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A CASE STUDY OF RESILIENT AFRICAN AMERICAN ADULTS: WHAT  
SHOULD SCHOOL LEADERS KNOW?

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A CASE STUDY OF RESILIENT AFRICAN AMERICAN ADULTS: WHAT  
SHOULD SCHOOL LEADERS KNOW?

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## *Abstract*

For many years, there have been scientists, educators and researchers who have studied the concept of resilience. Resilience is defined as a dynamic process that individuals exhibit positive behavioral adaptation when they encounter significant adversity or trauma (Luthar, Cicchetti, Becker, 2000). Through interviews, focus group discussion, journaling and artifact reflections, this study attempted to determine the role that efficacy played within the lives of resilient African Americans who grew up in poverty. A qualitative case study method was used in order to get a vivid account of the six participants' experiences and to capitalize on the dismal conditions that affected the participants who all grew up in the same zip code as children and youth. The extensive literature regarding resilience and the historical information regarding the city in which the participants resided rendered the following five factors that constitute the protective factors for the study: societal and socio-economic factors such as supportive adults at home, at school, and in the community; rigorous and challenging educational experiences that meet the academic, social and cultural needs of the child; opportunities for continuous engagement and focus through extracurricular after-school, Saturday, and summer enrichment programs; a network of achieving peers; and a strong belief in and sense of oneself. The ways in which these protective factors relate to sources of efficacy information were identified and analyzed.

## **CHAPTER I**

### **UNDERSTANDING THE ROLE OF EFFICACY FOR RESILIENT AFRICAN-AMERICAN ADULTS**

#### **Introduction**

Reasons why some students achieve at high levels even when they encounter difficult situations and pressures are of great interest to both researchers and practitioners. Such an understanding is particularly important about African-American youth who lag behind other ethnic groups in achievement, college admittance, and education attainment indicators. Low-income, urban, African-American youth are disproportionately represented in risk indicators such as poor school engagement, poverty, street crime, school drop-out rate, poor mental health outcomes, and long-term unemployment (Baker, 1998). Research also highlights alarming statistics regarding African-American male life expectancy, crime, and lack of education (Noguera, 2003). African-American males lead the nation in homicides, both as victims and perpetrators. Their arrest conviction and incarceration rates have been the highest of any group in most states for some time (Roper, 1991; Skolnick & Currie, 1994).

Generations of some African-American families have continuously been dependent on governmental supplements to meet their basic human needs (Moynihan, 1965). Some children in these social environments are raised to believe that getting a high school diploma is the equivalent of getting a college degree. Many of these students encounter adult responsibilities within the home that make internalizing the value of an education difficult. Further, children growing up in poverty and dependent on governmental aid often have to contend with other harmful social factors that impede learning and development. In spite of prevalent risk factors and harmful environments,

high poverty African-American children still achieve academic and personal success. Children who defy the odds by becoming successful rely on social and psychological factors to support their learning and development (Noguera, 2003). Researchers and practitioners often attribute the success of children who overcome salient risk factors to their resilience.

The contribution of resilience to the success of youth who encounter salient risk factors is well established in the literature (Benard, 2004). Resilience has varied effects on individuals, depending on their specific life circumstances and the age at which they experienced severe hardships. Some of those effects include the ability for those resilient individuals to perform better in school, mend broken relationships and build self-confidence and emotional stability. Researchers believe that risk factors set the foundation for resilience and that some youth embrace the effects of resilience while others lack the self-efficacy needed to overcome challenging situations (Noguera, 2003). Given the effects of resilience, understanding its formation is important. Is resilience formed by social factors as Masten (1994) argues? Or, is resilience a product of emotional and psychological properties (Benard, 1995)? The term *resiliency*, not resilience, is often defined as a personality trait; but Masten argues, that definitions based on personality traits are harmful because they carry the connotation that resilience is an innate, biological characteristic. Reference to a personal attribute can inadvertently pave the way for perceptions that some individuals simply do not “have what it takes” to overcome adversity.

Resilience, in contrast to resiliency, introduces the idea that affective and cognitive factors interact in children to assist them transcending challenges associated

with poverty and social deprivation. Most researchers agree with Masten (1994) that resilience is not the result of innate abilities, but instead is a capacity available to all children who are bolstered by protective factors (Bempechat, 1998; Benard, 2004). Capacity involves a blend of both personal and social factors, but the exclusion of personal factors in most definitions of resilience has left the contribution of affective and cognitive states unknown. Does resilience depend on some affective and cognitive contribution to the emotional capacity of individuals? Or, is it simply the result of protective factors? This proposed study seeks to explore the contribution of affective and cognitive states to the success of individuals who transcended harmful risk factors to graduate college and to establish successful careers. Specifically, it examines the role of self-efficacy in fostering resilient behavior.

### **Purpose of the Study**

Evidence shows that children raised in high-risk environments can thrive and develop into productive and loving individuals (Luthar, 2000). This research proposes to address *how* impoverished African-Americans experienced resilience in spite of negative circumstances. Despite extensive research on the effects of resilience, little evidence exists on how protective factors shape self-efficacy and how efficacy influences resilient behavior. Thus, the purpose of this study was to add to the understanding of resilience by exploring the role of self-efficacy in the lives of African-American youth who overcame poverty to become successful adults. The research was designed to address three questions: What protective factors contributed to the success of resilient African-American adults? How did protective factors and self-efficacy interact to shape their

resilience? What role did self-efficacy play in fostering resilience in African-American adults?

### **Definition of Terms**

For the purpose of this study, the following definitions will be used:

#### **Poverty**

The state experienced by an individual and/or family who lacks basic necessities and who lives in impoverished conditions. The state of not having the personal ability to fund the procurement of one's basic needs regardless of the nature of the environment (Winfield, 1991).

#### **Risk Factors**

Internal and external factors that impoverished individuals face that pose a threat to a safe, healthy, and productive way of life (Waxman, 1992).

#### **Protective Factors**

Issues or states of being that serve to buffer children from prevalent risks by helping them cope with adversity and develop the emotional fortitude to overcome challenges. In essence, protective factors are safeguards and lifelines for children and adults who are experiencing hardships (Wolin & Wolin, 2001).

#### **Success**

Success within the context of this study is defined as having obtained a 4-year college degree; working within a person's chosen profession, and demonstrating the ability to consistently lead a productive life (Bempechat, 1995).

**Resilience**

Resilience is defined for this study as the ability for children to develop and relate to protective factors that set the foundation for life-long success without succumbing to the risk factors of school failure, substance abuse, mental illness, and juvenile delinquency problems (Cicchetti and Garmezy, 1993).

**Self-Efficacy**

Self-efficacy is the ability to persevere in challenging situations. It shapes the decision or outcome that an individual faces based on one of the four efficacy judgments. It has also been described as one's belief or confidence in one's own ability, (Bandura, 1982).

**Limitations**

There were several limitations that prevent findings from this research to be generalized to other African Americans or other individuals growing up in poverty. Second, some of the responses were similar in nature due to the impoverished experiences that each had as children growing up the same community. Experiences may be different for individuals from different communities. Third, the similarity in age may pose a limitation and the participants may know one another since they once resided in the same part of the city. Finally, the researcher's previous history with two of the participants and personal resilience experiences resulted in difficulty with controlling researcher bias.

## **CHAPTER II**

### **REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

#### **Introduction**

Statistics from the U.S. Census Bureau reveal that poverty in America will affect up to an estimated 35.9 million people by 2014, including 13 million children (Howard, 2010). Poverty exposes children to more risk factors and hardships than other adverse social conditions. Children who are poor are more likely to live in single-mother families, or have a parent without a college education, to attend low-performing schools (Sawhill, 2006), drop out of high school (Hardy, 2006), and to experience teen pregnancy (Shillington, Peak, & Hohman, 2000). They are also more likely to live in neighborhoods characterized by high crime and drug use, exposing them to violence and criminal activity (Leventhal & Brooks-Gunn, 2004). Children who grow up in poverty encounter numerous obstacles in advancing to middle-class status. If they overcome hardships associated with poverty, their success is often attributed to being resilient (Mendez, Fantuzzo, & Cicchetti, 2002).

Researchers have concluded that resilience is more predictive of future life success than harmful risk factors that impede children's development (Garmezy, 1982; Werner & Smith, 1992). That is, one's level of resilience is more deterministic of positive outcomes like academic achievement, college graduation, and career advancement than harmful social conditions. Empirical evidence links resilience to positive youth development, healthy behaviors and lifestyle, and future achievement (Benard, 1991, 1995; Glantz & Johnson, 1999). Given the importance of resilience for long-term success and happiness, it is important that educational leaders understand its meaning and formation. With such knowledge, educators can take a more purposeful approach to



cultivating resilience in the lives of children. The purpose of this review of literature is to define resilience, to trace the evolution of the concept, to describe its properties, and to examine the role of efficacy in fostering resilience.

### **Resilience Defined**

Resilience is not a new concept. The concept of resilience emerged from studies on social factors that contributed to individuals adaptive outcomes in the presence of adversity. The study of resilience is rooted in earlier research in psychopathology, poverty, and traumatic stress (Cicchetti & Garmezy, 1993). Garmezy's (1971) study of children who experienced traumatic stress served as a starting point for modern research on resilience. He examined not just the psychological pathology associated with adverse circumstances but also resistance and growth attributed to social factors. Garmezy's (1971) focus on social conditions and Cicchetti's research (1993) were the turning points in defining resilience by protective factors that provide a social and psychological foundation for adaptive behavior.

The definition of resilience used for this study comes from research by Cicchetti and Garmezy (1993) on children and youth who experienced success in spite of growing up in an adverse environment. Cicchetti and Garmezy (1993) situate their definition on protective factors, risk factors, and hardships that many individuals face throughout childhood and adolescence. Protective and risk factors are two common properties of other contemporary definitions of resilience (Garmezy, 1971). Thus, for this study, resilience is defined as the ability of children to develop and relate to protective factors that set the foundation for life-long success without experiencing the risk factors of

school failure, substance abuse, mental illness, and juvenile delinquency problems (Cicchetti and Garmezy, 1993).

This definition is consistent with how other scholars in the field define resilience. Rutter (1985, 1987 & 1993), for example, defined resilience as a positive end of the distribution of developmental outcomes among individuals at high risk or facing adversity. Rutter and Weintraub (1990) defined resilience as the threat to a given child's well-being and evidence of positive adaptation despite adversity encountered. Fine (1991) defined it as successful adaptation despite risk and adversity. Luthar, Cicchetti, and Becker (2007) defined it as the ability of individuals to lead healthy, productive lives despite their high-risk environmental status. Lastly, Benard (1995) argued that resilience is a set of qualities that foster a process of successful adaptation and transformation despite risk and adversity.

Researchers have provided varied definitions that contain similar concepts and terminology in relation to resilience. Common definitions are presented in Table 1. These definitions identify similar properties of resilience that capture the social and psychological effects on individual behavior. Adversity, risk, and adaptation are observable indicators of resilient behaviors. Adversity and risk define characteristics of the social environment, whereas adaptation refers to personal behaviors that enable individuals to overcome challenges by adapting to changing situations. As Rutter (1991) suggests, resilience is mutually determined by environmental and individual factors. Less clear is how social and personal factors interact to affect the choices and actions taken by individuals growing up in adverse circumstances. Before exploring this interaction, risk factors and protective factors are defined in more detail.

**Table One: Common Definitions of Resilience**

<b>Properties of Resilience</b>				
Masten, Garmezy (1985) <b>Positive adaptation despite exposure to adversity.</b>	Rutter, 1985, 1987, 1993 <b>Positive</b> end of the distribution of developmental outcomes among individuals at high <b>risk</b> or facing <b>adversity</b> .	Ritchers & Weintraub, (1990) The presence of threat to a given child’s well-being and evidence of <b>positive adaptation</b>	Fine (1991) <b>Successful adaptation despite risk and adversity</b>	Benard (1995) A set of qualities that foster a process of <b>successful adaptation</b> and transformation <b>despite risk and adversity</b>

**Risk Factors**

Risk factors are life stressors that diminish the availability of protective factors for individuals who need the most access to social supports. Common risk factors found in resilience research include socio-economic disadvantage (Garmezy, 1991, 1995; Rutter, 1979; Werner & Smith, 1982, 1992), maltreatment (Cicchetti and Rogosch, 1997), urban poverty, and community violence (Luthar, 2000). Research by Werner (1992) and Luthar (2007) on at-risk youth found that all children can be helped to become more resilient if their caregivers encourage their independence, teach flexible ways of problem-solving, boost their self-confidence, model positive behaviors, and reward acts of helpfulness and cooperation. These actions by caregivers are examples of protective factors that support resilience and serves as buffers to risk factors. As Maslow’s (1963) hierarchy of needs suggests, all children need protective factors in their lives. The problem, however, is that all children do not have equal access to social support.

For the purposes of this paper, the term *risk* is not being used to refer to the physiological or cognitive vulnerabilities of children who have specific, clinical, biological, cognitive, affective, or sensory disorders (e.g., physical handicap, mental

retardation, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD, autism). Risk is being used here in reference to environmental factors that either singly or in combination have been shown to diminish academic and personal success. In the past decade, experts in the field of prevention have begun to design programs that increase protective processes and/or decrease risk factors for delinquency and other adolescent problem behaviors. In reviewing over 30 years of research across a variety of disciplines, Hawkins and Catalano (1998) identified 19 risk factors that are reliable predictors of adolescent delinquency, violence, substance abuse, teen pregnancy, and school dropout. These 19 factors can be classified as educational and social risk factors.

### **Educational Risk Factors**

Conditions of schools in which high poverty students disproportionately attend have become a risk factor for many children. Noguera (2003) argues that most African-American children are not enrolled in effective schools that nurture and support them while simultaneously providing high quality instruction. Waxman (1992) believes that attending schools designated as “at risk” can be considered an adverse situation, a risk factor. He suggests educational resilience must be present for some young people to succeed in the schools they attend. Wang, Haertel, and Walberg (1994) also argue that resilience is critical in some educational contexts because of the environmental adversities some schools present.

Educational risk takes on heightened importance because most studies on resilience point to adolescence as the most risky life stage. Developmentally adolescents are forming identities, developing more abstract thought, and experiencing biological changes that affect their judgments (Erickson, 1960; Piaget, 1963). Recent evidence

from cognitive psychology indicates that chemical changes in the brain contribute to the irrationality, perceived invulnerability, and risk-taking behavior that occur during adolescence (Noguera, 2003). These significant changes by themselves are enough to place adolescents at risk. When harmful social factors enter the equation, adversity and risk are amplified.

National self-report studies indicate that the ages of highest risk for initiation of serious violent behaviors are between 15 and 16 and that the risk of initiating violence after the age of 20 is extremely low. Youth 16 and 17 years of age have the highest rates of participation in serious violent acts. After age 17, participation rates drop significantly, and it is unlikely that persons will become serious violent offenders if they have not initiated such behavior by age 20 (Elliot, 1994). Adolescence can be a turning point for students. Positive experiences that nurture social and emotional well-being can be translated into later life success. Negative experiences, in contrast, can trap students in a life of trouble and hardship. The literature has identified three salient educational risk factors facing African-American youth: the disproportionate placement in special education, limited instructional capacity in many urban schools, and a high concentration of low-income students and families.

**Overrepresentation in Special Education.** Within the area of special education, the research indicates that many African- American children are placed in special education. Over-representation results when a particular sub-group's membership within special education is larger than the percentage of that group in the educational system or within a special education disability category such as learning disability, mental retardation and emotional disturbance (Cicettchi, 1993). African-American males are

more likely than other ethnic groups to be diagnosed with pathological behavior or suffering from a learning disability and more likely to be placed in special education (Milofsky, 1974 & Noguera, 2003). The special education epidemic depicts a larger trend in education where African-Americans males are increasingly placed in special education or alternative progress. Rather than serving as a source of hope and opportunity, some schools are sites where African-American males are marginalized and stigmatized (Meier, 1989).

Data presented in the 2000 Annual Report to Congress on the Implementation of IDEA provided compelling evidence on the problem of African-American males being disproportionately placed in special education. In the 1998-1999 school year, African-American students were 2.9 times as likely as Caucasian students to be labeled mentally retarded. The research further states that African-American children were 1.9 times more likely to be labeled emotionally disturbed and 1.3 times more likely to be labeled as having a learning disability as their Caucasian classmates (Kelly and Emery, 2003 ). As high schools face more pressure to prepare all students for college and the workforce, African-American youth are still less likely than peers to return to general education classrooms once they have been identified as needing special education services. Not being in a regular educational tract, limits opportunities for higher education (Kelly & Emery, 2003).

**Instructional Capacity.** Low instructional capacity in schools attended by many low income minority students is another educational risk factor. Instructional capacity has often been thought of as an individual or groups potential to achieve high performance. Such a conception of capacity is part of many accountability frameworks;

for example, the “highly qualified” requirement of No Child Left Behind (NCLB). In contrast to defining capacity as potential, Corcoran and Goertz (1995) defined instructional capacity as the ability of a school to produce high quality teaching and learning. Quality instruction is affected by the financial, human, and social capital available within schools (Cocoran & Goertz, 1995). Schools with a high concentration of African-American youth are generally lacking in the above sources of capital (Bryk et. al, 2010), thereby increasing the risk factors and limiting educational opportunities for students in these schools.

The funding gap for urban schools is well documented (Ogletree, 2004). The gap is even more severe when taking into account the unmet needs of students growing up in poverty. Restricted by the current funding levels, urban schools have not been able to meet the needs of the growing concentration of poor and minority students and families (Ogletree, 2004). Partly as a result of limited financial capital, students are at greater risk of not having adequate social supports and resources to address their educational, social, and psychological needs such as quality teachers who deliver quality instruction to urban students.

Human capital in the form of teacher quality and the management of instructional effectiveness is also lacking in many urban schools (Goe, 2007; Oden & Kelly, 2009). Evidence suggests that teachers in many urban schools have low expectations, small degree of positive perceptions of students, and low efficacy (Rist, 1970; Alexander, Entwisle, & Thompson, 1987). Limited human capital in urban schools has led to initiatives like the National Board Certification, Teach for America, and the Strategic Management of Human Capital that aim to attract, prepare, and retain effective teachers

in the most hard to staff schools. Low human capital not only increases the risk of poor academic achievement, but it can also affect students' social and emotional well-being (Gutman & Midgley, 1990).

Social capital, like financial and human capital, is productive; that is, relationships and social ties can lead to positive outcomes much like financial and human resources can (Coleman, 1987). Social capital is defined as resources embedded in relationships that are accessible by individuals and groups (Forsyth, Adams, & Hoy, 2011). Relationships and the resources they can provide are often tenuous in urban schools (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Bryk et al. 2010). Children in urban communities are less likely to have the social and emotional supports they need to develop resilience (Wilson, 1987). Schools, therefore, need to fill the social and emotional void left unaddressed by many neighborhoods and families, but without a strong relational network providing the protective factors to offset heightened risk is difficult (Coleman, 1987).

In summary educational risk factors like the overrepresentation of African-American students in special education and weak instructional capacity partly result from the inability of school systems to adapt to concentrated poverty (Coleman, 1987). Concentrated poverty describes a number of economically challenged people all residing in the same location and who all struggle to meet their basic needs (McCloud, 1974). De facto segregation resulting largely from white flight (a term for the demographic trend in which working and middle-class Caucasian American people moved away from the inner-city) has reduced the availability of resources to support the holistic needs of low income families in many urban areas (Coleman, 1987 & McCloud, 1974). Quality



schools can be anchors that keep families connected to neighborhoods and communities, but low test scores, high drop-out rates, high teacher turnover, and other problems show that many large urban school districts in the United States serve their students poorly. These deficiencies have led affluent families to leave cities for the suburbs or to move their children to private schools. When these families move, urban tax bases and economic activity decrease over time, and the average academic quality of the remaining public school students tend to decline. Declining academic performance and educational advancement in urban communities exacerbates the social risk factors that many high-poverty youth face (Rutter, 1987).

### **Social Risk Factors**

Social risk factors include poverty, poor health, and the lack of academic success. These conditions contribute to educational risk as well as to risks outside of schools. Urban, African-American youth grow up surrounded by more poverty, street crime, school drop-outs, mental health problems, and long-term unemployment than middle class children (Baker, 1998). Urban, African-American youth must not only cope with stress associated with adolescence, but they also face challenges of chronic social demands associated with economic deprivation and disadvantage (Franklin, 1982; Gibbs, 1989; Myers, 1982; Rosella & Albrecht, 1993).

**Economic Deprivation.** Economic deprivation refers to the lack of financial resources that individuals experience from low educational attainment and limited financial opportunities. The nature of the current U.S. economy largely necessitates a college degree as a precursor to middle-class wages (National Center for Education Statistics, 2007). Children born into poverty in the United States begin their lives on the

track to deprivation in a number of dimensions (Abley, 2009). Children who are poor are more likely to grow up without a father and have a parent without a college education (Sawhill, 2006), attend low-performing schools (Adler Lent & Figueria-McDonough, 2002), to drop out of school (Hardy, 2006), and experience a teen pregnancy (Berry, Shillington, Peak, & Hohman, 2000). They are also more likely to live in neighborhoods characterized by high crime and drug use that exposes them to violence and criminal activity (Leventhal & Brooks-Gunn, 2004). These factors perpetuate a cycle of weak academic preparation, low college attendance, and low paying jobs. Wilson's (1976) seminal account of poverty in urban communities reveals how concentrated deprivation cuts off individuals from social and human resources that facilitate socialization to a mainstream culture. The absence of mechanisms to socialize individuals to a mainstream or middle class culture can limit access to stable jobs and careers, can lead to harmful self perceptions, and can reduce aspirations (Wilson, 1991). As Wilson and other sociologists argue (see Coleman, 1987), economic deprivation shreds apart the social fabric of communities that enable individuals to take advantage of educational opportunities.

Disadvantaged families lack experiences, social connections and opportunities that limit their ability to choose a particular profession, participate in enrichment activities, and receive the academic support needed for their children. For example, middle-class parents frequently advocate for their children, work to get them placed in advanced programs and provide numerous learning experiences beyond the school day, low income families often miss opportunities because they wait until the school tells them their children need extra services, which they often do not obtain, (Lareau, 2003). Even when opportunities are available, many children and adults in poverty have not

developed the cultural competency to fully maximize opportunities. The solution argued by Wilson (1987) and Dryfoos (1990) is not more money and programs but better social connections and resources, the very conditions these communities lack.

### **Protective Factors**

Within the research, protective factors are commonly referred to as resources that protect individuals from harmful circumstances. Protective factors can offset the harmful effects of risks children and adults encounter in their lives. According to Wolin and Wolin (1993), protective factors serve to buffer children from prevalent risk factors by helping them cope with adversity and develop the emotional fortitude to overcome challenges. In essence, protective factors are safeguards and lifelines for children and adults experiencing hardships. Rutter (1985) described protective factors as “influences that modify, ameliorate, or alter a person’s response to some environmental hazard that predisposes to a maladaptive outcome” (p. 600). Students who are from low socio-economic backgrounds are not only affected by common risks associated with adolescence, they also deal more directly with critical problems that result from their environment such as poverty, homelessness, drug, alcohol and child abuse, and teenage pregnancy (Bank, 1997). Protective factors counterbalance risk factors by providing the social and emotional support children need to deal with their circumstances.

Rutter (1987, 1990) described three purposes of protective factors: to reduce the effects of risks or exposure to risk; to promote self-esteem and self-efficacy; and to provide positive relationships and new opportunities in life. The purpose of protective factors as suggested by Rutter capture the social and psychological interaction that informs resilience. Wolin and Wolin (1983) use evidence from their Project Resilience

study to argue that protective factors within the social environment provide both internal motivation and external support for individuals. For example, relationships formed within schools, churches, peers, and families shape adolescent's attitudes and perceptions about school, work, society, and life.

The importance of a strong relational network and social attachments for resilience is illustrated through studies on American Indian and Alaska Native youth. Peacock (2002) found in his study that native children and youth, though subjected to undue stress and adversity, did not give way to school failure, substance abuse, mental health problems, or juvenile delinquency. These youth benefited from protective factors provided through family (including extended tribal family who shared responsibility of child care), schools, and the community. These protective factors enabled the children to alter or reverse negative outcomes that might have been predicted for them, fostering instead the long-term development of resilience (HeavyRunner & Morris, 1997; Wenzlaff & Biewer, 1996).

Different types of protective factors are needed to address the individual life stressors that many urban, African-American youth face. A few important supports are found within schools, families, and communities.

### **School as a Protective Factor**

In the last decade, the literature on the power of school to influence the outcome for children from high risk environments has burgeoned (Austin, 1991; Brook et al, 1989; Cauce & Srebnik, 1990; Rutter, 1984; Rutter, 1979; Berrueta-Clement, 1984; Coleman & Hoffer, 1987; Comer, 1984; Nelson, 1984; Offord, 1991; Felner et al, 1985;

Ziegler, 1989; Edmunds, 1986). Evidence suggests that school can serve as a critical social support to help children contend with myriad life stressors through supportive relationships with school professionals and school peers (Garmezy, 1991). Many schools have strategically implemented mechanisms that are designed to meet the social and educational needs of high-poverty children. These mechanisms are developed in order to improve social interactions and relationships among students, parents, and teachers (Bryk, et.al, 2010). In particular Forsyth, Adams & Hoy (2011) demonstrate how schools characterized by high collective trust provide the social capital and academic optimism that is needed for educational success. Trusting relationships between teachers and students can mediate the negative effect of poverty on student achievement (Forsyth, Adams & Hoy, 2011; Bryk & Sydner, 2010).

Both protective factor research and research on effective schools clearly identifies the characteristics of schools that provide this source of protection for youth. Those characteristics include schools that have a challenging curriculum, opportunities for students to participate in extracurricular activities and opportunities for relationships to be built.

### **Community and Family as a Protective Factor**

Protective factors that are most often associated with resilience include supportive relationships with adults and (Werner & Smith, 1982, 1992, 2001), positive life events (Dixon & Reid, 2000; Luthar, 1991), and spirituality (Henderson, 1998; Wolin, Muller, Taylor, & Wolin and Wolin, 1993). Within many strong African-American families there was an understanding that there was a level of poverty experienced but no one in the family knew how difficult it was because of the strength of the parent(s). Within many

high-poverty households the guardian(s) work closely with government and community agencies in order to get the additional support needed to provide for the family. They also view school as a protective factor and the relationship formed with their child's teacher and school adds value to their family.

Resilient children also tend to have parents who are concerned with their children's education, who participate in the educational process, who direct their children's interest and goals, and who support their support their emotional needs (Coleman, 1987). Another important characteristic of resilient children is having at least one significant adult in their lives (Clark, 1983; Fine & Schwebel, 1991). Children seem to do better in school and adjusting to life circumstances when there is a fit between temperament, personality, and needs of the children and the style of parenting they receive (Clark, 1983; Fine & Schwebel, 1991). This fit is best achieved when parents provide the love and support (Pruett, Williams, Insabella, & Little, 2003) and become attachment figures for their children (Dolby, 1982). Parent involvement literature shows that parenting style and expectations have a stronger effect on learning and achievement than other parent behaviors assumed to be related to student performance (e.g. monitoring homework, attendance at school events, or contacting teachers (Fan & Chen, 2001). Fan & Chen (2001) in their meta-analysis of parent involvement literature found that parents who reinforce strong expectations for academic success and future careers support their children's learning and development. Jeymes (2007) in his meta-analysis of 52 studies in urban schools found that parents demonstrating a supportive and helpful parenting style had a large effect on student achievement.

In short, Herbert (1999) found that supportive adults at home, at school, and in the community; a rigorous and challenging educational experience that meets the academic, social, and cultural needs of the child; opportunities for continuous and enriching activities; a network of achieving peers; and a strong belief in and sense of oneself are determinants of resilience (Herbert, 1999). It is difficult to attribute resilience to any one protective factor, but what is true is that without supportive relationships in either the home, school, or community, children will encounter enormous risks that may be too difficult to overcome.

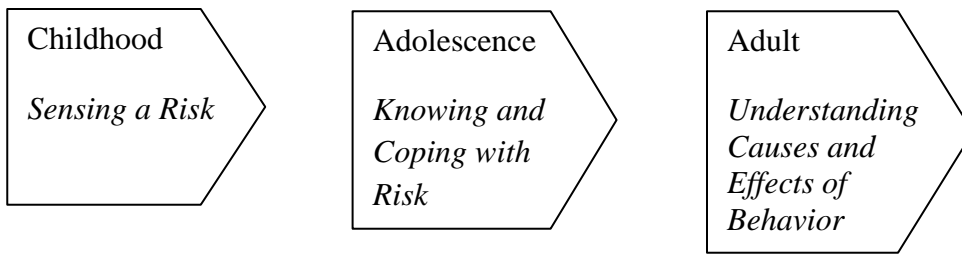
## **Stages of Resilience**

Resilience is not an innate personality trait possessed by some individuals but not by others (Masten, 2006). As an emotional state that is shaped by social experiences, resilience like other human conditions (e.g. moral development) is believed to follow a developmental process. Stages of resilience are naturally occurring and affect behavior of individuals as they advance through life (Masten, 1990). Individuals may be more or less resilient at different points in their lives depending on the interaction and accumulation of personal, behavioral, and social factors (Masten, 1990). Risk factors and protective factors are experienced and internalized differently during childhood, adolescence, and adulthood. Wolin and Wolin (1993) argue that the resilience process aligns with developmental stages in that physiological and emotional response to risk and protective factors change as individuals move through childhood, adolescence, and adulthood.

As Table Two illustrates, the early development of resilience manifests in children as they begin to sense that harmful behaviors or conditions are not normal and can be injurious to their well-being. During adolescence, sensing evolves into knowing that problems are present and finding ways to cope with harmful conditions within their social environment. In adulthood, individuals begin to understand both causes and effects of their behavior (Wolin & Wolin, 1993). Each stage of resilience is defined by the ways that a risk factor ( e.g. domestic violence) is experienced differently by children, adolescents, and adults. While children can sense the dangers of a risk, it is generally not until adolescence before they cope with the circumstance (either positively or negatively). Adults are better able to discern both causes and effects of coping behaviors.



**Table Two: Stages of Resilience**



**Childhood Resilience**

Research on childhood resilience provides detail of the cognitive and emotional processes children experience as different challenges arise and the way in which they handle stressors (Masten, 1990). Children surrounded by risk have an undeveloped sense that life in a troubled family is strange, untrustworthy, or not quite right (Wolin & Wolin, 1993). Cognitively, children can sense that something is abnormal in their lives, but they are often incapable of knowing and understanding causes and effects of the problems. Additionally, children experience fear and anxiety, but they are not conscious of the emotional turmoil such experiences can cause (Wolin & Wolin, 1993).

Understanding how children sense and react to risk can be illustrated with the example of domestic violence. A child who grows up in a home with an abusive parent can sense that there are some very disturbing and uncomfortable times in the home. Sensing threats of violence often leads children to withdraw to a safe place to avoid harm and to protect themselves from abuse. Fear that accompanies a sense of risk and leads a child to protect him- or herself by finding a safe place is the first step in resilience. Protective behaviors at this stage are unconscious and based on more of a biological than cognitive response (Wolin & Wolin, 1993).

## **Adolescent Resilience**

Whereas children can sense risk, adolescents begin to know and expect certain behaviors and conditions as they develop. Adolescents also build-up protective mechanisms as means to cope with risk. Evidence from developmental psychology suggests that adolescents interpret their world differently from children and adults; they have distinctly different perspectives, values, and understandings about harmful experiences and stressors of life (Connell, 1971). The child who senses danger and risk grows into the adolescent who possesses systematic knowledge of risk in her life and the preferred mechanisms to cope with such risk (Wolin & Wolin, 1993). While the child seeks safety and protection from risk, adolescent resilience takes the form of psychological safety through relationships that satisfy emotional needs (Ryan & Deci, 2001; Wolin & Wolin, 1993).

The transition from childhood to adolescence is challenging for any young person facing harmful social conditions only compounds the difficulty. Continuing with the domestic violence example, the adolescent who has intimate knowledge of the risk seeks psychological protection through her social environment. Protective factors can be positive such as a church youth group or a sports team, but protective factors can also be harmful such as drug and alcohol use, smoking, gang involvement, or promiscuous behavior (Jessor, 1986). Positive coping mechanisms serve to promote positive behaviors such as self-reflection, relationship building, or involvement in healthy activities, which can increase self-efficacy and social emotional well-being. In contrast, negative coping mechanisms are likely to lead to harmful behaviors that intensify risk. Adolescents expand and strengthen their sense of efficacy by learning how to deal successfully with

potentially troublesome situations in which they are inexperienced, as well by experiencing advantageous life events.

### **Adult Resilience**

While the resilient child senses harm and seeks physical protection and the resilient adolescent seeks psychological safety through positive coping mechanisms, the resilient adult understands causes of risk and potential effects of behavior. Adults are not immune to negative emotions or anger, but they attempt to listen, understand, and respect the reasons for negative actions more so than adolescents do (Golby & Bretherton, 1999). For example, adults who are addicted to drugs can pinpoint and identify the turning point in their lives that led to the substance abuse; they may be physically unable to stop the abuse, but they are aware of causes and consequences of their actions. Resilient adults can anticipate imminent risk and take steps to prevent harmful situations from occurring. Further, if risk is present, they have the coping mechanisms to address stress in positive ways (Wolin & Wolin, 1993). Continuing with the domestic violence example, a resilient adult can recognize the warning signs of an abusive relationship and end the relationship before harm occurs (Wolin & Wolin, 1993).

In conclusion, risk and protective factors are experienced differently by children, adolescents, and adults. Resilient children sense trouble and seek physical protection. Resilient adolescents are aware of the risk and seek psychological safety through positive protective factors. Resilient adults can understand causes and effects of behaviors and take preventive steps to avoid harmful situations. Wolin and Wolin's (1993) stages of resilience provide a useful framework to understand how resilience evolves in individuals through different life stages. It is also useful to situate the role of self-efficacy in

resilience. Because self-efficacy is a personal attribute that develops through social experiences, its onset begins to manifest during the adolescent years as youth start to form their identities and as they become more knowledgeable about their abilities (Bandura, 1986).

### **Self-Efficacy**

According to Bandura (1982), self-efficacy makes a difference in how people think, feel, and act. Self-efficacy sets the foundation for further research into how the educational, social, and behavioral experiences of youth growing up in poverty shape resilient behavior. Persons with low self-efficacy typically have low self-esteem, and harbor pessimistic thoughts about their accomplishments and personal development (Jessor, 1986). In contrast, a person with high self-efficacy chooses to perform more challenging tasks and is persistent in the face of challenges (Bandura, 1986). Bandura's (1997) social cognitive theory provides an explanation for how risk factors, protective factors, and self-efficacy work together to shape resilience. It is proposed (Jessor, 1986) that self-efficacy leads an impoverished youth to experience resilience. The following section define self-efficacy, describe sources of perceived self- efficacy, and synthesizes evidence on the effects of efficacy in order to form a theoretical basis for the role of self-efficacy in shaping to resilience.

#### **Self -Efficacy Defined**

According to Bandura (1997), *self-efficacy is the ability to persevere in challenging situations. It shapes the decision or outcome that an individual faces based on one of the four efficacy judgments.* Bandura (1997) argued that expectations of self-efficacy determine whether instrumental action will be initiated, how much effort an individual

will exert to achieve a goal, and the extent to which motivated behavior will be sustained in the face of risk factors. The dominant role self-efficacy plays in behavior underscores its importance for resilience, making an understanding of its formation important for educators and other adults who work with youth in poverty.

According to Bandura and Staples (1998), there are four major sources of information used by individuals when forming self-efficacy judgments. These are presented in the order of their relative effect on efficacy:

1. Performance accomplishments—past mastery experience that strengthens confidence in oneself;
2. Vicarious experience—observing other positive and/or professional people and emulating what is being seen;
3. Social persuasion—receiving pressure and encouragement from others in order to build belief in oneself;
4. Physiological and emotional states—how an emotion and/or situation is handled; how life stressors are dealt with.

**Performance Accomplishments.** Performance accomplishments are also referred to in the literature as past mastery experiences; these are successful experiences that resulted in an individual achieving his/her intended outcomes (Bandura, 1997).

Successful experiences lead to heightened confidence, and more confidence motivates behavior that is likely to result in achievement. To illustrate, a student who performs well in math and scores high on standardized math exams is likely to be more confident in her math ability than a student who struggles in the subject. The confident student is much more likely to work hard at math and to achieve continued success than the student

who has low efficacy for math. In short, past success fuels confidence for future behaviors that can lead to additional achievement in the future (Bandura, 1996).

**Vicarious Experience.** Vicarious experiences happen when an individual observes and then attempts to emulate certain desired behaviors. Vicarious emulation typically has a weaker effect than does actual performance because vicariously-induced self-efficacy can be negated by subsequent performance failure (Bandura, 1996). That stated, empirical evidence upholds the importance of vicarious experience for efficacy. Observing others perform a similar task at a high level gives an individual confidence to execute similar behaviors in the future (Bandura, 1997). Ford (1994) found that African-American youth with access to positive role-models and adults within the home, school, and/or community had higher levels of efficacy than did African-American youth without access to these individuals and the vicarious experiences they provide. Seeing people performing a behavior or having success can reinforce confidence in one's ability to execute behaviors that lead to desired outcomes (Bandura, 1986, 1997)

**Social Persuasion.** Social persuasion refers to encouragement and discouragement from others. The influence of peers is especially potent among adolescents because peers contribute significantly to their socialization, views of themselves, and choices they make (Herbert, 1999). For adolescents, socialization and behavior is heavily influenced by their relationships with peers. Students who feel they are part of their school, treated fairly by peers, and have good relationships with teachers are more emotionally healthy and less inclined to use drug and alcohol abuse, have suicidal thoughts and attempts, and to be involved in violence than those who do not have those experiences (Jessor, 1986).

**Physiological and Emotional States.** Physiological and emotional states refer to beliefs, feelings, and affect (Bandura, 1997). Success in managing problem situations instills a strong belief in one's capabilities that provides staying power in the face of difficulties. For example, youth who are in control of their emotional states are better able to cope with hardships than youth who lack emotional stability. Feelings of trust, competence, and internal locus of control, hope, and faith can lead to higher efficacy. In contrast, anxiety, stress, self-doubt, and hopelessness diminish efficacy.

### **Effects of Efficacy**

Efficacy beliefs lead to purposive action by individuals, and these actions have consequences for goal attainment. If efficacy was not such a powerful motivator for quality performance and future outcomes then its potential role in resilience would not be great. As it stands, efficacy has been found to have direct effects on performance outcomes (Bandura, 1997) and indirect effects through other personal and behavioral characteristics (Bandura, 1997).

People with high self-efficacy are better equipped to perform well in school due to beliefs about their own capabilities and their expectations for future academic success. Students who have a low sense of efficacy, in contrast, are vulnerable to disengagement from school (Meece, Wigfield, & Eccles, 1990.) Herbert's (1999) study of 18 culturally diverse high-achieving students in an urban high school found that high efficacy for academic success contributed to students' academic attainment and motivated them to set challenging goals. These students experienced risk factors, challenges, and set-backs, but they were able to achieve success partly because of the efficacy developed from past

mastery experiences and interaction with peers and teachers who encouraged them to excel (Herbert, 1999).

The relationship between efficacy and academic achievement has been found to exist within all educational levels (i.e. elementary, middle, high school, and college) and across many different subject areas (Bandura, 1986, 1997), suggesting that efficacy is a critical determinant of academic performance. Instead of testing the effects of efficacy on achievement, Reis, Colbert, and Herbert (2005) studied behavioral characteristics present when efficacy is low. They found students with low self-efficacy were often bored with school and the curriculum, were negatively influenced by their peers, and had developed few strategies for constructively dealing with problems. Reis, Colbert, and Herbert (2005) used an analogy of a student climbing a crowded staircase to illustrate the importance of efficacy for success. A student with low efficacy when confronted by a crowded staircase will decide it is too difficult and walk back down, but a student with high efficacy with the support of others will push through the crowd to reach the top of the stairs.

While the evidence on the relationship between efficacy and academic success is well established, the evidence linking efficacy and resilience is more theoretical than empirical. Rutter (1987) is considered one of the leading researchers of African-American resilience. He identified self-esteem and self-efficacy as one of four protective processes that foster resilience. Self-efficacy is developed through positive interactions with peers or adults and in successful accomplishments of a task, whether academic, musical, artistic, or athletic (Rutter, 1987). As African-American, high poverty youth encounter trials and hardships, perceived self-efficacy is likely to affect their judgments



of how well they can execute a course of action required to deal with potential challenges (Bandura, 1982). Self-efficacy judgments, whether accurate or faulty, influence choice of activities and future behavior (Bandura, 1977), and it is a pattern of behavior in the face of hardships that determines if a person is resilient or not. The link between efficacy and resilience that Rutter (1987) established is based on general knowledge about the effects of efficacy, not on specific evidence about the role of efficacy in shaping resilient behavior.

To summarize when a child manages to thrive in spite of adverse environmental circumstances, such as violence in the neighborhood or extreme poverty, it is reasonable to examine healthy relationships for clues in explaining the child's resilience (Gribble, 1993). The sources of efficacy and the protective factors undergirding resilience share many similar characteristics. Additionally, because efficacy is so strongly related to behaviors necessary for goal attainment, it has likely consequences for resilient behavior. Social cognitive theory is used as a lens in the next chapter to better understand the plausible relationship between efficacy and resilience.

## **CHAPTER III**

### **CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**

#### **Social Cognitive Theory and the Formation of Resilience**

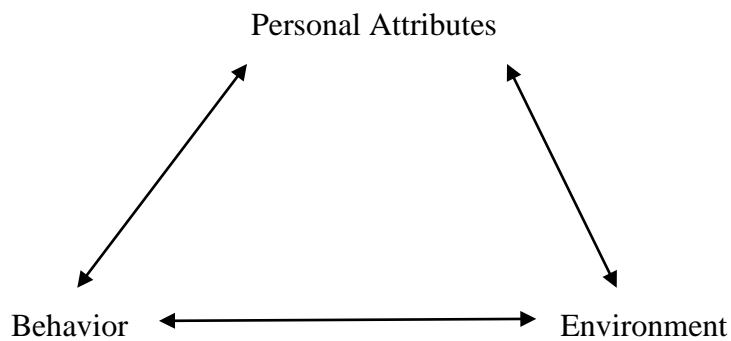
##### **Introduction**

The study of resilience began with an investigation of social and personal factors that result in adaptive outcomes in the presence of adversity (Masten, 1990). Resilience research is rooted in studies on psychopathology, poverty, and traumatic stress (Cicchetti & Garmezy, 1993). Garmezy (1971, 1991) serves as the best starting point for modern research in resilience as he and others began to examine not just perverse behavior under adverse circumstances but also how individuals overcome risk factors to achieve personal growth and success. Recall that resilience is shaped by risk factors and protective factors. Risk factors are harmful social conditions that affect learning and development of children (Bempechat, 1995). Protective factors are social and environmental supports that enable children and youth to overcome the harmful risk factors in their lives (Hawkins, 1992). The two interdependent properties of resilience emerged from research that addressed ways in which individuals who are exposed to multiple life tragedies (e.g., death, poverty, casualties, illnesses etc.) are able to transcend adversity and lead productive and healthy lives. Personal factors, such as efficacy, are important contributors of resilience, but little is known about the specific role personal factors play in resilient behavior. This chapter uses social cognitive theory to explain the relationship between risk factors, protective factors, and self-efficacy.

## Social Cognitive Theory

Social cognitive theory, introduced in the field of education in 1986 by Albert Bandura, explains human development and the basic causes and mechanisms of human behavior. Beliefs about one's competence to successfully perform a task can affect motivation, interest, and achievement (Bandura, 1997). How people acquire and maintain certain behavioral patterns depends on the interaction of environmental, personal, and behavioral factors (Bandura, 1997). Bandura (1986) referred to this interaction as triadic reciprocity (see Figure 1) because behavior, personal, and environmental elements affect each other (Bandura, 1989, 1999). These factors interact to influence how people behave, what they believe, what they experience, and what actions they choose to take (Bandura, 1989). This section explores in detail the three interdependent elements of social cognitive theory—personal attributes, behavior, and social environment.

Figure 1: Triadic Reciprocity of Factors Shaping Human Behavior



Personal attributes include human expectations, beliefs, and emotional states (Bandura, 1989). Beliefs, attitudes, outcome expectancy, and perceived social norms (Sorensen, 2007) make up personal dispositions that inform purposive action of individuals. Of these beliefs, Bandura (1989) considered self-efficacy to be the most

salient personal factor in determining behavior. Personal factors are influenced by the two other elements of the triad: human behavior and environmental conditions.

Environmental influences consist of social influences that convey information and “activate emotional reactions through modeling, instruction, and social persuasion” (Bandura, 1986, as cited in Bandura, 1989, p.3).

Environmental influences account for social factors that shape human behavior and development. Examples of social factors include past experiences, vicarious learning (Sorensen, Anderson, Speaker, & Vilches, 2007), and support from others in the form of encouragement and social resources (Dilorio, McCarty, & Denzmore, 2006). Mastery experiences are important contributors of behavior, for they enhance efficacy and build a sense of resilience in the face of challenges and difficulties. Quality behavior and performance are maximized when the social environment supports psychological needs of competence, autonomy, and relatedness, but when the environment neglects one of these needs, quality performances is likely to suffer (Ryan & Deci, 2000). As evidence on risk factors and protective factors suggest, social conditions within the environment are a strong determinant of personal factors and performance.

The behavioral element of social cognitive theory is shaped by motivation and internal control (Bandura, 1989). Exercising self-regulatory control over one’s developmental life-course requires personal agency and social support (Bandura, 1989). Social supports enhance a sense of resilience and give incentive, meaning, and worth to actions that people take (Bandura, 1989). In this way, social supports increase an individual’s ability to control factors through self-regulated behavior (Bandura, 1989). Behavior and the social environment have a reciprocal relationship: behavior alters

environmental conditions and environmental conditions in turn alter behavior (Bandura, 1989). Examples of the reciprocal relationship given by Bandura (1989) include situations such as a class lecture influencing students who attend class and parents praising children when they do something worthy of praise. In these examples, the social environment is dependent upon how students in the class behave and how children react to parental praise. In effect, people are both products and producers of their environments (Bandura, 1989).

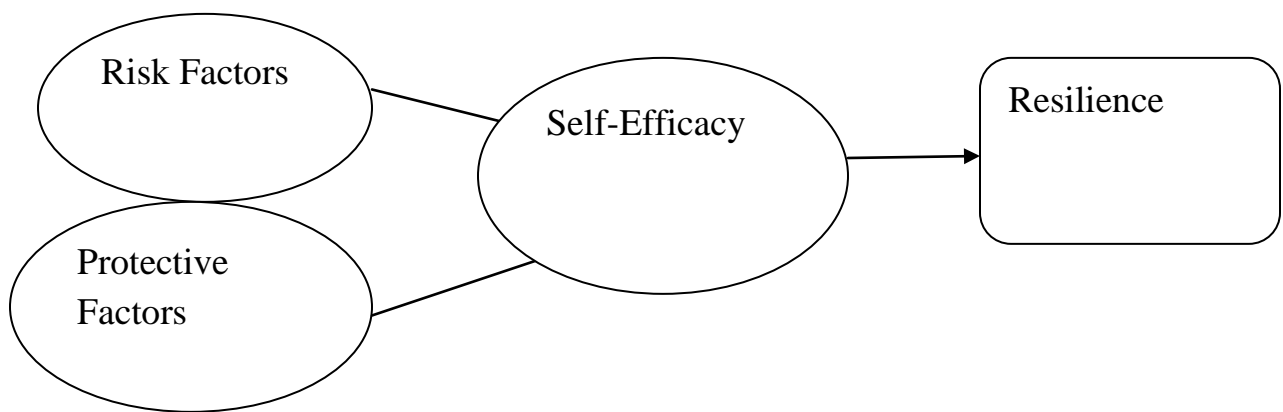
In summary, social cognitive theory explains actions as a function of environmental, personal and behavioral conditions. Behavior is not simply the result of the environment and the person, just as the environment is not simply the result of the person and behavior (Glanz et al, 2002). These are three interdependent elements that shape beliefs and actions and are influential sources of resilient behavior. Next, the compatibility between risk factors, protective factors, and sources of efficacy are explicated in order to better understand the role of self-efficacy in the formation of resilience.

### **Formation of Resilience**

As social cognitive theory suggests, resilience, like other behaviors, is affected by conditions in the social environment and personal attributes of individuals. As such, it makes theoretical sense to argue, as Rutter (1987) and Bandura (1986) have, that self-efficacy is every bit as important for resilience as social factors. Even though Bandura (1986, 1997) argues that social conditions and personal factors maintain a reciprocal relationship, it seems likely that in the formation of resilience, protective factors in the social environment can operate through self-efficacy to inform resilience. Figure 2

illustrates the theoretical relationship among risk factors, protective factors, self-efficacy, and resilience. Risk and protective factors are social elements that either contribute to or diminish self-efficacy, and self-efficacy in turn is a powerful motive that underlies resilient behavior. Support for the model comes from the compatibility between protective factors and sources of efficacy information.

Figure 2: Generalized Model of the Formation of Resilience



The multiple risk factors that impoverished individuals face may result in low academic performance, lack of motivation, and eventually an unsuccessful life. *Risk factor* is a term that has been adapted from the medical field and used to predict vulnerability to a range of negative life outcomes, including school failure and/or dropping out of school, drug abuse, failed relationships, delinquency/criminal activities, unemployment, ill health, and early death (Rutter, 1980; Dryfoos, 1990; Hawkins, 1992). When immersed in protective factors, impoverished individuals are given opportunities to overcome adversity. Risk factors and protective factors have an opposite effect on self-efficacy. That is, exposure to risk can lessen efficacy judgments while exposure the protective factors can provide the necessary sources of efficacy information. The specification of self-efficacy as an antecedent of resilience is based on the behavioral

effect of efficacy and the association between protective factors and sources of efficacy information (Bandura, 1997; Rutter, 1987).

All individuals experience risk to a greater or lesser extent, and the exposure to harmful conditions that increase risk has consequences for the type and level of protective factors needed in children’s lives. Children possess the potential for resilience, but the degree of resilience they develop is dependent on the interaction between protective factors and personal attributes like self-efficacy (Tusaie & Dyer, 2004). Table 3 connects specific risk factors to sources of efficacy and sources of efficacy to protective factors in order to illustrate the interdependence of these components. Social and economic supports can provide positive vicarious experiences, rigorous challenging educational experiences can lead to performance accomplishment, peer choice and peer influence can provide social persuasion, and positive self-beliefs are needed for psychological states. The alignment between risk factors, protective factors, and sources of efficacy is described next.

Table Three: Risk, Efficacy and Protective Factor Alignment

<b>Risk Factors</b>	<b>Efficacy Sources</b>	<b>Protective Factors</b>
Social Risks Educational Risks	Vicarious Experience	Social and Economic Support
Social Risks Educational Risks	Performance Accomplishment	Rigorous and Challenging Educational Experiences  Continuous Engagement
Social Risks Educational Risks	Social Persuasion	Peer Choice and Peer Influence
Social Risks Educational Risks	Psychological and Emotional States	Belief in Self

## **Social and Economic Support - Vicarious Experience**

Poverty, crime, and a weak social network are risk factors that affect behavior through their effects on individuals' aspirations, sense of efficacy, and other self-regulatory factors (Baldwin, Sameroff, & Seifer, 1989; Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara, & Pastorelli, 1996, 2001; Elder & Ardel, 1992). Social and economic support can counter-balance the harmful effects of poverty through relationship building, economic support, and a healthy living environment (Hawkins, 1992). Caring relationships with adults are one of the most effective protective factors for fostering resilience in adolescents. Research shows that developing relationships with caring adults protects "at-risk" youth against becoming involved in violence. The recent National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health found that young people's sense of connection to their parents and other family members was the most consistent protective factor across all the health outcomes. Teens with parents who are physically present in the home are less likely to engage in violent behavior (Williams, 1994).

Social and economic support aligns with vicarious experience because impoverished youth are truly affected by what they see and experience. Garbarino (1992) argues children in general are at risk because of the powerfully negative effect of people they attempt to emulate. An important characteristic of resilient children is having at least one significant adult in their life who leads a productive, successful life that the child can see and admire (Noguera, 2003). Despite the strong effect of social and economic risk factors that impoverished youth encounter, a positive adult can enable a child to pattern his/her behaviors around values, behaviors, and beliefs associated with academic and personal success. Vicarious experiences can set the foundation for African-American



youth to gain confidence in their ability to achieve academic success, personal goals, and economic stability (Garbarino, 1992). In the absence of positive adult figures to learn from, resilience to overcome the challenges of living in communities with concentrated poverty and crime is likely to be difficult to engender.

### **Educational Experiences – Performance Accomplishment**

Some risks African-American youth face relate to the lack of a quality education, teachers untrained in urban education, and an over identification for special education. Children and adolescents in poverty are placed at greater risk when their schools lack the necessary financial, human, and social capital to meet their cognitive and psychological needs. Schools with strong instructional capacity, well-trained teachers who demonstrate high-expectations for all students, and environments based on academic optimism can level the playing field of academic and occupational opportunity (Connell, 1994; Hoy, Tarter, Woolfolk Hoy, 2006). A rigorous and challenging educational experience is a protective factor that fosters critical thinking skills and academic competencies adolescents need to be successful (Waxman, 1992). Research on urban schools research suggests that schools can narrow the achievement gap (Bryk et al, 2010; Garmezy, 1991; Zeichner & Noguera, 2003).

Rigorous and challenging educational experiences align with performance accomplishment because such experiences instill in adolescents the confidence needed to achieve future academic success. Performance accomplishment (i.e., mastery experiences) is the most powerful source of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1986, 1997). Quite simply, past academic success begets future success. Adolescents with a strong sense of efficacy for learning are more resilient, are motivated to achieve academic goals and are

better able to resist the adverse academic influence of low-achieving peers (Bandura, Barbaranell, Caparara & Pastorelli, 1996).

### **Continuous Engagement – Social Persuasion**

Continuous engagement is defined as the influence of extracurricular activities on the development of achievement, competence, and other correlates of resilience such as optimism and school engagement (Masten & Coatsworth, 1998). Garmezy (1991) believes that resilience happens as a result of continuous positive interaction, feedback, and accomplishment. The protective factor of continuous engagement refers to opportunities for youth to have access to extracurricular activities and experiences that expose them to different realities. Risk factors such as a lack of social support, limited enrichment activities, and nominal opportunities pose major threats to the success of youth in poverty. Access to constructive activities and opportunities, however, can offset the harmful effects of limited experiences and reduced opportunities (Luthar, 2000).

Engagement in enrichment activities aligns with social persuasion because students who are at risk of failure can benefit from continuous engagement with role models, exposure to new and different experiences, and access to social supports (Condly, 2006). For example, if an impoverished youth joins an after school chess club, she has access to a social network that can keep her safe, address her need for belonging, and can establish a consistent support system. Research has found that when students are offered opportunities to acquire skills and engage in social activities, their problem solving, communication, and analytical skills improve (Nettles, 1991). Participation in community networks, neighborhood associations, religious and school organizations help students to develop strong formal and informal ties with adults. It also increases

adolescents' sense of connection and self-efficacy while raising self-esteem, and a belief in one's own capabilities (Bempechat, 1985).

### **Peer Influence – Social Persuasion.**

Peer influence relates to pressure of peers to influence decision-making and behaviors (Waxman, 1992). A lack of positive personal connections, poor choice of friends, and negative peer influence are several of the risks that youth face (Garmezy, 1991). Dryfoos (1990) found that high achieving ninth graders in an inner-city school had larger social networks with peers who were academically motivated than low achieving students. Additionally, she found that changes in adolescents' academic motivation were predicted by their peer group membership at the start of the year (Dryfoos, 1990). Students affiliated with groups high in academic motivation changed positively, whereas those in less-motivated groups changed negatively.

Peer influence is mostly related to social persuasion because it operates extensively through relational networks. Students in relational networks tend to be similar in many ways and perceived similarity enhances peer influence (Cairns, Cairns, & Neckerman, 1989; Hamm, 2000; Ryan, 2000). Peer influence on self-efficacy also occurs because adolescents are unfamiliar with many tasks and have little information other than their friends' behaviors from which to gauge their own competencies (Reis, Colbert, Hebert, 2005). Positive influence by peers is often more persuasive and has a greater effect on adolescents than connections with adults.

### **Belief in Self – Psychological and Emotional States**

Hopelessness defines the attitude of many adolescents in urban centers (Condly, 2006). A young person who is not optimistic about the future faces greater risk for

failure than one who has a positive outlook. Beliefs about the future affect goals, goal setting, initiative, and positive decisions (Mendez et al., 2002). Optimism in contrast, is a hopeful outlook about the future and can mitigate the harmful effects of many risk factors (Condly, 2006).

Belief in self aligns with physiological and emotional states that underpin self-efficacy beliefs. Research has shown that resilient adults typically attribute their status to a dogged determinism that they could conquer their circumstances and that they had inner resources to succeed (Staudinger, Marsiske, & Baltes, 1993; Watt, David, Ladd, & Shamos, 1995; Werner, 1989, 1993, 1995). Such perceptions are observable indicators of self-efficacy. It is normal for children to see adversity as a cause of problems. More resilient children who have high levels of self-efficacy shift blame away from external factors and toward their own internal agency (Condly, 2006). Emotional stability is a major compensatory factor that remains a robust determinant of positive behavior in the face of various stressors and challenges. McMillian and Reed (1994) described resilient, at-risk students as those who have a set of personality characteristics, dispositions, and beliefs that promote their academic success regardless of their backgrounds or current circumstances.

In conclusion, youth who are from low socio-economic backgrounds are not only affected by socio-cultural, demographical, and educational challenges, but they also deal more directly with critical problems such as negative peer influence and a feeling of apathy due to their unfortunate living conditions (Banks, 1997). Protective factors within the educational and social environment, however, can offset risk factors by evoking in adolescents the self-efficacy that is needed to persevere through challenging

circumstances. As demonstrated in the preceding section, these protective factors function as sources of efficacy information that are cognitively processed to shape resilient behavior (Reis, 2005).

## **Chapter IV**

### **Research Methods**

The purpose of this study was to add to the understanding of resilience by exploring the role of self-efficacy in the lives of African-American Adults who overcame concentrated poverty to reach academic and career aspirations. Few researchers have studied how some youth, especially urban, African-American adolescents develop into well-functioning and relatively healthy individuals in the face of adversity (Cicchetti & Garnezy, 1993; Luthar, 1991; Nettles & Pleck, 1994). This study adds to existing literature because it explored factors of resilience through the lived experiences of adults as they progressed through life stages.

### **Background of the Study**

The study involved six participants (3 males and 3 female) who once resided in Green Country, Oklahoma. Each participant was African-American and grew up in an impoverished home and neighborhood within North Green country. The participants' ages ranged from 30-37. All participants had graduated from college, were working in their chosen professional career and demonstrated the ability to consistently lead a productive life. Adult participants were selected based on the research conducted by Wolin and Wolin (1983) regarding adulthood being the stage in which the individuals know and understand their risk and resilient life experiences.

To understand the social context of the participants' upbringing, it is necessary to briefly explore the history of North Green country. An inner-city urban community named Greenwood flourished in North Green country during the oil boom. It was the largest and wealthiest of Oklahoma black communities and was known as *Black Wall*

*Street*. The North Green country community was a hotbed of jazz and blues in the 1920's and shared many characteristics as the Harlem Renaissance. In 1921, Greenwood was the scene of the worst race riot in United States history. At least thirty-six African-Americans, (unofficial accounts place the number much higher) were killed. Thirty-five blocks of businesses and residences were burned. Greenwood eventually recovered, and two blocks have been restored and are part of the Greenwood Historical District (Johnson, 1998). The race riots were a critical turning point for North Green country and triggered a lot of the economic decline.

Green country like urban cities across the country has experienced the social and economic problems of de facto segregation. Whites began to move from north and downtown Green country during the 1940s and 50's. White flight resulted in a change in financial resources within the urban area of Green country and many high poverty blacks could only receive housing vouchers from the Green country Housing Authority for homes located on the north side while whites moved to the southern parts of Green country.

According to McCloud (1974), education is one of the most important services provided by urban and local governments. Green country Public Schools District started to experience a decline in educational services much like many urban school districts who struggled to cope with the growing concentration of an impoverished community. Perceived deficits, services and schools led affluent families to leave Green country for the suburbs or to move their children to private schools. When these families moved, urban tax bases and economic activity was reduced. When more high-achieving students from Green country moved to private schools, the average academic quality of the remaining public school students declined, which reduced the quality of

the education received in the Green country Public Schools (McCloud, 1974). For all of these reasons, education reform had emerged as a key issue in urban areas (McCloud, 1974). Low income housing and a lack of jobs and resources had resulted in concentrated poverty and despair in North Green country which ultimately had led to crime and oppression (Johnson, 1998).

Achievement data reported as part of the 2000 census is characteristic of conditions in the North Green country community when the participants were growing up. For the population of 25 years old and over in North Green country, 81.4% have attained a high school diploma or higher, 11.5% have attained a bachelor's degree or higher and only 3.3% have attained a graduate or professional degree (Hersey, 2008). Although the statistics within South Green country were slightly more favorable, the data show that South Green country residents attained a trade and worked jobs that pay a more lucrative salary than the residents of North Green country. Within the high poverty, urban area of North Green country, the crime rate exceeded the national average in every area from rape to assault and burglary (Hersey, 2008). There are many health concerns within North Green country as the Green country World indicates that the 74126 zip code (the area where the highest premature death rate and a 14 year life expectancy graph (Hersey, 2008; Tyler, 2008).

### **Research Design**

A multiple case study approach was chosen for this study. Yin (2009) indicates that a multiple case study design shows different perspectives on an issue of interest and uses replication of protocols to examine emerging themes across different cases selected for this research. The study focused on six African-Americans adults who overcame poverty to achieve academic and professional success. By using a case-study approach, the study focused on resilience in the context of African-Americans raised in North



Green country. Participants were selected because all six grew up in North Green country and each struggled socially, emotionally and economically but eventually were still able to graduate college, establish professional careers and live a stable life.

The following research questions guided the study of resilience and efficacy:

- 1) What protective factors contributed to the success of resilient African-American adults?
- 2) How did protective factors and self-efficacy interact to shape their resilience?
- 3) What role did self-efficacy play in fostering resilience in African-American adults?

### **Data Collection**

Purposeful sampling was used to select participants for the study. Patton (2002) defines purposeful sampling by explaining that participants are selected because they are information rich. That is, participants possess information and experiences relevant to the phenomenon. These participants all grew up in an impoverished home and community. Five of six participants grew up in a single parent household and they are all of African-American decent. Data collection included one-on-one open ended interviews, a focus group interview, a reflection journal, artifacts taken from a childhood experience that speaks to resilience and field notes. The lived experiences and insights of the interviewees were described through the interview, and the interviewer tried to gain access to the world of the subject and his/her perspective about growing up in North Green country (Rubin & Rubin, 1995; Kvale, 1996).

**Open-Ended Interview.** Open-ended interviews are interviews that allow for participants to answer questions in detail and elaborate on the given response (Seidman

2006). Most participants were interviewed three times; however, due to two of the participants being extremely detailed and thorough, there was not a need for additional interviews. According to the Seidman's (2006) interview method, the first interview established the context of the participants' experience (focused life history). The second interview allowed participants to reconstruct the details of their experience within the context in which it occurred (the details of experience). The third interview encouraged participants to reflect on the meaning their experiences held for them (reflection on the meaning). Open-ended interviews ranged from 1 to 2 hours. Four of the six interviews were held at the local library, the other two were held at a school work site, and one within a participant's home. All of the interviews were audio-taped and transcribed.

**Focus Group.** The focus group is a gathering of all participants in order for an interview to take place within the collective group (Seidman, 2006). The focus group enabled the participants to reflect on their experiences while creating a communicative and experiential bond with other participants (Merton, Fiske, & Kendall, 1990). The intent of the focus group interview questions were to observe the dynamics of the participant's interaction as shared similarities and differences in their experiences.

The focus group was well attended with five out of six participants present. Keith, Jean, Cheree, Monta and Rejoice (pseudo names) were the five participants in attendance. The focus group was conducted at a restaurant. All participants received a free meal for their participation. When all of the participants arrived, the agenda was explained before starting the focus group discussion. The interview was originally set for 2 hours but due to the personal nature of the topic, the participants grew very comfortable with each

other's company and the interview lasted for 3 hours and 10 minutes. The interview was transcribed and member checked.

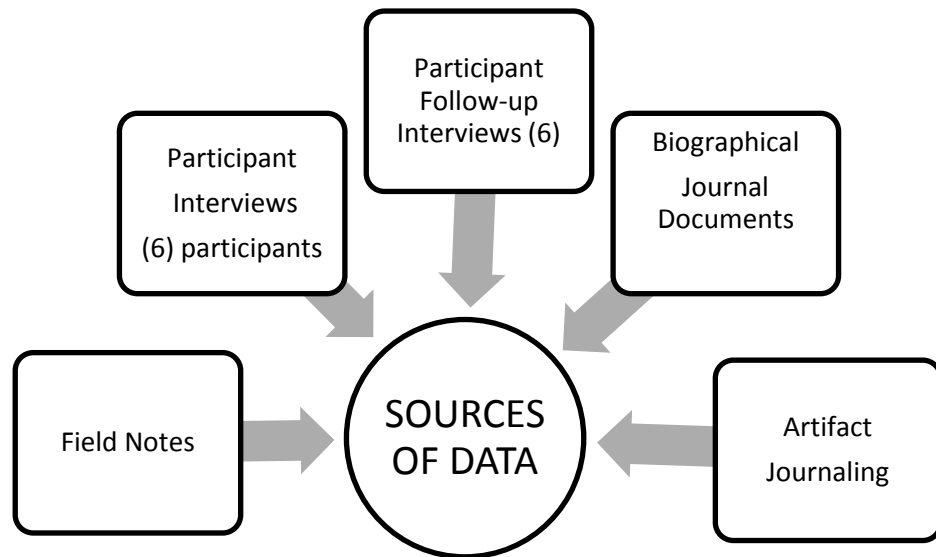
**Reflection Journal.** The reflection journal is a written document that allows for reflection on a past experience (Yin, 2009). The question focused on the participants most memorable childhood accomplishment. This activity gave the participant a chance to identify in writing a mastery experience that may have contributed to efficacy and resilience. Four out of six participants wrote full page detailed reflections while the other two wrote paragraph on their most memorable childhood experience. The writings were submitted electronically.

**Artifact Analysis and Field Notes.** Yin (2009) suggests artifact analysis is the process of gathering an artifact and recalling its purpose and significance in a person's life. Inferences can be drawn from document analysis; however, you should treat inferences only as clues worthy of further investigation rather than definitive findings (Yin, 2009). In order to further gather in-depth rich data into the lives of the participants, all six participants were asked to reflect on an artifact recalling a past childhood/adolescent experience and how that artifact affected their ability to become resilient. Also, field notes were written records of important statements and gestures during the interview (Yin, 2009). Field notes during individuals focus group sessions were instrumental in identifying key statements that led to codes and themes.

In sum, multiple data sources allowed for triangulation of information. Interview, focus group, journals, and artifact data were combined to provide rich information about participants' resilience and efficacy experiences (see Figure three). Triangulated data

allowed for an in-depth picture into the how's and the why resilience enabled the participants to defy odds to achieve their academic and career goal.

Figure Three: Sources of Data: A Case Study Approach



Source: Case study models (Stake in Denzin and Lincoln, 1994; Marshall and Rossman, 1995; Yin, 1994)

### **Data Processing Methods**

Data from interviews, the focus group, reflection journals were transcribed using the verbatim technique. The verbatim technique consists of transcribing the exact words of the participants (Yin, 1994). While reading the transcribed documents, codes were identified and specific words became repetitious throughout the documents which to the formulation of themes. The process for identifying the codes consisted of an intense analysis of the information gathered from all data collection methods. Yin (1994) details the importance of identifying codes that emerge from the information gathered during data collection. While reading transcriptions, codes began to continuously emerge (i.e.

teachers, parents, and poverty). From those codes, themes were formed from the organizing of the codes. The themes that emerged from the interview were identical to the themes that were identified in the journal and the artifact writings. The journal documentation and artifact allowed for more codes and theme detection. Themes and subthemes related to the conceptual framework except for one of the major themes emerged.

Member checking was used to allow participant to read their transcribed interviews in order to validate the information gathered by the researcher (Patton, 1990). Each participant was asked to member check the transcripts from the one-on-one interviews as well as the focus group. Competing explanations and discrepant data were analyzed in order to demonstrate that the study was not a self-fulfilled research outcome (Patton, 1990). Lastly, another reader not affiliated with the study reviewed the data gathered in order to compare codes and themes with the current findings within this study.

In summary, within the data collection process, it was imperative to gain rich data from each participant. As a result, six participants were asked to participate in one-on-one interviews, reflection journals and a focus group discussion and artifact analysis (Yin, 2009). Each participant was asked to write one page on an experience from childhood/adolescence and one page on how resilience has affected their adult lives and to provide a childhood/adolescence artifact that would allow for elaboration on a certain time or event.

Overall, the interviewing process and the document analysis methods of data collection proves to be an effective triangulation of data collection and provides an in-

depth picture into the how and why's of resilience in inner-city urban African-American youth. The qualitative, case study provided a more in-depth understanding of the role of efficacy in fostering resiliency for the six participants.

### **Participant Profiles**

Six former residents of North Green country participated in this study; consequently six profiles were developed (see table 4). The personal profiles present demographic characteristics of the participants' current occupation, educational attainment, and family structure during upbringing. The resilience profile captures the stream of stories that each participant shared regarding his or her resilience experiences.

Table Four: Participant Age and Occupational Profile

<u>Name</u>	<u>Age</u>	<u>Occupation</u>	<u>Highest Degree</u>	<u>Parent Household</u>
Cheree	33	Dean	Masters	Single/Mom
Rejoice	24	Social Worker	Bachelors	Single/Mom
Jean	28	Counselor	Masters	Single/Mom
Monta	39	Business Cons	Bachelors	Single/Mom
Lee	32	Ass. Principal	Masters	Double
Keith	36	Envir.Biologist	Doctorate	Single/Mom

*Cheree: "Trail-blazing through Trials and Hardships"*

Cheree is a 33 year old dean of students of a middle school that happens to be located in the same community in which she grew up. Prior to becoming a dean, she was

the first in her family to graduate from college with a bachelors and a master's degree. Cheree is married with one child of her own who she adores. Her marriage of eight years is a continuation of a childhood relationship that dates back to her ninth grade year in high school. Cheree is the second oldest child of four children. She has an older brother, a younger brother and two younger sisters. Cheree recalls the financial struggles that her family faced as a result of not having a father; her mother struggled to make ends meet. Cheree continues to struggle with some of her childhood experiences but she is happy that she had a mother who did the best that she could and a supporting mentor that took her under her wing.

*Rejoice: "Personality, Poverty and Perseverance"*

Rejoice is a 24 year old college graduate who recently obtained her bachelor's degree in social work and is ready to conquer the world. Rejoice is the youngest of five children. She is the first child in her intermediate family to get a high school diploma and to go on to graduate with a bachelor's degree. She has a very outgoing personality and prides herself in making good relationships with people with her witty ways. Rejoice recalls her mother's continuous incarceration due to drug addiction and how she was forced to live with her grandmother who had grown tired of having to take care of her children's kids (grandchildren). Growing up in poverty was tough on a young girl who always felt that it must be a better way. Disturbed by her mother's addiction to crack, Rejoice began to have resentment toward her mother and hate towards a man named "Walter" who never decided to claim her as his own child. Rejoice attended the neighborhood elementary, middle and high school. While growing up in North Green country, she was always excited about the community block parties but unfortunately due

to gang and violence, those parties stopped for kids. When she stayed with her grandmother and other family members she constantly felt violated. Her possessions were always taken and sometimes there was not enough food to eat. Things begin to change for her when she met her 8<sup>th</sup> grade English Teacher who later became her mentor and God-mother.

*Jean: "Young, Accomplished and Twin-Bound"*

Jean is young and successful. She is a school counselor at the prestigious high school in which she graduated. She is 28 years of age and has a twin sister. She has no children but is currently pursuing a doctorate in education degree. She attended Edison Middle School which was predominantly a Caucasian school. Some of the teachers made it hard for the African American students enrolled in honors classes. During her seventh or eighth grade year, Jean was voted the most outstanding African-American student. Jean had to learn how to stand on her own two feet and work hard. Because she worked hard, Jean was accepted into Hornet High School, the highest performing magnet school in the district where she managed to graduate in three years. Jean was very aware of shootings in the neighborhood and at rival football and basketball games. Hornet High School, however, provided a nurturing environment where the students had a lot of pride in the school.

*Monta: "Seizures, Success and Spiritual"*

Monta's outlook on life was shaped during his adolescent years growing up in a single parent home in North Green country. Being the oldest child of a single parent, Monta was given a lot of responsibility to assist in maintaining his home at an early age. He started cutting the grass in the summer between third and fourth grade, which coincided with his mother's second divorce. There were numerous times that the income



he earned from working various jobs was allocated toward buying groceries or other necessary items for his house. These experiences taught him the value of hustle and hard work. He also learned the principles of being creative and using unconventional ways to achieve a desired result. Because of his economic limitations, he was forced to find creative ways to accomplish the same end that others could simply purchase. These lessons are still manifesting in his life today, only in different arenas.

*Lee: "A Positive Spin"*

Lee is a 32 year old assistant principal in Green country Public Schools. He grew up in double parent household with a mother who stayed at home during his formative years in order to raise him and his 3 brothers. Lee was the only participant that lived in a double parent household. Lee is a strong believer in family providing a support system for the future success of an individual; but he is also mindful that it must also be some internal drive. Lee grew up in a neighborhood that was poor but it was rich in families supporting each other. Lee readily recalls his childhood neighborhood experiences as being fun and full of surprises. He believes that his whole life changed for the better when he graduated from Langston University.

*Keith: "Scared and Successful"*

Keith is a 37 year old environmental biologist who grew up in a single parent household. Keith recalls having a very protective mother who rarely allowed him to leave the house. He was not able to participate in extracurricular activities and he constantly feared his older brother who was addicted to crack cocaine. He is proud of his accomplishments but most importantly, he is proud of his wife and children.

## **Chapter V**

### **Findings**

In this data analysis section, information is reported on how participants overcame risk factors to achieve academic and personal success. The data were derived from a multiple case analysis of resilient African-American adults. The research was designed to address three questions: What protective factors contributed to the success of resilient African-American adults? How did protective factors and self-efficacy interact to shape resilience? What role did self-efficacy play in fostering resilience in African-American adults? Data were analyzed through the lens of risk factors, protective factors, and sources of efficacy information. The chapter begins by describing the common risks encountered by the participants during their childhood and adolescent years. Next, common protective factors experienced by the participants are described. The chapter concludes with a description of sources of efficacy information that shaped the participants' beliefs in their ability to reach academic and personal goals.

### **Prevalent Risk Factors**

Risk factors are obstacles faced by individuals that pose a threat to a safe, healthy, and productive way of life (Waxman, 1992). Waxman (1992) argues that crime, single parent households, and poverty are three common social conditions that place children at risk for unhealthy life circumstances. Individuals encounter different risks throughout life and differences in the magnitude or degree of risk. Common risks experienced by the participants in this study were deduced from the qualitative data. Three general risks are described: educational risk factors, broken relationships with

parents and families, and high mobility and isolation. Specific experiences of participants within these general types of risk are described next.

### **Educational Risk Factors**

The participants in this study described elementary school experiences in general as characterized by low expectations, an unhealthy school climate and limited skill development, factors that placed the participants at risk for low educational attainment and limited educational opportunities.

**Low Expectations.** Several participants mentioned that their elementary years were not filled with high expectations from teachers and schools. Such low expectations resulted in teaching practices that did not adequately challenge, stimulate, or prepare the participants for later school years. In general, low expectations made participants to question their optimal school success and to build academic efficacy during the foundational years. Keith commented on his educational experience:

Our elementary school teachers had very low expectations for African-American students' period, especially African-American males. Keith explained how he was improperly placed in honors classes in middle school because his teacher in elementary school closed the door and gave us the answers on the state exams.”

Rejoice also recalled low expectations being embodied in teacher behavior. Rejoice recalls assessment and feedback being rare. Looking back, she felt teachers lacked skill and the inability to properly reinforce high expectations. When asked about her school experience she noted:

There was not a lot of competition for best grades at the elementary level. The teachers seemed just happy when we turned in an assignment. I'm not sure if

some of our assignments were graded or not. We knew the teachers who did not grade our work; therefore, we were not expecting any feedback.

Other participants felt that their elementary school teachers were not ready to teach within an urban setting. They did not connect with their families well and their standard for excellence in education was lacking. When reflecting on his elementary experiences, Lee mentioned:

We had work to do sometimes in our classrooms and other times, we had a free day. I do not remember taking a lot of homework home in elementary but I do remember the class holiday parties and the big deal that we made to our parents about those.

Monta also remembers elementary school teachers not challenging his academic experience. He states, "I always knew that I could do better in class but since the teacher did not make a big deal out of it, I settled for making B's and C's sometimes."

Further, some of the participants expressed concerns about teachers' lack of understanding in working with students with defiant cultural background.

For Lee, the main problems were teachers who did not know the students' full potential. Teachers chose to spend more time on misbehavior and the staff did not recognize academic achievement. The participants were plagued with elementary schools that did not foster expectations and lacked quality teachers who did not encourage academics. Lee continued,

Some of us just turned work in to our teachers and we knew that it was not quality. We also knew that the teachers did not grade all of our work to make sure that we were doing it right. Some of the teachers used materials that were below our grade level while I was in elementary school.

While the participants in general felt their elementary years were characterized by low expectations. Rejoice found middle school to be problematic. She recalled, I felt like the teachers in my sixth grade year were asking for too much of me. I did not remember having so much homework in 5<sup>th</sup> grade. I knew that middle school was going to be a challenge for me and this made me nervous. Rejoice stated, I was excited about middle school at first but soon realized that I had a lot of work to do in order to do well in middle school. There were certain things in science and math that I just did not know.

Monta recalled the fact that his school did not create a climate of high expectations. Specifically, Monta commented, “School was fun, but we never talked about college as an option.” The lack of focus on college was a common experience of all the participants. Academic challenges regarding the lack of skill development were prevalent due to low expectations from teachers, and the participants also felt that these challenges coupled with a strained parental relationship posed a significant threat to the attainment of their resilience. Rejoice recalled, “My mom and grandmother did not care if I went to school, let alone what my grades were. I can remember bringing some of my work home and my grandmother would just put it to the side and even though I told my teachers what happened at home, they would not call my family and ask any questions.”

**Unhealthy School Climate.** Information gathered from the participants suggested that climate of their schools were not conducive to a solid educational foundation. A lack of structure to support quality learning experiences, tenuous teacher-student communication, a lack of academic press, and unmanaged classrooms and hallways were common characteristics of elementary schools attended by the participants.

Rejoice expressed concerns regarding student teacher relationships and teachers' inability to manage their classroom. She expressed,

I believe that the teachers would be so focused on just the teaching part, which I know is what they are there for; however, sometimes kids would act out or sometimes when things were not going right for that particular child, they would take it out on all of us. Some of my teachers did not know how to bond with us.

That is what stood out the most to me. I think they had a lot on their shoulders and then they just probably took it out on all of us.

Much like Rejoice's experience of having teachers who were not fully prepared to teach urban students, Lee also recalled a poor learning climate and how his elementary school struggled with creating a culture that valued academic excellence:

For the most part elementary school was not a happy place. The climate of school was not the best. As an educator now, I wonder how did I make it? Teachers struggled with structure and procedures and did not know how to help us with future goals.

Through these experiences, the participants were at risk of school failure in the latter years as a result of not having a healthy academic foundation at the elementary years and a lack of school and parent trust. They were also at risk of having a negative perception about school and learning. Cheree mentioned, "My mom depended on me to do well in school on my own but sometimes I needed for her to step in and talk to my teachers for me or to make sure that my homework was finished. I felt like my teachers felt sorrier for me instead of demanding more of me and my mom." Keith recalled,

“When I began to get low scores in middle school, I felt like school was not for me. I felt like I should know more about the different subject matters.”

**Limited Skill Development.** Participants believed that foundational skills were not adequately developed during their elementary years and as a result there had to be some re-teaching by the participants themselves in order for them to keep pace academically with their peers in middle and high school. Several of the participants mentioned the lack of foundational skills for middle and high school as a challenge to their academic development. Jean recalled in the group interview that she was not prepared for the rigor of middle and high school. Keith detailed in the reflection journal the steps he took to make up for limited academic skills: Keith wrote,

I had to study twice as hard as my classmates and pretend that I knew the information after the teacher taught it. Then I would and later go home and really learn it before class the next day. I was placed in honor classes and I knew there were more things that I should have known but after some time, I caught on and excelled anyway.

Lee wrote,

When I entered middle school, I realized that the teachers had higher expectations. We had weekly quizzes, books to take home and notes to take daily. I hoped that I could measure up. I remember feeling nervous about the change of expectations.

The participants were at risk of academic failure in school, embarrassment due to low skill level. Cheree noted,

I am glad that I decided to work hard and persevere in middle school because, there were days that I felt dumb and discouraged. Because of my hard work, I was accepted into Booker Washington High School. All of these risks hindered the participants' ability to feel confident going into middle school.

### **Broken Relationship with a Parent**

For several of the participants, family issues related to broken relationships, lack of father figures and tension with guardians presented challenges to their development.

**Lack of a Father Figure.** The majority of participants described the harmful effect of not having a father in the home or present in their lives. The lack of a father resulted in Jean lacking trust in future relationships with men, Cheree carrying depression and resentment towards her father due to his absenteeism, Monta feeling anger towards a male relationship and Rejoice feeling alone and unidentified. Jean detailed a sense of frustration and longed for a closer relationship with her father. When reflecting on her relationship with her father, she became very emotional yet able to vividly recall feelings of distrust and a sense of abandonment from her father. She noted,

There would be times when I would go a whole year without seeing him, and he would say he was too busy when I asked him to visit. Later, I would look out the window, and he would be visiting his girlfriend. I think that affected my future relationships with men.

Cheree also suffered from the absence of a father figure present, but her feelings and stress were somewhat different than Jean's. Jean felt that her father did not place value in their relationship which caused her to feel alone. Cheree on the other hand, worried about her mother's emotional and physical health while trying to keep the family



together. Cheree recalled her mother going through depression, suicidal attempts and mental distress as a result of being a single parent without financial stability. She stated:

My mother tolerated a lot from my dad until she went through a mental break down. She had no financial support and was still trying to raise us even though she was broken. My mom did good with my sisters; however, my brothers did not have the same success story. They are still having challenges. They are still in the system negatively. I'm not sure what may have happened. I know that my mom was the mom and the dad. I have a feeling that my brothers missed having the male in the home to assist with being a male and figuring out how to make it.

Monta also felt anger towards his father for being abusive, absent and present only for sports recognition or his own convenience. Monta loved and appreciated his mother for remaining strong after she divorced. Monta's father after years of abuse chose to no longer be in his life after the age of three. He stated, "I can remember when he showed up again once he heard that I was talented in football and wanted me to regain his last name after I was adopted by my mother's second husband." Monta, along with other participants, struggled with guardian relationships as a result of an apparent level of abuse.

Rejoice's situation is similar to Cheree's in that both of their fathers were not present at all; however, Rejoice's father chose not to acknowledge that she was part of his family. In the reflection journal, Rejoice mentioned that her father never claimed her as his child. She wrote, "I just have no parents. He is not claiming me, but he pays child support that I never see. My mother uses it every time." Rejoice also recounted her unstable relationship with her grandmother and the tension that would mount. "I never

understood why my own grandmother would call me bitches and sluts and would talk about me to other family members in a negative way. Sometimes it was just too much to handle.”

In summary, negligent fathers placed many of the participants at risk of developing attachment and abandonment issues, stress associated with worrying about their mothers as the primary caregivers, and unhealthy mature relationships as adults. These feelings are typified in Cheree and Monte’s feelings. Cheree remembered, “I wondered if he loved his girlfriend more than me and my twin. I was always afraid of the answer.” Monta asserted, “Where was he when I really needed him? I often thought, it’s too late to show up now that I am a star athlete doing well.”

**Tension with Guardians.** In addition to the absence of participants’ birth fathers, two participants in this study experienced problems with their guardians that presented many emotional issues and challenges. While being raised by an angry grandmother, Rejoice became very resentful toward her mother for not being with her and for choosing drugs and an abusive relationship with a boyfriend over her. Rejoice recounted,

My mother was in and out of jail for drug use, and at one point she dropped us off at our grandmother’s house for good. She was sent to prison because of her drug addiction, which also caused me to be born with a hole in my heart and illness growing up because of her drug use while she was carrying me. I don’t think that I will ever mentally get past this.

Rejoice also experienced a range of emotions as a result of her abusive relationship with her grandmother. Depression and confusion became prevalent through Rejoice’s statements regarding her grandmother:

I felt alone, worthless, sad, depressed, empty, and hopeless. I simply did not understand why she put me out, why no one came after me, and why I was alone at a corner store after midnight. As the emotions went through my entire body, I then made the decision to never allow myself or any future child of mine to experience what I was experiencing. I made a promise to myself to always love and care for me always. It was in that moment that I made the decision to persevere for my future.

Jean experienced considerable tension with her mother; however, unlike Rejoice, her mother was present in her life but she felt that her mother spent more time with her twin sister. Jean shared her concern during the interview that she struggled with the feeling of abandonment and that her mother showed favoritism. She stated:

One of the main disagreements is that I felt that my mom favored one twin over the other. She stated that she will give me her finances and my twin her time. The only thing about that is that it had an indirect effect on me. My twin always had her time. I would rather have your time than your money. There were times that I reached pinnacles and she was not there because she was dealing with my sister. To this day, she doesn't see it and she won't see it but I learned that regardless if my child is bad or good, they both deserve my time and my money.

In summary, tenuous and contentious relationships with a guardian affected Rejoice and Jean's upbringing. For all the participants, the absence of a father figure and struggles with guardians threatened their ability to form healthy relationships as adults, not understanding the appropriate role of a father and an inability to trust and communicate effectively with family members. As a result of built up resentment, many

of the participants had to look elsewhere for support, at times they resolved to self-preservation to cope with their risk factors.

**Physical and Psychological Abuse.** Physical and psychological abuse was also detected from the experiences of the participants. Monta recalled that his mother's husband (his step father) was abusive to his mother and began to be abusive towards him. "He would hit my mother and was a bit physical and extremely verbally abusive to me after he got on those drugs." Similarly, Keith also recalled abuse from a family member and the negative impact it had on his life as a result of a drug dependent older brother:

I had a brother who was addicted to crack so that was probably some of my worst experiences. Waking up with his hands around my neck trying to take my gold chain off my neck that I got for Christmas or sitting in the living room watching TV and him walking into the living room and unplug the television and walk right out of the house. Getting pretty much beat!!! Me just defending myself. She would not kick him out. So I left at 15.

Cheree described her abuse from her mother as mental and verbal. She always worried about the lasting effect that abuse would have on her siblings. Cheree recalled times when her mother would force her sister to be self-conscious about her dark-complexioned skin and her wide nose. She recalled one troubling and traumatic experience in particular when her mother, as she states, "made my sister squeeze in her nostrils in order to shrink the size of her nose." This comment made an indelible impression.

### **Mobility and Isolation**

High mobility and isolation affected the lives of the participants due to the instability and constant breakdown in relationships. Due to high-poverty conditions,

participants' families were forced to move continuously due to evictions and financial hardships; therefore, they coped with the isolation and frustration of moving.

Cheree believed that her childhood could have been better if she did not have to move so much. While documenting within her reflection journal, Cheree commented about a time that built a sense of loneliness and frustration. She noted,

From the time I can remember, probably since I was five, we moved every year. So every year, I was in a different home, and that exposed me to a lot of different schools. The schools in the neighborhood schools were a bit rough because I was always the new kid.

Cheree remembered that at one particular school she was the new kid, and the other students actually beat her up. "I had a fight on the first or second day, and I can remember crying. Here it is they were in the 5<sup>th</sup> grade, and I was coming to their school and they had been friends from first or second grade." Cheree noted that never having a permanent home was a very negative experience. She always moved around from school to school.

Much like Cheree, Keith moved all the time, making it very hard for him to make friends in school because he knew he would be moving and have to change schools. He moved every 3 months, so he just began to keep to himself. He can remember going to three or four elementary schools and not having adequate clothes. "I can remember being happy because I did not know that I was poor." Keith felt that he was deprived of the opportunity to meet, learn, and grow with people in his community because he was never allowed to go outside or to anyone's house, especially not to spend the night. Keith mentioned, "I never learned a sport or anything because I had to stay in the house when I

was not in school. My mother thought that our community was dangerous.” All of the participants felt that their environment was a risk due to the crime and violence around their homes.

High mobility was present in the participants’ lives because of the lack of finances within the home to maintain the rent and utilities monthly. Due to frequent moves, Jean remembered not having friends and feeling isolated while experiencing bullying. Jean recalled problems she encountered from her peers when she walked home from school. She remembered facing cruelty and the inability to handle encounters with other students who were mean. She stated:

As a child, I wasn’t the cutest person that walked the street and as a child and my twin and I were bullied all the time. That was one of the reasons why I did not like riding the bus because we were always talked about or someone was picking on us. We both had nappy hair and glasses. We were very tall for our age. My sister found a way to deal with it by fighting. I just cried my eyes out and went home.

Cheree also experienced a feeling of isolation but her experience was different than Jean’s. Cheree’s experience was one of loneliness and depression. Cheree’s demeanor changed as she reflected on the times that caused her to believe that there was no way out. “It got really bad for me and I felt like I was all alone and that to kill myself would be my only way out.” She can also remember that she was not able to leave the house much at all as a child because her mother was strict about keeping Cheree and her siblings in the house for what Cheree remembers as protection against people in their community. The participants were at risk of depression, loneliness and the inability to

maintain friendships because of their mobility and isolation from interacting with others in school and community. These risk factors affected the participants due to the lack of consistent socialization and healthy interaction with peers.

The data indicate that some of the participants experienced the same type of risks while others experienced different combinations of risk factors that the participants detailed were categorized into the four themes: abuse, low expectations, broken relationships, and high mobility/isolation. Participants (Table 5) were asked to identify the risk factors they felt most affected their lives. All but Lee identified multiple risk factors. Abuse and broken parent relationships were the most prevalent risks followed by low expectations and high mobility/isolation.

Table Five: Master Risk Experiences

<i>Participants</i>	<i>Abuse</i>	<i>Low Expect.</i>	<i>Broken Parent Rel</i>	<i>High Mob/Isol</i>
Cheree	X		X	X
Rejoice	X		X	X
Jean			X	X
Monta	X	X	X	
Lee		X		
Keith	X	X		X

In summary, data showed that risk factors were prevalent in the lives of all of the participants. The reported data clearly indicate that the majority of the participants experienced abuse and broken parent relationships. Additionally, three participants who

had at one point or another inadequate teacher who did not have high expectations for them were all male. Based on the findings, risk factors could have prohibited the participant from reaching their full potential but these did not deter the participants in achieving their full potential. In the ensuing section, participants identified protective factors that contributed to their success as resilient African-American adults.

### **Protective Factors: Opportunities, Optimism, and Success**

Protective factors provide social and emotional support for overcoming risk. Without protective factors, participants would have fallen victim to their dismal environments. Protective factors emerged in different forms and at different times depending on the participant.

While participants' childhood experiences revealed multiple risks factors (i.e. absent fathers, supportive teachers, high mobility, verbal and physical abuse etc.), the protective factors that emerged were salient in fostering their resilience. Even when participants experienced low teacher expectations and poor family relationships, they were able to find protective factors in schools and within their family. For example, having a strong mother influenced participants' perceptions of school and family. For example, educational experience, continuous involvements, peer support and individual beliefs are discussed highlighting their importance in influencing participants' sense of success and achievement.

### **Family Support: Strong Mothers**

Two participants recalled having a strong family that served as a support system and a buffer from harm that contributed to their future success. Several of the participants recalled having a mother who held the family together with her strength and courage.



Monta's mother was very matter of fact about the future success of Monta. Monta stated, "first thing that is visible in my mind was the household culture of having my mom who wanted more for us but yet did not have the resources." When the financial resources allowed, Monta was sent to a private school because his mom felt that he would get a better education there than in public schools. He recalled her stating, "I do not know what I want for you, but I do know what I don't want for you and that is a school that does not focus on you going to college." Monta recalled there was not much financial support after his step-father and his mother divorced. "I had to go back to the public school." Monta recalled having a mother who made a lot of sacrifices for him despite her financial hardship.

Jean also recalled the support of a strong mother who took pride in meeting her children's basic needs. She noted, "I had a mother who took care of my basic needs; however, she couldn't take the place of an absentee father. There was never enough money coming in for our family but my mother made sure that we had clothes, heat, hot water, cool air and food to eat." Lee's experience was a bit different because he recalled having the support of his mother and his father. Lee's response is a direct indication of the relationship he had with his family as a child. "Well one of the things that our parents tried to instill in us is that when we had hard times, we always had a family." On the other hand, Lee was proud to speak of his mom's role as a stay at home mother and the impact that having both parents in the home had on his life:

Lord, where would we be if my mother was not home. She was there at a pivotal point in our lives. She was there to be that key component. There was a sense of

structure that we needed. When we came home, she had us on a set structure and my dad was in full support.

Whereas the participants relied on the strength of their mothers to provide stability and to remain resilient throughout any situation, it was also important for the participants to receive a quality education. The protective factors of a strong mother figure helped the participants to understand the role of a parent in fostering success in the lives of their children and the value of education.

**Educational Experience: Challenge Me, Inspire Me, Believe in Me, and Teach Me.**

In order for the participants to internalize the importance of education, it was important that they had guardians and teachers who reinforced high academic expectations and a certain level of involvement in an extra-curricular activity. Some parents expected the teacher to teach and their child to be academically challenged. As parents, educators, and community members understood the importance of education, it became very important that the participants were being academically challenged because they looked at their education as the key to getting out of poverty. Lee explained his father's stance on education when he was growing up:

We had some trouble at school and our grades didn't look the best and my parents were sticklers for grades. Teachers would say, "you may not make it." My father would say, "you will go to school, regardless of what happened, you will persevere." Our father was a key component in our lives especially when you have friends that do not take school as seriously. My father was the sounding board that told us that you will make it and you will go to college. There are no ifs, and buts about it. This helped me get through those rough times as far as grade

wise because I had a couple of D's, maybe an F or so, father was like, "No, you will go to college so you had better get these D's and F's up." Our parents really pushed us through those moments.

Parental academic rigor was important for the participants because it demonstrated the importance that some of the participants' parents placed on education. The participants readily recalled the seriousness of finishing homework, relationship building between their parent and teacher and the value that was placed on grades.

**Teacher Expectations.** In addition to parents emphasizing the importance of education, participants discussed the important role of teachers' expectations which had a great influence on them. Jean vividly recalled the effect that one of her teachers had on her ability to achieve in schools.

Elementary schools were important because I can remember a teacher named Ms. Madison. I remember how much I learned in Ms. Madison's class. Her class took us through the Egyptian times to Black heritage and White heritage. We did poetry by like 8 or 9 years old. We participated in a lot of extracurricular activities.

Cheree's experiences were similar to Jean's in that there was a level of expectation for academic achievement established at school. Cheree reflected on the academic rigor and the culture of expectations of her community's premier middle and high schools that she proudly was accepted into by stating, "It was definitely positive attending a middle and high school where you have to be accepted based on academic ability." The middle and high school environments were different from her elementary school. The middle and high school that Cheree attended attracted students from all over

the city. As Cheree reflected on her old acceptance letter, she expounded on the following:

It was kids that wanted to be there. It was a big deal to make the grade! It was very competitive and that helped me to be more competitive because I wanted my name to be announced like one of the kids who was making a 100s.

As Rejoice reflected on her high school experience, she remembered that teachers had afterschool tutoring activities and would provide support to all students who needed it. Jean also had great experiences with her teachers and felt as if she was up for any academic challenge. “In elementary school, I had a teacher who really showed us a lot and expected us to learn. The teachers in middle and high school had very high expectations for me.”

As for the other participants, their middle and high school experiences were very challenging and rigorous while having teachers with high expectations for all students. Four of the six participants attended high schools that required acceptance.

Table Six: Teacher Expectations of Student Success

Lee	Keith	Monta
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Some of my high school teachers really challenged me and others had low expectations of all of us.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The work was not challenging enough in elementary school. The teachers were more focused on discipline than rigorous instruction. <b>It all changed in high school.</b></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>My classmates were all taking challenging courses, and I needed to fit in. <b>The teachers expected for the students to come in knowing a lot in middle and high school.</b></li> </ul>
Rejoice	Cheree	Jean

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I didn't really care about school until I met the teacher who would become my mentor in middle school. <b>She really believed in me. She expected a lot from me through high school and college.</b></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I don't remember having teachers in elementary school that really cared. It was hard for me to form relationships because I changed schools so often. I was the most stable in middle and high school.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I had a teacher in elementary school that really showed us a lot and expected us to learn. <b>The teachers in middle and high school had very high expectations for me.</b></li> </ul>
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Table 6 detailed the similarity among statements participants made about the difference between elementary experiences and middle and high school experiences. The bold type indicates the similarities in the participants' responses. Five of the six participants believed that their teachers in middle and high school had higher expectations for their ability to learn. While some participants had teachers with high expectations for their ability to learn, other participants became involved in extra-curricular activities and/or job experiences.

**Continuous Involvement: Outside Activities Helped to Shape My Future.**

Continuous involvement is defined as positive out of classroom activities that meet social and psychological needs of individuals. Three types of continuous involvement were important for participants in this study: participating in a school organization, working a local job and belonging to a church. Participants were proud of their accomplishments in the school organizations. They were part of in high school. Rejoice stated,

Initially, I had no interest in activities. I was mostly focused on surviving and getting ready for the next day. I didn't care about any of the afterschool activities.

I eventually became certified as a CNA through a school program, and I wanted to become a nurse which kept me very active in the Health Club. The CNA club allowed me to focus on my future and my career instead of my home life problems.

Rejoice reflected on her experience with a pre-nursing/ job school program that rendered her an opportunity to become self-sufficient while working within a learned skill.

Monta also prided himself in being a part of an organization. Monta was a member of the football team in middle and high school. He loved going to the practices and to the games. He stated, "I learned a lot about team work, hard work and athleticism from football. As a result of financial struggles and the need to have an escape from trying times at home, several of the participants worked jobs that contributed to increased self-esteem and efficacy. Cheree recalled how her job provided an opportunity to help support her family, gave her a sense of pride, and provided a way to stay away from home for a while. She noted,

During my middle school years, I could not help but when I was 17 it changed because I was working a job. I would come home and deal with my little brothers and sisters. They were a little older at the time. I had friends but did not have a boyfriend at that time. But I had friends and would talk on the phone with them. I did not have a car so I rode the city bus. But I worked all the time. I was rarely at home because I was working.

Jean also recalls her experience as a first time employee and the liberation she felt to have her own money. "I worked at Burger King making \$5.75/hour. I was determined to drive a Camry and I would break my back to do it."

Monta reflected on his need for money to buy things at the local store and to get shirts and shoes that he liked. He recalled the day that his uncle began to take him to cut yards and to do some roofing and the joy he felt to earn his own money. Lee's dad worked as the manager of a convenient store and on his busier days, he would allow Lee to come up and earn a small but useful amount of money for candy and other snack foods. Keith was unable to go out and get a job during his adolescent years due to difficulties with transportation and support but his mother would pay him to do odd jobs around the house as best as she could. He recalled, "My mom would always say that fast money earned on the streets is bad money."

Two of the male participants gained confidence in their ability to become successful through experiences associated with attending church. Monta felt that outside of football, attending church was a positive influence in his life. His free time was spent at his church. He strongly believed in the importance of church affiliation. Lee believed extracurricular activities in high school and college had a large influence on his future success. He credits participation in organizations like speech and debate and junior honor society as increasing his communication skills, higher level thinking, ability to work with others and problem solving.

Through jobs and involvement in organization, the participants developed confidence to work with others, and learn the virtue of honest hard work. These life skills would prepare the participants for life after high school while providing real-life opportunities for understanding future responsibilities.

### **Peer Influence: “Friends Support Future Success.”**

Peer influence was a powerful protective factor for participants in this study. They provided supportive relationships that fostered responsibility. Participants expressed being very dependent on their friends for support. They believed that if it were not for close friends, they might not have made it through difficult times. Lee recalled the time in which he and a group of friends all obtained their bachelor’s degrees together. They made a pact to get their doctorate degrees and to be strong leaders in their communities. Lee stated, “I can remember the reason why I made it; it was because we held each other accountable. At times when we felt like we really could not make it and didn’t want to study, we would call each other and say, “Hey man, let’s get it done.”

Cheree recalled the time in which she began to meet real friends who would accept her for who she was and who she knew would continue to encourage her through her circumstances. She noted, “within my junior and senior years, I met several individuals whom I became very close to who would later become my best friends and one became my husband.” Monta recalled in his reflection journal that the smartest kid that he knew went to Green Country High School, which was considered a low-performing high school:

I was struggling with some math and my friend was like ‘Man you need some help with your math work’? I wrote a rap for that. I took that rap and on 21<sup>st</sup> and Utica within my private school , I aced the test based on what this guy at McLain gave me. Yet at my private school, I was viewed with a halo on my head because of the private school environment in which I did it. He was so creative and supportive.



Monta appreciated the friendship that he and his classmate had in relation to the help that they exchanged within their academics. They became accountability partners' friends who help to keep individuals on track to accomplish goals. Rejoice was proud to speak of her best friend who was truly her accountability partner. Her friend was also poor but wanted more for her life than her dismal surroundings. Rejoice mentioned, "she would make sure that I did my work, and I would make sure that she had something to eat sometimes. Our family members did not care whether or not we were making good or bad grades." Rejoice and Monta were appreciative of the close friends that provided them support. He recalled having a middle school friend that would ask him if he completed his homework and would make sure that he studied his school work. Lee detailed the belief that he developed in himself as a result of having a friend that would speak often about life after North Green country. His friend made a commitment to him that they were going to make it together no matter what and that he would make sure of it. Lee realized that having competent peers helped him to stay on track. While in college, Lee appreciated the friends that he had who were smart and who could help him with certain courses.

The relationships that the participants shared with their friends provided a consistent and reliable support system for them while helping to foster healthy relationships and the ability to rely and support each other through trying times.

### **Belief in Oneself: I Have Always Believed in Myself**

The participants within this study all developed an internal drive, strong efficacy and internal motivation to accomplish their goals. Some of the participants were self-motivated and always believed in their ability to overcome challenging circumstances.

When participants remembered their impoverished environment, they also recalled there were not many family members who would encourage their achievement. They began to understand the importance of having a belief in oneself. Lee was very matter of fact when he stated,

The biggest piece that pushed me was my internal drive. My parents could speak to me until they were blue in the face, but if I did not have a sense of goals and drive, it would not have mattered. I need to do this work. I need to keep myself motivated.

Similarly, Jean said, “I always knew that it was something within me and that I wanted to get a degree like my mom.” Rejoice recalled in her one-on-one interview, “I’m glad that I had that voice inside of my head and heart that told me that I was going to make it no matter how bad it was. The participants’ goals and aspirations were achieved through internal drive and as a result, efficacy and confidence were developed and the participants based their success plan on their internal drive.

Rejoice attested that she really did not believe in herself. She did not care much about her future. It was her teacher who changed her life. Much like Rejoice, Jean attributed her ability to believe in herself to a mentor. Jean recalled, “I had very low self-esteem. It was my Godmother who believed in me and made me believe in myself. Keith also recalled having teachers at the high school level who encouraged his academic success. He noted, “The work was hard but my teachers supported me and told me that I was smart enough to do the work.” Monta’s mother believed in him, and he had some teachers who motivated him. It was not until he became a high school student that he really began to believe in himself. Likewise, Keith’s mother would always tell him that

she was so proud of him and that he was smart. He internalized that which helped him to develop self-confidence.

In sum, it was important that the participants had internal motivation and belief in their ability to overcome and become triumphant over the hardships experienced in their lives. Overall, the participants were encouraged during their middle and high school years by their teachers and positive adults. The relationships with their teachers in middle and high school were life-changing for they partly contributed in the development of competence and positive images of the participants' abilities.

After conducting interviews and collecting biographical documents, it became apparent that some of the participants' protective factors were similar while others were completely different. Table 7 depicts the common protective factors articulated by the participants. It is evident that each participant experienced a variety of protective factors such as: family support, involvement in extracurricular activities, peer choice and belief in self; however, teacher expectations across grade levels and more prevalently at the middle and high school was common with each participant.

Table Seven: Common Protective Factors Experienced

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Family</b>	<b>Teacher Expectations</b>	<b>Involvement</b>	<b>Peer Choice</b>	<b>Belief in Self</b>
Cheree		X (H.S.)			
Rejoice		X (M &H.S.)	X	X	
Jean	X	X(E,M&H.S)			X

Monta	X	X (M &H.S.)	X	X	
Lee		X (H.S.)	X	X	X
Keith		X (H.S.)			

E = elementary school teachers    M= middle school teachers    H.S.= high school teachers

### **Sources of Efficacy Information**

In the previous section of this chapter, protective factors were detailed in order to better understand the experiences that contributed to participants' future success. Many protective factors also served as sources of efficacy producing information. The primary sources of efficacy are generally thought to include mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, social persuasion, and physiological and emotional states (Bandura, 1997). Although participants experienced harmful social environments during childhood and adolescence, they also formed relationships and had experiences that were consistent with the formation of efficacy.

### **Mastery Experience: Building on Prior Success/A Life-Changing Event**

When participants were asked about a pivotal point in their lives that contributed to their resilience and their ability to achieve future success, they often referred to academic awards, college acceptance, and college experiences. Several participants began to receive academic awards in middle school.

Jean recalled receiving her medal for scoring within the top 10% in elementary school on

National Merit Test. She was named most outstanding African-American student at her middle school. These accomplishments were life-changing for Jean because they affirmed her ability to achieve academically and it led her to believe she was smart. Keith and Monta remembered being acknowledged for top scores on tests and how important it was to be acknowledged by their teachers because at one point in their lives they lacked academic confidence. Keith stated, "It was not until I entered middle and high school that I began to receive awards for how smart I was. This really built my confidence." Similarly, Monta stated,

I wanted to get the most improved math student award because I knew that I worked hard for it. I studied and studied and by the end of the year, I had one of the top grades in the class; therefore, I received the most improved math student award."

He believed this award increased his competence and confident to choose finance as a major in college. Jean reflects on her academic accomplishments while Monta expressed sentimental value towards his college acceptance. Mastery experiences in the form of academic awards motivated the participants to strive for additional accomplishments. The experiences of the participants depict the emotional and cognitive effect of receiving positive reinforcement for academic accomplishments.

Backgrounds of the participants did not provide many examples of family members and friends being accepted into college; therefore, acceptance into college was a mastery experience that added to their efficacy. Upon being accepted into college, the participants felt a sense of confidence in their ability to be successful around others who were also in college. Such confidence can be a challenge to build for many students from

poverty background. College acceptance helped affirm their beliefs that they could graduate and succeed. Monta recalled applying for college:

After attending a private school during my high school years, I decided to apply to Notre Dame University. I will never forget the way that I felt after receiving an acceptance letter. I felt confident in my ability to attend and be accomplished in a premier college. I was so happy and my mom cried. It was a very special time for us because we knew that my life would never be the same.

Cheree recalled being accepted into Northeastern State University and the happiness she felt knowing she would be starting a new life in college. Cheree stated, "Going to college was so important to me. This would be a new beginning for my life. I wanted this for my whole life."

Lee felt as though the college he attended was like being with a supportive extended family. He stated, "I made so many friends and I was so glad that my grandfather made sure that I attended Langston University. He built confidence in me and helped me to believe in myself."

Past awards and acceptance into college affirmed that other people recognized the participants' ability and intelligence. College experiences also built in the participants the confidence to make their own decisions and to have control over their lives. In addition, positive experiences in college added to participants' confidence in their ability to make it in society. Mastery experiences in school were life-changing moments that continue to shape positive beliefs and behaviors of the participants.

## **Vicarious Experiences: If You Can See It, You Can Be It**

The majority of the participants aspired to be like someone else. There were family members or local community members who left positive impressions on them. Through vicarious experiences, confidence was built in their ability to live a similar life as their role models.

Cheree recalled a lady who was her godmother at church. Cheree grew up in a Catholic church, and it was her godmother who inspired and encouraged her to believe that her situation would get better. Her godmother would take Cheree to her house where they would bake and cook. The godmother would listen to all of the things that Cheree had to say that were important to her. She would give her advice and great feedback. Cheree's godmother had daughters who were in college at the time. Cheree remembered one of them saying, "Take a foreign language." Cheree said that she would do whatever the daughters told her to do because she saw them as being successful. They were going to college, they were beautiful, and had boys who were interested in them. They would come home and bake and cook with their mom and everything seemed very easy for them. Cheree decided she wanted that life. Watching their lives built her self-esteem and confidence that she too could have a healthy, happy life. Cheree stated,

I wanted to be happy with less stress, and at 12 and 13 I wasn't happy. Then my godmother came along and allowed me to see her life and took time and mentored me, encouraged me, and prayed with me, and that really helped.

While Cheree admired her God-mother, Jean admired her mother. Her mom was an educator and she wanted to live up to her mother's expectations. As a result, Cheree built the confidence to become successful. She stated:

I wanted to be like my mom back then. She was so educated and she drove me to

be the best that I could be. She gave me a saying for my sister and me to say, I am somebody, no one is better than I am. I will learn; I will succeed.

In contrast to the other participants, Lee was the one participant with a stable family.

Having a mother and father in his life shaped his values and beliefs. Lee expressed admiration for his parents. He recalled, “They were such a beautiful example of a solid marriage. I wanted to be just like my father because he was a hard worker and he provided for my brothers and me.”

The example set by Lee’s parents has shaped who he is as a person today. In addition to family members, teachers were another source of vicarious experiences. Teacher and student relationships are a powerful way to build confidence in student abilities. Rejoice had a positive relationship to a teacher who became her mentor. Her mentor experienced a similar upbringing as Rejoice and seeing her mentor as a successful adult instilled confidence in Rejoice. Rejoice also experienced efficacy through her longing to be like her mentor. She asserted:

This may seem weird, but I could see myself so much in her. She gave me the confidence to believe in myself. If she made it out of the things that she went through to become a teacher, then I can do the same thing. She would give me so much support. I did not have to watch kids or get talked to crazy for her to just help me. She was so different than what I was used to. She was like a stress reliever for me. We would go out to eat or to the game. She would get me out of that bad environment. She is still the exact same way. I am encouraged and confident that my life can be like her life.

Teachers also shaped Cheree and Monta’s confidence. Cheree distinctly recalled the way that her teacher dressed and carried herself. She remembered how her teacher walked



with so much confidence and seemed to be willing to help her with anything she needed. She stated, “I wanted to dress, smell and look like Mrs. Smith.” Jean also wanted to be like her teachers. She thought that her teachers were always happy with nothing to worry about. As she watched her teachers, she made a decision that she wanted to have a profession that was highly regarded. Jean also wanted to be like the example of a smart, beautiful and graceful African-American teacher that was before her in class. Monta was very impressed with his teacher who was also the head football coach. He thought that his teacher was so talented to be able to juggle the responsibility of teaching and coaching. He also liked how his teacher always used a calm voice when he spoke to his students unlike Monta stepdad spoke to him constantly. Lee and Keith both had teachers that were inspirational in their lives. Lee recalled being called the teacher’s pet because he would excessively help the teachers as he now recalls as a need to get additional attention and to be accepted.

Growing up in a high need, impoverished environment necessitated that teachers and other adults would serve as positive role models for the participants. Despite having varied experiences with adults, the participants found supportive attachments to teachers who they wanted to emulate and continue to build a bond with. The participants gained a new perspective on how to talk, dress and conducted themselves through positive examples of teachers and mentors.

### **Social Persuasion: The Influence of the Peers**

The participants’ friends provided a relational context that was motivating and supportive. Rejoice felt strongly about her best friend and the confidence that her friend helped her develop in her ability to make it through tough times. She stated,

I had a best friend that would make sure that I was at school and I would make sure that she was there as well. We always checked on each other. I always had my best friend. She was just like me. Her mom did not care if she went to school or not. There were a lot of times that I would stay at her house all night and mom would not know that I was there. We were on our own. No one was there for us.

This relationship allowed her to see the power of having true, dependable, non-judgmental friends who would support her. Jean recalled having a childhood friend that became very protective of her friendship while they were at school. She encouraged Jean by telling her that she was smart even when she didn't score high on a class quiz or exam. She would also encourage her by saying the following:

“Girl, everything is going to be alright. I can help you with your homework and don't worry about things that are going wrong at home, you need to come to school and make a better life for yourself anyway!”

Monta remembered a life changing friendship he developed in middle school. His middle school friend showed him a different way of life and started him thinking about college and careers. Monta remembered,

My friend was so focused on his school work and his mother made sure that I read every time that I came to his house. His mother and my mom became friends and I believed that this helped my mother to strive for a better education for me.

Due to the lack of multiple healthy relationships, friendships like the ones described by Monta were important for the participants because they allowed for open communication, development of social skills through consistent interaction and bonding with a person or group of people who valued school and an education.

### **Physiological and Emotional State: What is My Coping Mechanism?**

Poverty, broken relationships and lack of opportunity led many participants to deal with life stressors through fiction and religion. By handling difficult times through fantasy and faith, the participants were able to build efficacy and confidence that overtime things were going to get better.

Fantasy was prevalent in the lives of the participants as a way to set high expectations, an escape from a dismal reality, and a way to build confidence in their ability to become successful. Fantasy is mostly associated with physiological and emotional states in which the participants coped with multiple stressors and their environmental circumstances. Cheree and others would find their escape in watching the lives of famous people while putting themselves in the place of the characters. Cheree recalled times that she wanted to be a part of a Hollywood family in order to escape her life circumstances while building her confidence that she too could have live a dream life one day. She stated,

I would also watch the Cosby Show and I would imagine that was my family and that would help me get through the rough times. I wanted to be happy with less stress and at 12 and 13, I wasn't. Then my God-mother came along and allowed me to see her life and took time and mentored me, encouraged me and prayed with me and that really helped.

Similarly, Jean also lived through fictional life experiences as a way to cope, build confidence, and hope for a better life. Fantasy provided Jean a temporary escape from the realities of her own experiences. She stated,

I searched through different magazines and found pictures of rooms for a house and a floor plan of what I would like for a house. I also found pictures of what I would like my family to be like. I had pictures of Sheryl Swoops just after she gave birth to her son, Kadeem Hardison and Chante Moore when they were married and his hand on her stomach while she was pregnant, a picture of Babyface with his youngest son at Disney Land etc. This section is how at the age of 15 I saw my life. This was my fairytale life. As I got older I saw that none of this happened for me, but in due time it will.

Several participants discussed the effect of having faith and religion in their lives. Jean stated that she cried and prayed a lot. There would be times when other female students would threaten to fight Jean and she would negotiate herself out of the fight, she commented. "I would be able to talk my way out of it." Jean also recalled, "I am not a fighter at all. I used to write poetry. I wrote songs and poetry to help me deal with things." Jean believed strongly in the power of having faith in God. Faith was expressed in Jean's songs and poetry.

She believed that without her faith, she would not have made it this far. She stated,

There is nothing that will happen today that God and I can't handle. I will be a good Christian and treat people the way that I want to be treated. I will take responsibility for my own actions without blaming others for my mistakes. My mom made us say this each time before we got out of the vehicle before we went to Roosevelt. This changed my life.

Jean recalled her experiences as a youth believing in God and the influence faith had on her mother's life. Faith was a source of efficacy for Jean. Her belief encouraged her never to give up and to persevere even when it seemed as though there was no hope.

Similarly, Monta found comfort in his faith. He attributed his religious belief to his mother. Monta recalled his intimate relationship with the Lord. He acknowledged the extreme times within his life when he had nothing but what he affectionately called “Jesus to call upon.” He attributed his ability to handle his life stressors to his mother for introducing him to his faith. An example of Monta’s faith is when a doctor asked him what he did to stop his seizures, Monta replied, “I said, man, I prayed.” That event was serious for Monta and was a very important time with his relationship with God and his mom.

In short, participants found safety and comfort in stories as seen on T.V. and in the movies, and through a strong belief in God. Faith and fantasy were critical for several of the participants. These adults provided a source of efficacy and confidence in their ability to make it through tough times.

### **Conclusion**

Overall, this chapter on risk factors, protective factors and sources of efficacy detailed participants’ life experiences during childhood and adolescence. Risk factors associated with poverty, socio-economic conditions within the home, low expectations in elementary school and unstable relationships with family jeopardized the participants’ learning and development. The protective factors served as buffers for the experienced risks. Educational opportunities, relationships built with teachers, family and community support were protective factors that shaped the participants’ lives in positive ways. As a result mastery experiences in school, vicarious experiences through teachers, the ability to make wise and healthy choices because of friendships, and an internal drive to succeed, participants overcame life challenges to attend graduate college, establish careers and form families.



## CHAPTER VI

### **Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to add to the understanding of resilience by exploring the role of self-efficacy in the lives of African-Americans who overcame poverty to become successful adults. The focus on African-American participants provided a context to analyze the historical, social, and economic risk factors that many African-Americans in high poverty communities encounter as they strive to achieve their goals and dreams. This study focused on adults by asking them to reflect on experiences during their childhood and adolescent years, as opposed to adolescents currently dealing with hardships in their lives. Prevalent risk factors in the lives of the participants included challenging school environments, tenuous family structures, and a cycle of poverty. Protective factors provided participants opportunities to transcend dismal conditions to achieve personal and professional success.

The purpose of this section is to discuss findings in the context of the formation of resilience, focusing specifically on the type of protective factors that contributed to resilience and the importance of efficacy in resilient behaviors. New insights derived from experiences of participants on the relationship between protective factors and sources of efficacy information are discussed. The chapter concludes with implications for school leaders in communities with a high concentration of African-American youth living in poverty, as well as directions for future research.

## **Prevalent Protective Factors**

Psychosocial, physical and cognitive protective factors played an important role in the resilient behavior of the participants. Of all the different protective factors, findings suggest that quality relationships were the critical social mechanism that influenced the attitudes, decisions and behavior of the participants. Supportive relationships across different social contexts contributed to beliefs that participants had the ability to achieve their goals, and these positive beliefs resulted in behavior that led to academic and professional success. The contribution of positive relationships to productive attitudes and behavior can be seen through motivational theories like self-determination. Self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000) explains how behavior and performance are maximized when the psychological needs of competence (Harter, 1978; White, 1963), relatedness (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Reis, 1994), and autonomy (DeCharms, 1968; Deci, 1975) are met. Without supportive relationships, confidence, and internal agency, individuals struggle to perform at levels necessary for goal attainment (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Social conditions associated with concentrated poverty can hinder the formation of relationships supportive of psychological needs. Coleman's (1987) research on poverty demonstrates how families, communities, and schools are challenged to meet the psychological needs of children because relationships within these different social contexts are often tenuous, inconsistent, and at times contentious. That stated, the formation of supportive relationships within schools, peer groups, and the community were critical factors that protected participants in this study from the harmful effects of poverty. Stated simply, relationships were a safety net that prevented prevalent risk



factors from confining participants to a life of poverty. Relationships within the school environment, peer groups, and the community were instrumental resources that the participants leveraged as they encountered hardships.

### **Relationships in the School Environment**

The importance of relationships as a social resource for learning often gets lost in debates on school reform. Improvement strategies tend to respond to the needs of impoverished students with financial investments in technology, capital improvements, new curricula, or other simple inputs (Grubb, 2009). Data from this study suggest that school environments conducive to positive relationships were more valuable contributors of academic and personal achievement of participants than any specific tangible resource. Coleman (1987) argues that schools should compliment demands and rewards to spur achievement with processes and conditions that meet student needs for competence, autonomy, and relatedness (Coleman, 1987). The experiences of participants in this study support Coleman's (1987) argument about the value of using relationships as mechanisms to help children overcome risk factors to achieve academic and personal goals.

Despite experiences and circumstances that placed participants at-risk for academic failure, they each established at least one strong relationship with an educator that partly protected them from academic failure. These relationships kept the participants motivated to do well in school and to focus on academic goals. For Rejoice, it was a middle school teacher that she affectionately referred to as her god mother who provided ongoing words of encouragement, a positive example through the life she lived, and

constant reinforcement of high expectations. Although Rejoice's relationship was formed during middle school, the benefits lasted through high school and college and still shape her perspective on life today. Cheree benefited from several strong relationships with different middle and high school teachers. These teachers motivated her to strive for better grades and higher test scores, and to graduate college. Like Rejoice, Cheree's relationships with teachers provided confidence in her ability to succeed academically.

As seen through experiences of the participants, relationships were functional resources that led to beliefs and behaviors that had a positive effect on academic performance. Positive relationships with caring educators largely cultivated competence in the participants' academic capabilities and beliefs that they could succeed in school and go to college. Positive feedback and on-going communication with educators fostered the academic motivation that was not instilled in them by their family or neighborhood environment. In many ways, a few caring educators replaced parents as primary attachment figures. Positive experiences with caring educators partly contributed to the internal capacity that motivated participants' to work hard in school and to strive for academic goals. If strong relationships with educators had not existed, a critical source of emotional stability would have been lost.

### **Relationships with Peer Group**

The value of supportive relationships extended to peer groups as well. Schools and society in general should not overlook the influence of peer groups as an important protective factor and behavioral influence. Peer groups are a social system that adolescents use to address their psychological needs (Bandura, 1986). It is hoped that peer influence reinforces good values and motivation to achieve academic and personal

excellence rather than promotes harmful and risky behavior that adversely affects achievement. According to Hawkins (1992), adolescents experience a variety of social and emotional changes that can manifest in healthy and/or unhealthy friendships with peers. Despite directives and advice by parents, adolescents seek affirmation from peers when making critical decisions. Peer affirmation can lead to harmful behavior, such as drug use, gang activity, promiscuity, or it can promote healthy decision making. Rather than surround themselves with friends associated with gangs and involved in other deviant behaviors, the participants surrounded themselves with peers who also yearned for a better life and who could truly relate to their daily struggles. Similar to Hawkins' (1992) findings, positive peer relationships affirmed healthy decisions and actions by the participants.

Lee recalled his childhood friend who struggled through economic and family issues and the challenges they both faced living in poverty. There were nights when they lacked food, the ability to wash clothes and a lack of a father figure to provide guidance and assistance. Through the influence of his childhood friend and other friends that he had throughout life and college, Lee developed determination and motivation to transcend his impoverished issues to become a high school and college graduate.

Monta's friends contributed to his ability to succeed as well. Monta's friendship with Adam in junior high and high school provided him access to a home that reinforced the importance of getting a high school and college degree. The consistent visits motivated Monta to study, make good behavioral choices and set a goal to go to a prestigious college. Similarly, Keith was extremely sheltered by his mother but managed to make a couple of friends at each grade level. He recalled the hardship that he and his

neighborhood friends all faced growing up in poverty. Keith and his friends were like brothers. They were there for each other if anyone tried to bully, threaten or harm them.

Rejoice considered her relationship with her friend Deborah as one of the reasons she graduated college and developed a successful career. She explained that none of her family truly cared whether she did well in school or in life but Deborah became that friend who did show that she cared about Rejoice's well-being and future. Deborah consistently asked about Rejoice's assignments for class and whether or not she completed them. She would also ensure that Rejoice had food to eat and would share her clothes and other belongings. Cheree recalled the high school friends she had as being non judgmental, positive and optimistic about the future. They were friends that supported her through her depression and hardship and people who would become life-long friends and companions.

The participants expressed a sincere appreciation for their elementary, middle, high school and college friends and how they shaped their decision making and desire to escape poverty and the life circumstances created by poverty. A positive peer group addressed the participants' need to belong, to feel valued and to believe that this uncertain, yet hopeful, journey was not being traveled alone. Healthy peer relationships kept the participants grounded, provided an outlet for emotions and supported them in difficult times. Peer relationships were based on the need to help one another in critical times, a desire to see someone else with similar struggles achieve success in school and in life, and a support system that fostered healthy decision making.

## **Relationships in the Community Context**

Strong communities contain intangible resources and opportunities that address social and psychological needs as well (Coleman, 1987). Many adults who have successfully made their way out of poor environments credit community organizations, activities, and a strong social network as being extremely important in their coming to grips with themselves, their circumstances, and the world (Seccombe, 2002). The community context has an effect on individuals (Coleman, 1955). Communities with supportive relationships, opportunities, and human resources provide physical, emotional and social support for children and adolescence growing up in poverty (Herbert, 1999). Continuous engagement in extracurricular activities and constructive time commitments were avenues to positive academic experiences for participants. While being involved within these activities, the participants were able to establish relationships with community members, to learn specialized trades, and to take college tours.

Of the six participants, three of them felt that their involvement with activities outside of school offered an escape from risk factors and enabled them to build relationships with positive people who ultimately contributed to their achievement. Rejoice benefited from a high school where she established positive relationships with health care professionals, learned about nursing and healthcare, and attained her certified nurse assistant license. Largely, as a result of relationships formed in the program and her experiences, she had more drive and more confidence to strive for a college degree and to later apply to graduate school. Interactions with adults in the community gave participants the opportunity to interact with professionals who were committed to their success and who they could look at as a successful person who came from a similar

background. The participants would ask the community members questions about college while playing chess or working on homework. Positive interactions with community members' established positive role models that communicated the expectations for college and career success.

### **Summary of Relational Effect**

As described through the participants' experiences, supportive relationships spanning the school, peer group, and community contexts offered invaluable social and emotional resources for individuals whose environments otherwise placed them at-risk for academic and personal failure. All children and adolescents have psychological needs that if left unaddressed undermine performance (Ryan & Deci, 2000). For the participants in this study, teachers, peers, and community activities provided a social safety net that kept them out of trouble and on a path to success. Supportive relationships existed as the participants traversed different life stages. In some cases one strong relationship with a caring adult was important and continuous throughout childhood, adolescence and young adulthood. In other cases, relationships changed across different life stages but the positive effects remained constant.

The participants would not have become as successful as they are if critical relationships did not protect them from the harmful social environment of their upbringing. Teachers, friends, and other adults served as lifelines and guides for transcending poverty and harmful life circumstances. Life would be different today for the participants without the social resources provided through positive relationships in schools, peer groups and the community. Behavior is an individual choice, but choices are affected as much by our social surroundings as our personal orientations. The

participants chose to use the strength and skills that it took to survive in their social environment and allowed those characteristics to foster the formation of life-long goals. Supportive relationships were the protective factor that enabled the participants to realize their innate ability to achieve success.

## **The Interaction of Protective Factors and Self-Efficacy**

The interaction of protective factors and self-efficacy is a complex phenomenon best explained by detailing similarities and difference between the two concepts. Protective factors are social resources that serve to buffer children from prevalent risks by helping them cope with adversity and develop the emotional fortitude to overcome challenges (Bandura, 1997) In essence, protective factors are safeguards for children and adults experiencing hardships (Wolin & Wolin, 1993). Self-efficacy is a cognitive belief in one's ability to attain a desired goal and it serves as an internal support for individuals (Bandura, 1997). Efficacy manifests as a cognitive and emotional state that motivates individuals to take advantage of opportunities and experiences. In many ways, efficacy is a type of internal protective factor; it shapes decisions and behaviors that underlie actions, and is influenced by sources of efficacy producing experiences (Bandura, 1997). There are four major sources of information used by individuals when forming efficacy judgments: mastery experiences, vicarious experience, social persuasion, and physiological and emotional states.

Even though protective factors and sources of efficacy are similar, not all protective factors shape efficacy beliefs. Efficacy is circumstantial, and the context and task will determine one's confidence in his/her ability to achieve a desired outcome (Adams & Forsyth, 2006). Efficacy sources need to be specific to the task. For example, a student may have a great relationship with a football coach but this relationship may not help his confidence to perform well in math. For the relationship to support efficacy in math, the football coach would need to build on the relationship established through



athletics and stress the importance of academics in order for the person to gain college admittance. The coach could also help the young person understand how problem solving in football is similar to solving problems in math.

In general, findings in this study describe the types of relationships supportive of self-efficacy for academic and personal success and how efficacy contributed to participant's goal attainment. There were several types of relationships that increased the participants' beliefs in their ability to achieve academic and personal success. Once established, efficacy had a positive effect on behaviors necessary to complete college and establish a career. Next, relationships with teachers, peers and community members and organizations that were supportive of efficacy and the specific effects of efficacy are explained in more detail.

### **Relationships as Sources of Efficacy**

Strong relationships with teachers were a source of mastery experience for participants. During the elementary years, there were negative experiences that the participants encountered with teachers who did not show concern for their learning and development. These teachers failed to build healthy relationships with the participants, which left a negative imprint in their minds. On the other hand, some of the participants formed positive relationships with some teachers, and these positive attachments helped them to overcome the emotional damage of unsupportive teachers. Supportive teachers helped to build confidence in the participants' ability to learn subject matter, study skills, and essential habits of learning. They also motivated participants to attain good grades, to maintain decent behavior and to persevere through academic challenges.

Like teachers, peers also contributed to efficacy. Participants encountered many peers whose actions and behaviors devalued education, but generally the positive actions of their close friends motivated them to work hard in school. Bandura (1997) notes, social persuasion makes a major difference in whether or not positive choices will be made at critical times of an adolescent's life. Supportive friends were sources of efficacy that partly fueled the participant's motivation and confidence to control their lives.

Extra-curricular activities and relationships in the community also supported efficacy of participants. Relationships in the community were a valuable source of vicarious experiences. For example, Cheree expressed how grateful she was to have her church mentor take her to colleges and ask to see her grades on a regular basis. Cheree knew the expectations placed on her for academic success. Monta spoke proudly about being an active member of his church and how the principles of discipline, patience and hard work instilled in him through church led him to attend and graduate from Notre Dame.

In summary, protective factors emerge in various forms at various times of the participants lives. Some protective factors provided opportunities while others shaped values, beliefs and behavior. Protective factors shaping efficacy had some association to academic tasks and goals. Positive and supportive teachers provided for mastery experiences as well as social persuasion. Community members were a source of vicarious learning. Friends provided motivation, encouragement, and accountability. One relationship did not carry more weight than others; rather the combined effect of teachers, adult mentors, and friends contributed to the participants efficacy to achieve their goals and dreams.

## **Effects of Efficacy on Academic Success**

Efficacy is a dynamic concept that ebbs and flows throughout one's life and experiences. In addition, efficacy is not synonymous with positive outcomes but it does support behavior necessary to achieve goals. According to Bandura (1997) self-efficacy beliefs contribute to motivation in several ways: they determine the goals people set for themselves, how much effort they expend, how long they persevere in the face of difficulties, and their resilience to failures. When looking at the effects of efficacy on persistence and self-regulation, Bandura (1997) argues that people who are confident in their ability exert greater effort when they fail to master the challenge. Strong perseverance usually pays off in performance accomplishments (Bandura, 1997). This was true for participants in this study.

The participants were presented with challenges such as the inner belief and motivation to achieve higher academic success and regulation of their own learning. These challenges were presented at different stages of their lives and if the confidence to persevere was not built up, having protective factors would not have mattered. Cheree recalled the plethora of opportunities that began to open up for her, such as academic clubs, scholarships and recommendations for awards; however, it was not until her efficacy improved that she maximized these opportunities. Rejoice's relationship with her teacher helped her to set goals to have a good life in the future, persevere through challenges and establish a healthy family. Monta's motivation to have a better life increased as he became more confident in his academic ability. Increased efficacy led him to make a commitment to finish school, to graduate college, and to become a man that his mother would be proud of. Lee's change was profound because prior to entering

college he questioned whether or not college was for him because of his past experiences in school. Through increased academic confidence, Lee began to see himself as a scholar, to articulate and communicate effectively and to become a better role model as an African-American male. As Cheree developed more self-worth and dignity, she established better relationships with her family, friends and male acquaintances.

The effect that efficacy had on the participants was life-changing for each of them. Efficacy was a critical protective factor that changed the participants outlook on life, their hope for a better future and their dreams. Even though the participants felt the effects of poverty through family systems, community decay, and under resourced schools, they managed to escape poverty to graduate college, establish careers, and to form families. Now, they have become strong community role models who are helping young people like themselves develop skills and accomplishments to succeed.

### **Implication for School Leaders**

Grubb (2009) argues that conventional policy tools for improving the educational accomplishments of economically disadvantaged children overly rely on simple inputs, such as programs and money into schools, as a means to trigger improvements. The problem is that attention to money and programs can distract from the social and psychological antecedents of quality performance. Limitations to using simple inputs relates to the inability of tangible resources to remove structures affecting the interaction patterns among students, teachers, families and schools. It is important for school leaders to examine how school structures support or hinder the type of relationships that can meet psychological needs of students. Peer relationships and family/school community interactions are critical relational sets for the formation of resilience.

Results from this study confirm existing evidence on the importance of social relationships for the learning and development of children (Coleman, 1987). Without positive attachments to educators, peers, or community members, participants in this study believed their lives would be entirely different. Supportive relationships enabled the participants to overcome risk factors and to defy odds facing many high poverty African-American youth. Relationships were a critical vehicle to resilient behaviors that expanded several different domains and boundaries in participants' lives (i.e. family, community, schools and peers). Understanding the importance of relationships in fostering the internal capacity in high poverty children has implications for how policies and regulations structure interaction patterns in schools. Administrators need to understand how school structures affect teacher-student relationships, student –student relationships, and family–community school relationships.

### **Teacher-Student Relationships**

As school districts assess what is needed to reform high poverty, low-performing schools, there is an assumption that more resources are key to the transformation (Benard, 1995). However, the data collected from participants in this study point to the importance of relationships in shaping efficacy and fostering resilience. Within schools, there are structures that hinder the ability of teachers and students to foster healthy, meaningful relationships. Some prominent barriers cited in the literature include large class sizes, large school sizes, expanding teacher responsibilities, discipline plans that are too rigid and the departmentalized structure of many high schools (Coleman & Hoffer, 1987).

According to Herbert (1999), many teachers find it difficult to foster healthy relationships with students because the responsibilities within the school day limit time for interactions and the daily schedule makes it difficult to do much more than teaching. As a result, teachers lack adequate opportunity to build bonds with students outside of the classroom. More time needs to be structured into the school day for teachers and students to discuss grades, academic goals, leadership opportunities, and life challenges. Some effective ways to increase interaction time include advisory periods, teachers as advisors, Tribes and enrichment time. Another change for fostering healthy teacher-student interactions is too rigid discipline policies. Noguera (2003) argues that schools need to exercise more flexibility with discipline policies in order to build relationships with urban children as a means to change the behavior. With a flexible discipline policy, the students could be given opportunities to improve their behavior through the development of alternative behavioral plans while gaining the skills needed to change inappropriate behavior.

While many structures impede teacher-student relationships, there are examples where schools have redesigned structures to support positive interactions. A few structures include service learning projects, advisory periods and extracurricular activities. Noguera (2003) mentions that schools that value the power of relationship building utilize service learning projects as a means for teachers and students to work together for a good cause while teaching life skills, civic responsibilities and providing opportunities to apply learning. Bondy (2007) found that an effective advisory time can foster a strong attachment between teachers and students because it allows the student additional support for academic and personal circumstances. In general, there is not one

single best way to better connect teachers and students. Schools need to design structures and strategies that are responsive to their needs and community context. What is important is that schools target positive teacher-student relationships as a condition that mediates learning.

**Student-Student Relationship.** Attention to peer relationships in improvement initiatives are critical in understanding the positive and negative decisions made by students. According to Condly (2006) schools often prohibit the students from being able to foster healthy peer relationships. For example, an unhealthy peer culture and teachers who do not allow for collaborative work efforts can foster a negative climate. According to Stewart (2004), continuous conflicts among students with no ability to institute resolution has a harmful effect on performance. Teacher interactions can also affect students' relationships with peers. Teacher conflicts set a poor example for youth who are in desperate need of an orderly, collaborative environment. It can also hinder growth and the ability for teachers to communicate about what is best for the students (Stewart, 2004).

There are also supportive structures that build on the relationships among students as a means to create a supportive learning environment. Some examples include collaborative class projects, college tours, peer conflict/mediation a healthy peer atmosphere of team work and an appreciation of self and others. According to Banks (1997), an atmosphere of collaboration through class projects, field trip experiences, and positive communication establishes a culture and climate that is more responsive to conflict and better suited to learning needs.

**Family-School/Community Interaction.** Positive adults in the community also were critical in the fostering the success of the participants in this study. According to Meier and England (1989), buffering schools from community members and hindering structures that have kept schools from resources hinders schools from meeting student needs. Noguera (2003) believes that the supportive structures consist of schools that embrace a community schools model where schools are seen as the social hub of the community. For such a model to be effective, school leaders need to welcome community members and develop an organization design that connects families with other families.

It is important for the three relationship domain (teacher/student, student/student and family/school community) to establish a balance. If one domain is weak, the other domains need to adjust and work to improve the weak relationship. For example, family-school-community relationships are weak, student-teacher and peer-peer need to be strong. According to Condly (2006), in order for impoverished youth to experience resilience, voids felt by broken relationships must be mended.

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of this study was to add to the understanding of resilience by exploring the role of self-efficacy in the lives of African-American youth who overcame poverty to become successful adults. Payne (2008) asserted that African-American youth typically live in economically impoverished communities that have high rates of unemployment, underperforming school districts, high arrest rates, police brutality, infant mortality, substance abuse, and dilapidated housing. Participants in this study faced broken relationships, a lack of basic resources (i.e. food, clothes and household needs) high mobility and physical and mental abuse. In spite of their circumstances, the



participants all graduated college, and now have families and successful careers. So how were the six participants within this study able to defy the odds? Relationships were the critical factor for the participants' success.

The participants explained despite their challenging childhoods living conditions, the emotional distress and the abuse, they were protected by teachers, friends, guardians and community members who believed in their ability to make it. Sources of efficacy defined the cognitive and emotional change that took place within the participants that allowed them to embrace of the protective factors and ultimately resulted in resilient behavior. The data details that protective factors alone did not result in the success of the participants, confidence had to be built through life-changing academic accomplishments (master experiences); emulation of a mentor, teacher or guardian (vicarious experiences), support from a friend or group of friends that encouraged the participants (social persuasion); and fantasy and faith that supported copying and self-motivation (physiological and emotional states).

The participants were rich in social supports provided through teachers, friends and adult role-models not fancy programs or a lot of opportunities. According to the data gathered, it became apparent that protective factors within the educational and social environment offset risk factors by evoking in participants the self-efficacy that was needed to persevere through challenging circumstances. Through the testaments of the participants, it was clear that without solid relationships, their lives could have taken a turn for the worst.

While the study described the importance of relationships for efficacy and resilient behavior there are more questions that can be explored in future research.

First, what shapes resilience in other social context? A look into further research of resilient students who once lived in a rural and suburban school district in order to look for a variation in risk and resilience patterns. In addition, resilience in the lives of non-African-Americans who grew up in an identical social condition could add to the literature.

Second, what are some strategies in schools to form supportive relational networks for student? A look at successful schools and communities and whether any of the protective factors and sources of efficacy drive the decisions and collaboration efforts among the staff, parents, and students would be beneficial to add to the literature. Are there established norms and policies that provide students the opportunity to connect with teachers, peers and/or parents/community in order to affect change in their lives? Finally, what were the differences between adults who overcame challenges and those who did not? A comparison study of those who became successful and those who do not and the implications surrounding that phenomenon may be of interest to researchers and school personnel. In addition, the difference in the level of efficacy among the female and male participants would be a study that would contribute to the literature.

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## **APPENDIX A**

### Research Question

What role does risk, protective factors, and self-efficacy play in African-American, high-poverty youth experiencing resilience as adults?

Sub Questions

1. How are African-American youth affected by the risks that they experienced within childhood and during their adolescent years?
2. Which protective factor and source of efficacy information is the most prevalent within the lives of African-American youth and why?

Interviewee: GENERAL EXPERIENCE:

1. Please state your first and last name. State your age and your occupation.
2. Take me through a typical day for you growing up in poverty at 12 years of age.
3. What are some of the positive experiences that you had as a child growing up in North Green country?
4. What are some of the most hurtful, negatives experiences that you had as a child and adolescent?
5. How did you emotionally handle difficult situations and decide to persevere during hardship?
6. What were some of the characteristics the schools you attended have, both negative and positive?
7. What are you the most proud of regarding your accomplishments?
8. Why are there not more successful African-American males who come from inner-city, high poverty environments?
9. Was there a person that you emulated growing up and why?

10. What type of friends did you have? Did they encourage or discourage your achievement?

## **APPENDIX B**

### **2<sup>nd</sup> Interview DETAILS OF THE EXPERIENCE**

1. What were the reasons for your hardships growing up? Would your siblings agree with similar hardship? Give detail

2. Take me through a typical day for you growing up in poverty at 17 years of age. How did your family affect this day? Give Detail
3. What are some of the positive experiences that you had as a child growing up in North Green country? Why did you choose these experiences? Were their more positive or negative experiences?
4. What are some of the most hurtful, negatives experiences that you had as a child and adolescence? What happened? What would you do when these things would happen?
5. How did you emotionally handle difficult situations and decide to persevere during hardship? Did you believe in yourself? Was it your friends? Give detail
6. What were some of the characteristics the schools you attended had? Both negative and positive. How did that environment affect you? Give detail
7. What are you the most proud of regarding your accomplishments? Explain what makes these experiences so important you. Give detail
8. Why are there not more successful African-American people who come from inner-city, high poverty environments? What do you believe are their stumbling blocks? Give detail
9. Was there a person that you emulated growing up and why? What made this person special to you? Give detail
10. Do you think that it was an internal motivation that afforded you the success that you achieved?

## **APPENDIX C**

### 3<sup>rd</sup> Interview REFLECTION ON THE MEANING

1. Why are you named this first and last name. Why did you choose this profession? State your age and your occupation.

2. Take me through a typical day for you growing up in poverty at 12 years of age. How were you able to get through the day? Why do you think that poverty affected the situation?
3. What are some of the positive experiences that you had as a child growing up in North Green country? Why did you choose those experiences? How did those experiences affect you as an adult?
4. What are some of the most hurtful, negatives experiences that you had as a child and adolescent?
5. How did you emotionally handle difficult situations decide to persevere during hardship?  
As an adult, what do you think of those times now?
6. What were some of the characteristics the schools you attended have? Both negative and positive. How do you think that your school has affected your adult life?
7. What are you the most proud of regarding your accomplishments? Did you want to continue succeeding? How do you feel about that now as an adult?
8. Why are there not more successful efficacious African-American people who come from inner-city, high poverty environments? How does this issue affect you as a successful adult.
9. Was there a person that you emulated growing up and why? Why did you choose this person? Give detail about this person?
10. What type of friends did you have? Did they encourage or discourage your achievement? Why do you believe that those friends affected your success?

## **APPENDIX D**

### **FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**

1. Do you all consider yourselves resilient and why?
2. What was one of the most challenging times of your childhood?
3. Did you grow up with family support?
4. How would you cope with your stressful life situations?
5. Who or what led you to become successful?



## **APPENDIX E**

### **JOURNAL PROTOCOL (1) PAGE Double Spaced**

1. Describe in detail a pivotal time in your life when you felt hopeless. What happened? Describe the time and incident in detail. How did you make a decision to persevere?
2. Looking back in your childhood and adolescent experiences, why do you think things were the way that they were for you and your family? In what way has your childhood and adolescent years growing up as an African in North Green country affected the way that you think and live as a resilient adult?

### **ARTIFACT PROTOCOL (3) PARAGRAPHS Double Spaced**

Locate a picture, letter, award and/or any artifact that represents a memory that allows you to reflect on your life challenges and/or successes.

Discuss briefly why you chose this piece of artifact. As you look at it, please write about how it makes you feel and what memories arise.



*The University of Oklahoma*

OFFICE OF HUMAN RESEARCH PARTICIPANT PROTECTION - IRB

IRB Number: 13365  
Approval Date: March 10, 2011

March 10, 2011

Ebony Johnson  
Educational Leadership and Policy Studies  
2311 West Woodrow Place  
Tulsa, OK 74127

**RE: Resilience and Efficacy In African-Americans**

Dear Ms. Johnson:

On behalf of the Institutional Review Board (IRB), I have reviewed and granted expedited approval of the above-referenced research study. This study meets the criteria for expedited approval category 6, 7. It is my judgment as Chairperson of the IRB that the rights and welfare of individuals who may be asked to participate in this study will be respected; that the proposed research, including the process of obtaining informed consent, will be conducted in a manner consistent with the requirements of 45 CFR 46 as amended; and that the research involves no more than minimal risk to participants.

This letter documents approval to conduct the research as described:

IRB Application Dated: March 09, 2011  
Consent form - Subject Dated: March 01, 2011  
Survey Instrument Dated: March 01, 2011 Artifact protocol  
Survey Instrument Dated: March 01, 2011 Journal protocol  
Survey Instrument Dated: March 01, 2011 Focus group  
Survey Instrument Dated: March 01, 2011 3rd interview  
Survey Instrument Dated: March 01, 2011 2nd interview  
Survey Instrument Dated: March 01, 2011 1st interview  
Protocol Dated: March 01, 2011

As principal investigator of this protocol, it is your responsibility to make sure that this study is conducted as approved. Any modifications to the protocol or consent form, initiated by you or by the sponsor, will require prior approval, which you may request by completing a protocol modification form. All study records, including copies of signed consent forms, must be retained for three (3) years after termination of the study.

The approval granted expires on March 09, 2012. Should you wish to maintain this protocol in an active status beyond that date, you will need to provide the IRB with an IRB Application for Continuing Review (Progress Report) summarizing study results to date. The IRB will request an IRB Application for Continuing Review from you approximately two months before the anniversary date of your current approval.

If you have questions about these procedures, or need any additional assistance from the IRB, please call the IRB office at (405) 325-8110 or send an email to [irb@ou.edu](mailto:irb@ou.edu).

Cordially,

Lynn Davenport, Ph.D.  
Chair, Institutional Review Board

1816 West Lindsey, Suite 150 Norman, Oklahoma 73069 PHONE: (405) 325-8110

Ltr\_Prot\_Fappv\_Exp

