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Overcoming Adversity: High-Achieving African American Youth’s Perspectives on Educational Resilience

Joseph M. Williams and Julia Bryan

This qualitative multicase research study identified the home, school, and community factors and processes that contributed to the academic success of 8 urban, African American high school graduates from low-income, single-parent families. Ten main themes emerged: school-related parenting practices, personal stories of hardship, positive mother–child relationships, extended family networks, supportive school-based relationships, school-oriented peer culture, good teaching, extracurricular school activities, social support networks, and out-of-school time activities. Implications for counselors are discussed.

Keywords: resilience, African American, urban, counselors, partnerships

Across the United States, millions of public (K–12) school students from low-income, urban, and rural communities overcome dire circumstances, such as poverty, inadequate housing, food instability, and financial insecurity, to succeed academically (Wyner, Bridgeland, & DiIulio, 2007). They defy the stereotype that poverty precludes academic success and that low income and low academic performance are inextricably linked. They demonstrate that children and adolescents from the most challenging backgrounds can succeed in school, despite sometimes improbable circumstances (Wyner et al., 2007). These students are often referred to as educationally resilient (i.e., students who succeed in school despite the presence of adverse conditions) and constitute an important segment of the public (K–12) school population (Waxman, Gray, & Padrón, 2003). Unfortunately, they often go unnoticed, unless they are no longer making satisfactory academic progress (Wang, Haertel, & Walberg, 1997). As a result, high-achieving, lower income students are less likely to graduate from high school, to attend selective colleges, to graduate from college, and to receive a graduate degree than their high-achieving peers from higher income families (Wyner et al., 2007).

These circumstances are especially true for high-achieving, low-income students from urban areas, where resources are few and frequently distant. Previous research has consistently shown that children living in urban areas are much more likely to face financial, social, and other barriers that prevent school success and other problems in comparison to their suburban and rural peers (Chau, Thampi, & Wight, 2010). Yet, despite these obstacles, many public (K–12) school students from low-income, urban areas go on to succeed academically (Waxman, Gray, & Padrón, 2004; Wyner et al., 2007). It is important that counselors and other school personnel understand why some students succeed despite difficult circumstances while others fail. Without such understanding, well-intended school policies, programs, and counseling services to improve outcomes for low-income urban students will likely be ineffective (Fraser, 2004).

Relatively, little attention has been directed to the resilience of African American youth. Much of the research on the academic performance of African American youth focuses on both the causes and the consequences of underachievement (Obidah, Christie, & McDonough, 2004; Ogbu, 2003). Although few people would argue the importance of this research, such research ignores African American students who beat the odds and succeed at school. Consequently, relatively little is known about the protective factors or processes that operate in the daily lives of African American youth. Over the last 2 decades, only a few studies on resiliency have focused on African American children and adolescents (Braddock, Royster, Winfield, & Hawkins, 1991; Clark, 1983; Cook, 2000; Ford, 1993, 1994).

The present study potentially adds to this small but emerging body of literature by investigating the contextual factors that contribute to the educational resilience and success of urban African American youth. This is not to say, however, that individual factors (e.g., affect, self-efficacy, and self-regulation) do not matter or matter less, but the current study focused on the home, school, and community protective factors that mitigate against school failure, particularly among African American students from low-income, single-parent families (for more comprehensive reviews of the risk and resilience literature, please see Benard, 2004; Fraser, 2004; Williams, 2012). The purpose of this study was to identify the factors and processes that contribute to the academic success of urban, African American high school graduates from low-income, single-parent families. The following broad research question was addressed: What experiences do Afri-
American high school graduates from low-income, urban backgrounds report as contributing to their academic success?

Method

Given the scant research on the educational experiences of African American (K–12) students who succeed academically despite adversity, a qualitative study is appropriate because it yields depth in the data rather than surface patterns (Patton, 2002). Furthermore, qualitative methodologies are ideal for identifying factors and generating new data relevant to populations or groups that have been previously overlooked or understudied (Merchant & Dupuy, 1996). The present study used a multiple case study design to provide the authors with a systematic way of looking at events, collecting data, analyzing information, and reporting the results (Yin, 2009). It was anticipated that each case would yield findings that were unique to each participant, yet similar across the breadth of participants due to sociodemographic similarities.

An ecological perspective was used to frame the research question and inform the research design. Essentially, the ecological perspective considers a broad range of factors within the students’ social environment to help identify the individual characteristics and contextual conditions that contribute to student outcomes (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Therefore, the ecological model allows researchers to look beyond the commonly cited causes of resilience (e.g., personality traits) and considered environmental factors (e.g., family, school, community) that might have a significant impact on the educational resilience of students (Fraser, 2004). Thus, the ecological perspective provided a “big picture” perspective of the factors that promote educational resilience within different systems.

Participants

Participants were eight individuals (four men and four women) between the ages of 18 and 21 years old, and all self-identified as being of African American descent. All participants lived with their mothers except one who lived with his grandmother. Cumulative high school grade point averages of participants ranged from 2.75 to 4.20 on a 4.0 scale ($M = 3.5$). The American College Testing scores of participants ranged from 18 to 27 ($M = 24$). All participants were sophomores in college, except one who was a freshman. All but one of the student participants were born and attended high school on the south side of Chicago, Illinois; the exception was born and attended high school in East St. Louis, Missouri. There were several reasons for selecting participants who are essentially from the same place, mainly determined by their shared experience of growing up in an environment plagued by poverty, chronic unemployment, crime, and the country’s highest rates of homicide involving African American youth (U.S. Department of Justice, Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2009).

Criterion sampling was used to identify and understand cases that were information rich (Patton, 2002). Participants were identified as those exhibiting the following risk factors in Grades 9 through 12: (a) raised in a low-income household (i.e., eligible for free or reduced-price lunch), (b) raised in a single-parent household (i.e., a parent with no spouse present living with one or more own, never-married children under the age of 18 years), (c) raised in a low-income urban neighborhood, and (d) attended a high-poverty high school (i.e., public school where 76% or more students are eligible for free or reduced-priced lunch).

Data Collection

The first author contacted gatekeepers (e.g., deans, counselors, and educators) at a midwestern, historically Black college and university who agreed to assist with identifying students who met the study criteria. Once a list of potential candidates for the study was generated, candidates were contacted by telephone to ensure that they met the criteria for the study and given a brief explanation of the purpose of the study. Participants who expressed interest in participating were sent a packet (via e-mail) containing (a) an informed consent form, (b) a description of the study, and (c) a demographic questionnaire. Students were asked to complete the consent form and demographic questionnaire as well as provide documentation of their high school achievements.

Two separate meeting times were scheduled: The first meeting was a 1-hour individual interview, and the second meeting was a 1-hour focus group interview. An interview protocol was created to ensure consistency in gathering information (Patton, 2002). The interview questions were formulated by analyzing the general literature related to the educational resilience of Black K–12 students. The questions ranged from very broad (e.g., “Why do you think you received good grades in high school?”) to more focused (e.g., “What messages, if any, did you hear about education while growing up in your home?”). Participants were asked to review and provide feedback on the interview questions. It was anticipated that the pilot study participants would indicate if the questions were appropriate or not and recommend any additions or deletions to the interview questions. The students believed that the interview questions were appropriate for the given study. Follow-up questions to the individual interviews were conducted with each of the eight participants by telephone and lasted 30 to 40 minutes.

Researcher as Instrument

The first author, who is an African American, conducted the study and analyzed the data. He could have been considered at risk of failing during his public high school years; therefore, his own personal experiences could have influenced and shaped the way this research was organized, written, collected, and interpreted. Caution was taken to avoid adversely influencing the course of this study with procedures.
implemented to curtail personal biases and assumptions. For example, the first author documented any assumptions and biases in a reflective journal before each interview was conducted. Additionally, field notes were annotated in the journal to facilitate critical reflections when comparing the findings to the theoretical framework. The effect of the second author’s biases and assumptions on the research was not examined, because she did not conduct the study or analyze the data. The second author worked with the first author to develop the manuscript.

**Trustworthiness Procedures**

Several techniques were used to ensure the trustworthiness of the present study. For example, multiple data sources (e.g., interviews, documentation, field notes) were used to answer the research question. Two additional strategies included peer debriefing and member checking. Peer debriefing involved enlisting the support of two colleagues with experience conducting qualitative research to discuss evolving suppositions and findings from the study (Patton, 2002). The present study used member checking by asking participants to (a) review the interview questions to check for clarity, (b) review their personal interview transcripts to ensure adequate representation of their ideas and comments, and (c) comment on the themes and expressions of emerging patterns that contributed to the results. The participants believed the findings accurately depicted their ideas and comments. Saturation occurred naturally during the progress of the study once incremental learning became minimal.

**Data Analysis**

Data analysis occurred as data were collected. All individual interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed according to the constant comparative method (Strauss & Corbin, 1997). Major themes were identified and individual responses categorized according to the major theme. Next, the data were distributed to colleagues with experience conducting qualitative research; they examined and named the themes. In the constant comparison method, raw data are divided into three distinct, but related processes of analysis. These three stages are open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. Open coding is the process, by which data are broken down, examined, compared, conceptualized, and categorized (Strauss & Corbin, 1997). In the present study, open coding entailed question-by-question, line-by-line, and paragraph-by-paragraph analysis of the transcript as well as analysis of observations, field notes, and other documents (Strauss & Corbin, 1997). The second stage in the process, axial coding, consisted of grouping the data together in new combinations by identifying relationships between categories and their subcategories. The final stage involved linking these categories, themes, and assertions to answer the research question. (The reader should note that only the individual interviews were analyzed and reported for this article.)

**Findings**

This section describes the common themes that emerged from the data. These themes reflect student participants’ responses to the in-depth individual interviews. Individually and collectively their stories paint a portrait of the environmental factors that contributed to their academic success despite adversity. Ten main themes emerged: school-related parenting practices, personal stories of hardship, positive mother–child relationships, extended family networks, supportive school-based relationships, school-oriented peer culture, good teaching, extracurricular school activities, social support networks, and out-of-school time activities. The first four themes shed light on the family factors that influenced students’ academic success. The next four themes spelled out the school factors reported as important to their academic success, and the last two themes addressed factors in their communities that influenced their academic achievements. Direct excerpts from the transcripts are used to illustrate these themes. Participant pseudonyms are provided in these findings.

**Home Factors**

*School-related parenting practices.* All eight participants described school-related parenting practices (e.g., verbal praise for good grades, setting high but realistic expectations, monitoring academic progress in school, supervision of and help with school work, and the use of physical discipline in response to bad grades and behavior in school) as the most important contributing factor to their academic success in the midst of adversity. For example, Brandii commented,

> My mom worked multiple jobs, but no matter what time she’d get home from work, she’d always ask, “Did you do your homework?” OK, then she might ask about school and stuff like that, or she might have my older sister check my work to make sure it was done, and done correctly. . . . She made it her business to monitor my progress at school.

Six of the eight participants discussed at length the spankings they received at home for bad grades or getting into trouble at schools. In particular, the students reported that the spankings served to reinforce the importance of education as well as motivation to do better in school. For instance, Shante explained, “What spankings communicated to me was that my parents valued education.” Similarly, Alonzo shared,

> I know they say [spanking] kids isn’t right, but for me personally, that kept me out of trouble . . . and kept my grades up at school, because I knew my mom was paying attention and cared about my education even if she didn’t always verbalize it.

Furthermore, all the participants reported that the words of encouragement from their parent(s) or guardian(s) kept them focused on school (most days) and away from outside distrac-
The response below illuminates this sentiment:

My mother, she kind of always pushed for me to get better grades and to not “give up” . . . and in certain cases when I was being lazy or still not where I should be, she always kind of motivated me by telling me I’m better than this or that she believes in me. . . . Even when times were rough, she didn’t let me use that as an excuse not to try. (Jaylen)

Finally, all eight participants shared that their parents had high yet realistic expectations concerning their academic performance, which served as an interim source of motivation. One student participant, Shante, explained,

I knew what was expected of me [academically] and I did everything I possibly could to meet those expectations. I was so used to living up to [my mother’s and grandparents’] expectations about school that I actually [started to] enjoy school and being intelligent for myself.

Personal stories of hardship. Seven of the eight participants cited the personal stories of hardship told by their parents or extended family members as a contributing factor to their drive to succeed and graduate. These stories were about the negative consequences of not finishing high school (e.g., unemployment, low-paying jobs, limited social mobility). Simply put, these stories served as a frequent reminder to students about the importance of receiving a good education. The following response illustrates this perspective:

My dad didn’t graduate from high school. I think he obtained his GED [general equivalency diploma] but he didn’t go onto college. . . . He’s always telling me to continue with my education and how hard it is for him [to survive without] a high school diploma or a college degree. . . . Those talks really kept me on track. (Asha)

Positive mother–child relationships. Five of the eight participants reflected on their desire to “give back” to their mothers by doing well in school and going on to college. Many of the participants described their mothers as warm, supportive, responsive, and close. The following excerpt illustrates how the students’ bond with their mothers served as a source of motivation to succeed in school:

Making my mom proud is the only reason I tried in high school because I knew how much it meant to her. However, after a few years I began to put forth effort because of myself . . . so I guess it started with her and ended with me. (Dana)

Extended family networks. Of the eight student participants, seven indicated that extended family members—aunts, uncles, cousins, and grandparents—had a positive effect on academic performance. In particular, extended family members served as an extensive social support network that assisted students in overcoming the difficulties (e.g., emotional, financial, social) often associated with single-parent households. Moreover, these networks provided students with positive role models, academic and moral support, information about college, and supervision. For example, Asha described the types of academic support she received from her extended family:

[My family] always helped me academically. They were open to spending long hours helping me with homework . . . applying to colleges . . . writing personal statements . . . paying applications fees . . . and visiting schools. When my mom was unable to help me, I would turn to my grandmother or aunt or my dad. . . . I never felt alone when it came to my academic pursuit; there was always someone in my corner.

School Factors

Supportive school-based relationships. All eight student participants reported having at least one adult at their school (e.g., teachers, counselors, coaches, college recruiters) who cared about them and knew them well. These supportive school-based relationships were characterized by warmth, concern, openness, and understanding, thus contributing to students’ academic engagement and school performance. For instance, seven of the eight participants identified school personnel who served as parental figures while students were in their care. The following narrative highlights this perception:

My basketball coach and track coaches really influenced my grades or whatever . . . [they] were more like father figures and they really pushed academics. . . . If I had to come to them about anything, a problem or anything they were always there and then again, they were also there to correct me when I was wrong. They kind of helped me grow into a man . . . so they were my biggest influence. (Jaylen)

Likewise, all eight participants were able to identify at least one adult in their school who contributed to their academic success through mentorship, identifying their strengths, setting high yet realistic expectations, and helping students make educational and career decisions. The following excerpt illustrates this theme:

There was one lady who worked in our school as an admission counselor for [XXX] University. She harassed me for 3 years about going to school and making something of myself. She even filled out my application letter for me. . . . After I graduated [high school], I didn’t go straight to college. So she showed up one day at my grandmother’s house and said, “We want to change your life, you should come today.” That was enough to get me to go to college. So that day I left for college with no money in my pocket, only two trash bags of clothes. I learned to trust her and now I refer to her as my mentor. (Marcus)
Five of the eight participants reported that they developed trust and respect for those school personnel who took the time to address the academic and nonacademic needs of students. Brandii shared,

I remember during high school, I didn’t have Internet access or any resources at home to complete my homework; I didn’t have a computer or anything. . . . [My teacher] would let me come to class early and unlock one of the computer labs and let me use the computer to do my work. Later during the school year he convinced the school to sell him an old computer, which he gave to me. He even helped me get a job during my summer years of high school, to make sure I stayed out of trouble. Throughout high school if I need anything, school related or not, he would help me find the resources to get it.

School-oriented peer culture. Six of the eight participants recognized the importance of close friendships among peers who faced similar life challenges, yet valued education. These invaluable connections served as a source of accountability and motivation to succeed academically, regardless of their circumstances. The following excerpt illustrates this theme:

Me and my friends were concerned about each other’s success. When you have a group like that you feel more free to do what you want to do in the classroom. You don’t feel nervous about being smart, because everybody there was on the same page. . . . That’s something you don’t see too often with kids coming from our background. My friends and classmates were one of the biggest influences ever. (Andreal)

Good teaching. Six of the eight participants cited the importance of teachers who made learning relevant and fun. According to students, good teaching was characterized by connecting curriculum to students’ personal interests and lives, providing experiential learning opportunities, and setting high standards. These methods of teaching helped increase the participants’ engagement in school. For example, Shante explained,

I had a few teachers who were really dedicated and didn’t succumb to the whole “we just graduated them.” They were like I don’t care if you’ve been here for 5 years; you’re going to get this material. So they made learning more hands-on and fun by incorporating experimental learning into their lessons. I definitely think that helped out.

Extracurricular school activities. Six of the eight participants identified extracurricular school activities (e.g., athletics, academic clubs, and social organizations) as a contributing factor to their academic success. Marcus and Asha described it as follows:

I was a part of an after-school program where we played chess, and professional and college football coaches would come and speak to us. I mean these were people who came from the same disadvantaged background as me and actually did something in their life and came back to the hood to encourage us. Those experiences really gave me the motivation to do better, if not for me, then someone else. (Marcus)

Community Factors

Social support networks. Three of the eight participants identified a handful of very close social ties (e.g., friends, family, neighbors, and other acquaintances) within their communities that contributed to their academic success. In particular, these social networks provided students with encouragement, support, and advice at critical points in their lives, such as facing eviction, pregnancy, or dealing with the violent death of a close friend. The following excerpt illustrates this theme:

My friends, neighbors, and close friends of the family were all preaching the same message. They would say, “Ain’t nothing on the streets.” They would encourage me to get an education. When I became pregnant with my daughter during my sophomore year, I thought about dropping out, but they encouraged me to stay and told me about the resources out there to help teenage moms finish school. (Dana)

Out-of-school time activities. Four of the eight participants cited local churches and community organizations as important and influential to their successful academic achievement. Specifically, these community-based organizations offered students a wide range of activities that took place after school, on the weekends, and during the summer and other school breaks. For instance, Brandii described her church and its impact on her academic achievements:

The church I attended was big on education, and so they would take us to like different schools and let us look around at different colleges and stuff like that and help us fill out the college applications, write personal statements, and apply for scholarships. In addition, we had several programs that allowed you to register and take classes that you could substitute for a class you can take in college.

Discussion

Taken together, these results suggest that home, school, and community contexts play a key role in fostering the resilience and academic success of urban African American students from low-income, single-parent families. For example, school-related parenting practices were identified by all the participants as essential to their academic success in the midst of adversity. It seems possible that these parenting practices served as a buffer to many of the environmental barriers (e.g., family discord, inadequate housing, and financial insecurity) that too often deter students of color and those from economically disadvantaged backgrounds from academic success.
relationships that provide resources, knowledge, and information are in direct contrast to the social capital (i.e., networks and relationships) as moral, navigational, and emotional capital that is important for their success in school. They mentioned the connection to at least one caring adult in the school building who went beyond his or her role to help students. These influential adults earned the respect and trust of participants because they (a) attempted to understand the challenges students faced, (b) advocated on behalf of students’ academic and nonacademic needs, (c) acted as parental figures, (d) reinforced positive academic performance and student behavior, and (e) set high yet realistic expectations. Consistent with the literature on caring in schools, African American students interpret the display of these characteristics by teachers and other school adults as caring about them (Ladson-Billings, 1994). These results suggest that school-based relationships constitute a significant source of social capital in the academic outcomes of low-income African American students. As noted by Moore-Thomas and Day-Vines (2010), learning for African American children is an interactive process undergirded by effort and social support. Research strongly suggests that students of color and those from economically disadvantaged backgrounds function more effectively when they feel respected and valued by school personnel (Stipek, 2006).

In addition to supportive school-based relationships, several school characteristics were identified by participants as contributing to their academic success: (a) high standards and expectations, (b) challenging curriculum and instruction, (c) extended after-school learning opportunities and activities, (d) positive relationships with other resilient students, and (e) well-qualified teachers. Kober (2001) argued that these school characteristics are required for successful performance in school among students of color and those from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. These findings further support the idea that schools serving students from low-income families and communities have the potential to foster educational resilience (Ceci & Papierno, 2005).

Finally, with regard to community support, half of the student participants \( n = 4 \) identified community resources and institutions, such as churches, community centers, libraries, local businesses, youth organizations, and other organizations, as contributing to their academic success. A possible explanation for this might be that community resources provided students with (a) constructive activities in safe settings (physically and psychologically), (b) opportunities for positive relationships with adults and peers, and (c) development of skills and exploration of interests. These results are consistent with those of other studies and suggest that programs and activities conducted by community-based organizations help students succeed in school and beyond (Hall, Yohalem, Tolman, & Wilson, 2003; James, Jurich, & Estes, 2001). Furthermore, these findings corroborate the ideas of Bowen and Richman (2002) and Wang et al. (1997), who suggested that it is important to consider participation in activities in contexts outside of school that may support the achievement of African American youth in urban environments—especially because nonschool time accounts for nearly 80% of a child’s waking hours (Bowen & Richman, 2002).

Implications for Counselors

There are several implications of this study for all counselors and how they work with African American students, especially those from low-income backgrounds in urban schools. Themes emerging from this study highlight the importance of counselor interventions that move beyond the counseling room to (a)
help families strengthen student achievement; (b) facilitate supportive school-based relationships and culturally relevant caring in schools; and (c) promote strengths-focused school–family–community partnerships that create opportunities for positive peer relationships, extracurricular school participation, out-of-school activities, and extended social networks for low-income African American students. We discuss, as follows, ecological interventions counselors can use to foster educational resiliency for these students. Counselors may use these interventions in school or community-based settings.

Helping families strengthen student achievement. One of the findings of the study suggests that low-income African American parents may be involved in their child’s education (e.g., school-related parenting practices, positive parent–child relationships, and personal stories of hardship) in ways not recognized by school personnel with a narrow vision of what constitutes as legitimate participation (Fields-Smith, 2005). Unfortunately, too often schools do not recognize and honor different ways families are involved in their children’s learning and unwittingly restrict the ways that parents can be involved in their children’s schooling (Mapp, 2003). Therefore, counselors should help school personnel to redefine their vision of family involvement, identify diverse forms of involvement, and provide different outlets for family participation (Mapp, 2003). On similar lines, counselors can work with families and schools to increase parenting support to low-income African American students. Seeing that parental support in this study seemed to center on moral support and encouragement, counselors could play an integral role in teaching and helping parents to access social capital by providing parent information and opportunities for building family networks. Parent education programs and support groups provide a forum for building supportive networks among families, sharing academic and college information, and discussing school-related parenting practices (e.g., verbal praise for good grades, setting high but realistic expectations, monitoring academic progress in school, supervision of and help with schoolwork) that could help African American parents augment the support they provide to their children. Such services should be empowering, culturally sensitive, and geared toward the parenting needs and goals identified by parents and centered on parents’ schedules.

Supportive school-based relationships and culturally relevant caring. The emphasis on the importance of supportive and caring adult–student relationships to the low-income African American students in this study implies that counselors may need to do care work in schools whether they are serving as school counselors, as mental health counselors and consultants in the schools, or as advocates for African American clients. By care work, we mean counseling and teaching “practices characterized by deliberate attempts to infuse acts of care with understandings derived from examinations of the privileges that surround the lives of those involved, particularly the teacher” (Lindsey, 2000, p. 270) and the counselor. The findings from this study suggest that adults who were perceived as caring went out of their way to make sure students succeeded. Care work necessitates counselors implementing strategies to develop more supportive counselor– and teacher–student relationships and school climate and to connect students to caring school adults. Care work begins with self-examination (Lindsey, 2000). To prepare the foundation for caring and supportive school-based relationships, counselors will need to facilitate their own as well as teachers’ and administrators’ examination of their beliefs about and interactions with African American children and families. Beliefs guide and direct behavior, and without awareness, counselors may rely unintentionally on implicit biases that result in negative or uncaring attitudes and behaviors toward African American children (Bryan, Day-Vines, Griffin, & Moore-Thomas, 2012; Bryan & Henry, 2012; Gregory, Skiba, & Noguera, 2010). Counselors themselves must first recognize African American families’ values, strengths, and support to their children. Some approaches to counselors’ care work include providing professional development on cultural awareness and caring for school faculty and staff; advocating on school improvement teams for conditions of care; skillfully reframing negative counselor–teacher narratives about African American students and families to strengths-focused narratives, highlighting their strengths and successes; and consulting with teachers to create counseling, academic, discipline, instructional, and classroom strategies and interventions that create caring teacher–student relationships.

Interventions to foster caring, supportive teacher–student relationships with African American students must focus on teacher–student interactions as well as classroom and school climate or ethos in general (Pianta, Stuhlman, & Hamre, 2002). Counselors should be able to present teachers with strengths-based, culturally relevant behavioral and communicative strategies that relay high expectations, affirmations, and support for African American children (Day-Vines & Day-Hairston, 2005). Furthermore, counselors can help teachers and administration consider how they can make teacher–student relationships more personal, less evaluative, less competitive, and more responsive to students’ emotional needs (Pianta et al., 2002). In addition to caring relationships with teachers, and other adults in schools, counselors function as important sources of social capital for low-income African American students. Undeniably, school counselors constitute a critical source of expectations, information, and resources for low-income African American students who are more likely to seek out school counselors than their White peers (Bryan, Holcomb-McCoy, Moore-Thomas, & Day-Vines, 2009; Bryan, Moore-Thomas, Day-Vines, & Holcomb-McCoy, 2011).
were unable to because of the absence of these activities and opportunities in their communities. By building school–family–community partnerships, counselors across all specialties can play integral roles in connecting students to school and community-based programs and opportunities for school extracurricular participation, extended social networks, and out-of-school activities that may be lacking in their own neighborhoods (Bryan, 2005; Bryan et al., 2012; Bryan & Henry, 2008, 2012). Partnership programs may provide African American students with academic or school-oriented peer cultures and positive relationships with other resilient students. Examples of programs include cross-age peer, adult–youth, and group mentoring and after-school, academic enrichment, college preparation, and college outreach programs.

Partnerships with African American organizations and programs can provide culturally responsive sources of enriching extracurricular participation, extended social networks, and out-of-school activities for African American students (Ginwright, 2007; Moore-Thomas & Day-Vines, 2010). Churches and other faith-based organizations play a central role in African American communities and provide extended social networks and social capital for many families (Cook, 2000; Ginwright, 2007). Furthermore, Black community organizations such as churches, clubs, and voluntary associations can provide what Ginwright (2007) termed critical social capital. Critical social capital moves beyond social mobility (i.e., networks of trust that provide information, knowledge, and resources) to foster African American youth’s collective and political consciousness and build collective cultural and racial identity that engages them as activists and change agents in their neighborhoods. Hence, counselors can build partnerships with Black sororities and fraternities, African American churches, local branches of community organizations such as the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People), and programs designed for African American students’ success such as the YMCA (Young Men’s Christian Association) National Black Achievers Program (Moore-Thomas & Day-Vines, 2010).

In addition to Black organizations, counselors can partner with a variety of community organizations to create programs for students or connect them to already existing resources, mentors, and enrichment programs (Bryan, 2005). For example, partnerships with university student organizations, campus programs, and precollege outreach programs provide a valuable source of tutors, mentors, and resources for creating innovative new programs for African American students. One example of a strengths- and empowerment-focused university–school partnership that is increasing academic success and college enrollment for African American students is Empowered Youth Programs (Bailey & Bradbury-Bailey, 2010). Such youth programs provide students with the opportunity to experience high expectations from adults, rigorous curriculum, extracurricular participation, extended social networks, and positive relationships with other African American students.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

There were several limitations to the present study. First, the study included a small number of participants from one midwestern state; therefore, the results may not have implications for other populations. For this reason, it is important to examine other populations for the purpose of comparison. Second, the study was vulnerable to examiner bias because the author developed the questions; recruited participants; analyzed the data; and developed the findings, recommendations, and conclusions. These limitations do not weaken the findings of this study but serve as a starting point for future research by providing factors that others should consider when conducting similar research.

Although the current findings suggest that protective factors within home, school, and community environments may be linked to academic success of urban youth from high-risk backgrounds, they are limited. There is a need to further explore the role of African American single mothers in the education of their children. Interviewing the mothers for more information could enrich the study and possibly bring another perspective to the story, often told by students, teachers, and administrators. Likewise, there is a need to investigate the specific parenting practices that help high school students experience academic success against the backdrop of environmental issues. Indeed, the relationship between parenting practices and academic achievement among high school students is not yet known. In addition, a longitudinal research design that follows urban ninth graders through 12th-grade graduation would be informative. Such a study will help to provide a much more comprehensive model of development that considers influence from school, family, communities, and peers over time. Also, the role of extended family members in the academic success of students is often overlooked in studies of family involvement and is a topic that requires further research. Finally, more research is needed to identify the intrapersonal, interpersonal, and contextual factors and processes that contribute to the resilience and academic success of African American students from a variety of other contexts (e.g., rural, suburban, and affluent and multiracial populated schools).

Conclusion

All students—especially those at risk of school failure—have the capacity to succeed in school and in life. One of the best ways to help low-income African American students succeed in school despite significant challenges is to identify the often overlooked strengths, resources, or support systems that they possess and build on them. In other words, students’ families and communities must be considered resources to be tapped. Counselors should strive to use these resources or support systems to inform the home, school, and community-based services and interventions they provide for students. Although counselors cannot control community demographics
and family conditions, they can create collaborative partnerships and advocate for school policies and practices to ensure that these address the specific needs of students at risk of academic failure. It is important to note that academically competent students exist in all racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic groups. Unfortunately, their successful experiences are rarely empirically examined.

References


Cook, K. V. (2000). “You have to have somebody watching your back, and if that’s God, then that’s mighty big”: The church’s role in the resilience of inner-city youth. *Adolescence, 35*, 717–730.


