with them. She taught me that whatever decision I made will reflect on others as well as myself.

Katasha also noted that her mother had instilled in her “the value of family rather than material things.” Similarly, Carolyn, 17, who lives with her mother and stepfather, stated that she particularly admired her mother “because she has always been there for us kids and she has strict guidelines for our lives.” These comments were echoed by Theodis, a shy young man with a pleasant disposition, who noted that he most admired his mother’s organizational skills and availability to the family. As he concluded:

She makes it to my basketball games and takes care of my younger brother and the entire household. I’m still in school because I want to be here and because of my mother, who helps me. If things get tough, she says, “Keep going on. Life’s full of struggles, but you can’t give up.”

To be sure, mothers were not the only parent discussed by these resilient students. For instance, Ralph, a senior with a bright outlook, commented that he greatly admired his father for returning home and helping to heal a troubled marriage after his wife (Ralph’s mother) suffered an emotional breakdown. Another student, Timothy, who lives with his father, mentioned the presence of people in his life “who will help me to get through college, not just to get into college.” He especially praised his father’s stability and concern for his family and expressed appreciation for him for “[taking] time for me.” As Timothy observed: “My Dad doesn’t have the greatest of education, but he’s the most influential person in my life, and the reason that I’m still in school.”

Tamara, 17 and the oldest of two children, credited her aunt with encouraging her to think positively about herself. Her comments below are further evidence of the high levels of self-esteem she and the other resilient, successful youth interviewed for this study possess:

I am determined to make something of myself. Too many people think that we [poor Black kids] are good for nothing, and it’s time to let them know that we are going to college and doing something with our lives.

External Supports

The students mentioned several other adults besides their parents who had helped them and were influential in their school success. Selected teachers were frequently cited as motivating influences in their quest for academic achievement, and students often identified specific behaviors exhibited by teachers that propelled them forward. For example, according to Anita, a bright young woman with a vivacious personality:

3All names used within this article are pseudonyms.
In my junior year, my English teacher brought out more in me than I knew existed, especially about my writing and acting abilities. She wasn’t an “open-your-book-do-this-page-it’s-due-tomorrow” type of person. She put more into her teaching so that we could understand better, and I got good grades.

Another college-bound senior, Althea, the oldest of four children, mentioned the significant role played in her life by a teacher of similar racial/ethnic background in the following comments:

My first and only Black teacher told me that I was going to make something of myself, and I believed him. We need more African American and Hispanic teachers. Also, we need cultural classes for students to learn about their history.

Ralph reported that his football coaches and an English teacher were especially helpful to him. Of the latter, he stated:

I hated writing my freshman year. My English teacher told me to make it fun by thinking of things at home. I started writing more and I passed the writing proficiency test that same year.

Clevell, the 7th of 11 children, who has plans to become an engineer, also credited a coach with giving him the impetus to excel academically:

I had never really thought about going to college before I met my basketball coach. He took us on trips to colleges, and he opened up my mind to larger things in life instead of thinking about small stuff.

The students also attributed benefits to spending time with school counselors. When asked what adult on her high school campus helped her most in her quest for college, Harriet, a bright young scholar with a serious demeanor, observed:

My counselor is genuinely concerned with my well-being. She knows what I want to be, and she sees something in me. She knows that I don’t want to give up. She’s opened the door to college for me by helping me with the paperwork.

Personality Factors

Student responses to interview questions that sought to determine the critical personality trait or traits associated with their resilience point to two characteristics in particular: perseverance and optimism. Each of the students advocated a strong belief in the power of hard work to overcome obstacles insofar as their education was concerned. They also expressed conviction and optimism in the potential for their academic efforts to “pay off” in both the short and long run. For example, when asked why she persisted in her schooling, 17-year-old Aretha, the youngest of seven children, replied, “I like coming to school and learning. . . . I’m in school because I want to educate myself and do something with my life. I’m not a street person.” As Dorian, a tall and highly popular young man, declared with obvious pride: “I want to satisfy my family. I’ll be the first child and grandchild to graduate from high school and go to college.” Critical to their own dogged efforts, most of these students noted, was their parents’ and other concerned adults’ continued support.

Persistence and optimism were critical resources in these resilient students’ personality repertoire. Their comments indicated that they called upon these traits often in the face of challenging and stressful circumstances at school and elsewhere. For example, the comments of quiet, cooperative Alicia reveal that teachers’ negative perceptions of poor Black students often motivated her to persist and excel in their classes. As she stated,
“Most teachers look at the way you dress and figure you’re not going to do anything. You’re stereotyped as the person that’s going to sit around and copy from another person.” In response, several of these students indicated their wish for more African American and teachers from other groups who are sensitive to and knowledgeable about their cultural and socioeconomic conditions.

**Discussion**

The literature on resilience suggests that supportive personality, family, and community conditions are precursors to successful academic outcomes for children placed at risk of school failure. In this regard, the responses of the 20 African American adolescents participating in the present study were consistent with those identified in the literature as characteristic of resilient youth. Through the development and sustaining of these aspects in the lives of children from families with limited means, the foundations by which these young people learn to cope with bad times and failures as well as experience small and large successes can be built.

Seven recommendations for increasing the success of African American students who must grow and learn in impoverished circumstances are supported by the findings of the present study. These recommendations are as follows:

1. As the comments of the students participating in the present study reveal, there are many warm and stable homes among the poor where academic excellence thrives and a theory of success is practiced. Such families should be supported and encouraged, and the factors leading to their members’ successes be further explored.

2. Families, school personnel, and concerned persons associated with schools serving large numbers of these students must work closely together and form coalitions to advance effective schooling for all students, regardless of socioeconomic status. Such coalitions should not accept uncritically any generalizations about students, their parents, or their families, who are poor.

3. School staff must reflect the diversity of school communities. They must, however, be comprised of competent persons who can serve as role models of achievement and morality. Both features are of equal importance, and must be underscored by caring and the ability to relate positively to young people whose persistence in school and other efforts, by virtue of their socioeconomic status, is a struggle to beat the odds.

4. Although the research is unfinished, we educators need to apply what we know. Data stressing the importance of parental influence upon the academic achievement of poor children should be widely disseminated, as should research which concludes that a loving and caring environment is conducive to learning. More adults should be enlisted to work as volunteers in the schools and promote enhanced learning by providing poor children with extra time, attention, and feedback. Supportive school programs such as reduced-price lunches, mentoring initiatives, rites of passage programs, scouting, cooperative teams, literacy programs, and opportunities for part-time jobs should be strengthened and scaled up. Schools serving poor African American children should become places where supportive messages such as “You can do it!” “Try, try again!” “We love you!” “We’re here for you!” resound in the hallways and classrooms. Such messages can go a long way in the ears of a child who may be feeling “less than” because his or her family’s material circumstances fall short.

5. The role of the school counselors in promoting the beyond-school success of African American students from poor backgrounds should be bolstered. As Edwards (1976) maintains, this position is deserving of continued study, for it is the school counselor, more than any other person in the schools, who is vested with the responsibility for

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producing academic success beyond the secondary school level. Edwards's research has shown that students, particularly seniors, who have close working relationships with their counselors are often better informed about opportunities beyond secondary school, more likely to receive scholarships for college study, and more frequently the recipients of other types of school recognition.

(6) Schools serving large numbers of low-socioeconomic-status students and their communities should join together to highlight the academic successes of their students in much the same way, if not more so, that student-athletes are praised and publicized. When school forensic clubs receive the same accolades shown by the public for school football teams, the elevation of academics in the minds of children is sure to follow.

(7) Schools serving the poor, like all other schools, should have clear rules and great expectations for all children. The resiliency skills that have been identified in the literature, and confirmed in this study, should be nurtured among the students in these schools. Curricular and instructional efforts whose goal is to instill self-esteem, personal responsibility, goal setting, clear communication, and problem solving should be implemented. To diminish student isolation and alienation from academics and the school culture, students should be presented with adequate opportunities to participate in classroom and school decision-making activities.

CONCLUSION

This study focused on the distinct characteristics of African American high school students who have achieved despite the obstacles poverty has placed in their lives. Above all, its findings suggest that generalizations cannot be made about the factors that limit the academic potential of poor youth, or about the families from which they spring. The students selected for this study are role models of perseverance and exemplars of the benefits of effort. Their comments, though directed primarily at their peers, bear importance for parents, school personnel, and other community persons interested in enhancing the opportunities for success for all students regardless of their race, ethnicity, or class.

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