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The purpose of this study was to determine what African Americans who serve in upper-level school leadership positions and who have faced significant barriers as children attribute to their resilience and success. I focused on individual resilience, using the definition summarized by VanBreda (2001): “[R]esilience theory addresses the strengths that people and systems demonstrate that enable them to rise above adversity” (p. 1).

The researcher utilized qualitative methodology in conducting research. To select participants, the researcher used a purposive sampling method. The participant sampling was also a sampling of convenience, as the researcher tried to find participants located within the same county of the researcher’s residence. In order to identify potential participants, I networked with professional contacts who have knowledge, position, and power to gain access to the participants. My networking contacts called Gatekeepers provided me with the names of African American male and female participants who are currently serving as principals, assistant principals, or in upper level district positions. Pseudonyms were used for the gatekeepers and the participants. During a three-month period, in-depth individual interviews were conducted with five African American male and female principals who excelled academically despite adversity.

The participant’s perspectives on how they overcame adversity and achieved academic success are essential for identifying and understanding the factors attributed to their resilience and success. Ideally, the results of this study may be helpful to districts in

providing professional development opportunities that focuses on school factors that will contribute to the success of African American students demonstrating resilience. Furthermore, it may inform the parents and community regarding programs focused on creating and enhancing the personal and environmental attributes that promote achievement outcomes for other youth in high risk environments (Fraser, 2004; Wang & Gordon, 1994).

Findings from the study revealed that protective factors across multiple contexts of students' lives contributed to their academic success despite adversity. Eight themes emerged: precise parenting practices, financial hardships as a motivator, school-based professionals as parental figures, creating a cultural of high expectations, positive student praise and recognition, supportive relational networks within the community, community and church participation, and belief in God.

CHILDHOOD RESILIENCE OF AFRICAN AMERICAN  
SCHOOL LEADERS

by

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Approved by

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## APPROVAL PAGE

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## **CHAPTER I**

### **INTRODUCTION**

#### **Background of the Study**

While sitting in my study, my eyes roamed around the walls looking at the various college diplomas that my husband, three children and I have received. I moved my head from side to side symbolizing my disbelief as tears began to roll down my face while touching the iron plated sign with the numbers 2209 inscribed on it. This was the address of the Projects that I grew up in from the age of 2 until I reached the age of fifteen. At that time, because of my sixteen year old sister's pregnancy, the housing authority allowed us to move one street over from where we were living. The additional bedroom allowed my oldest sister enough space for her and her baby son. I recall being excited about no longer having to sleep on top of our bunk beds. Finally, I had my own bedroom and some space to move around.

I smiled as I looked at the other metal plate inscribed 1925 also hanging on the wall. This new address was a little more spacious but not enough room for our youngest sister to begin living with us. She continued living with another lady one street away from us in the same housing project. My mother had given her to Ms. Effie, her best friend, to raise a few months after she was born. Fifty years later, I still do not know why my mother made that decision. She never talked about it or allowed us to discuss it. However, the family rumor was, our father did not want a third child and he would marry

my mother if she gave our sister to Ms. Effie. Subsequently, mom did just that; however, they never got married. My father moved back to New York City, married another lady, and had a son.

Ms. Effie, also a single mother, living in poverty with her biological son, resided in a three bedroom project located across the parking lot from us. I was happy that she lived close by because I could see my little sister playing outside periodically. Ms. Effie and mom both dropped out of high school during their senior year because they became pregnant. Neither of them returned to school not even to get their General Educational Development (GED).

Because of their limited education, the majority of the mothers living in the projects had jobs that required manual labor such as cleaning houses or working in a factory on an assembly line. Although their finances were limited, there was a sense of pride and responsibility that existed in our neighborhood. For instance, it was very common to see grass cut neatly and decorated with artificial flowers, and “*Keep off the Grass*” signs posted throughout yards in the neighborhood.

Although my mother was proud of her yard work, she never mentioned that she was proud of my older sister and I, even though we both were A-B students throughout school. Nevertheless, education was where I received the most validation. I remember always seeking affirmation and confirmation. Regardless of whom I received affirmation from, it did not substitute for what I was supposed to receive from my mother, father, or a mother’s boyfriend. To compensate for this huge void, I found affirmation and confirmation from other people.

School and church were places I received affirmation and praise for being a good role model. Both institutions were fountains which provided me the hope I needed and I considered them safe places where I could communicate the disgust that I felt about my mother's boyfriend. Every Sunday at church, I prayed for God to forgive me for the hatred I felt for him. During my Sunday school classes, I heard stories about the lost being found, mistreated being vindicated, and the oppressed being set free. To me, freedom meant no longer dreading the weekends and fearing that my mother would be seriously injured or killed. It meant seeing my mother smile, listening to her beautiful voice singing, and eating her delicious meals. It meant waiting on the monthly food stamps knowing we would be going to the grocery store to get our favorite foods. Finally, freedom to me meant listening to mom say, "thank you for washing the dishes, emptying the trash or sweeping the kitchen floor without me having to tell you what chores needed to be done." Simply put, freedom meant laughter while doing my chores, mastering the daily routines, obedience, and respecting and pleasing my mom.

Lee and Bowen (2006) and Somers, Owens, and Piliawsky (2008) assert parental expectations have a major influence on student achievement. Norton (1993) suggested that family routines prepare children for school routines, providing expectations and structure. Some of the routines that I encountered were dusting the living room on Saturday mornings and folding the laundry in a very precise manner. Growing up we followed such traditional routines and rituals such as changing clothes after school, being ready when the church van arrived each Sunday morning, and to coming inside the house when the street lights turned on. These rituals did not require special talents or skills but

were expectations and they were just as important as saying my blessings before eating and my prayers before I went to bed. Interestingly, these were the same routines instilled in the homes of my neighborhood friends. Spagnola and Fiese (2007) noted, “Naturally occurring family routines and meaningful rituals provide both a predictable structure that guides behavior and an emotional climate that supports early development” (p. 284).

Obviously, I had some talents, skills and resilience because from kindergarten to the fifth grade, I attended three different schools due to redistricting. By the time I became a high school senior, I had attended seven different schools and only moved once. I was somewhat disappointed but not surprised that I was redistricted my twelfth grade year. It was surprising that I was going to a predominately white school for the first time. Yet, my resiliency helped me to graduate from high school in the top 10 percent of my graduating class. By then, changing schools was as normal as the police cruising through our neighborhood or responding to a call in the neighborhood.

There were also years that I listened to my mother receive verbal abuse and horrific physical abuse. The slaps, punches, and kicks she received on the weekends from her alcoholic boyfriend named Mr. Bud were atrocious and left indelible prints in my mind. Interestingly, my baby sister watched Ms. Effie experience the same type of abuse. On the weekends, many of the mothers, including mine, would go to the neighborhood liquor houses and get drunk. Later, they would return home, turn up their music extremely loud and we would sing and dance to the music. However, before the night was over, it was normal to hear the sounds coming through the screen doors of

adults cussing, fussing and fighting. These were typically acceptable behaviors observed in the neighborhood.

Nevertheless, my two sisters and I graduated from high school and my youngest sister and I graduated from accredited universities. Bennis (2009) explains using experiences from your childhood and adolescent years that will help you take charge of your life now so that you will become the master of your life and not the servant. It was those experiences that kept me from using profanity and drinking alcohol. More importantly, I demanded respect from anyone I dated.

For years, I have meditated on what motivated some of my neighborhood friends and me to continue to excel academically no matter what obstacles we faced. As an African American principal who grew up in a single-parent home, an impoverished neighborhood, with limited resources and poverty, I am interested in understanding the internal and external influences that contribute to the resilience and success of African American students living in poverty. Even though my childhood barriers were significant, I continued pursuing an education after high school graduation and was in the top ten percent of my graduating class. Consequently, I have obtained the following degrees: an undergraduate degree in Early Childhood Education, Masters of Education, and two Educational Specialist degrees. Currently, I am enrolled in a Doctoral Program while beginning my twenty-sixth year as an educator. Although I experienced success, several of my childhood friends became school dropouts, single parents, or were incarcerated.

Recently at a shopping mall, I had a conversation with three African American sisters that were my childhood friends. During our conversation, we reminisced about growing up in the projects and our lives today. Surprisingly, two of the sisters had dropped out of school, had been incarcerated, were single parents, and live in the same projects in which we were raised. Fortunately, the third sister graduated from high school, attended college in another state, and still resides there as a social worker with her husband and children.

Doll and Lyon (1998) indicated that “students from highly stressed communities and families struggle up a much steeper path toward adult success” (p. 348), citing numerous studies that have shown poor outcomes to be associated with poverty, family dysfunction, and other maladaptive living conditions. Research on resilience has consistently shown that low levels of income and single parent homes are two potent risk factors that tend to have adverse impacts on families and children (Cicchetti & Garmezy, 1993). Despite the disproportion of at risk youth living in poverty and facing poor outcomes, many African American youth adapt including me.

Although there are strengths within all cultures, African Americans have a rich history of religious and spiritual traditions and teachings, which have remained strong over time. Bachay and Cingel (1999) found that regardless of their ethnic background African American women often attribute their successes to their faith in God, resilience, perseverance and hope for a better future. Participants in his study consistently stated that they had faith and a relationship with God.

An examination of Biblical principles with African American children emerged in Billingsley's (1999) and in Haight's (1998, 2002) research. Both authors concentrated their research within religious institutions. The Biblical principles were used as a device to empower the children in everyday life. Levy and Wall (2000) explored spirituality from a different perspective. They examined spirituality as a resiliency aspect. The focus of their study was on African American children who lived in a location strongly affected by community killing. These children were studied for risk factors and resiliency factors. Fortunately, being a part of various institutions, such as schools, churches, and community centers exerted positive influences on these children. As a result, these establishments were identified as resiliency components with protective factors that assist young folks in dealing with everyday problems in living. Levy and Wall (2000) identified the church as a positive influence in the lives of children and a way to implement protective factors in their lives. Levy and Wall (2000) study lacked information as to what were the protective factors learned in the church and whether these factors could be utilized in other crisis outside of community homicide.

In the community, factors that helped protect against risks involved subjects relying on community members, such as teachers, neighbors, friends" parents, church groups, and ministers, for support (Werner, 2005). Urban communities can provide plenty of resources to support the educational resilience of urban youth. For example, healthy communities support families and schools; establish high expectations and clear norms; and encourage active participation and collaboration in the life and work of the community (Benard, 2004). Benard (1991) notes that "...communities exert not only a

direct influence on the lives of youth but, perhaps even more importantly, exert a profound influence on the lives of the families and schools within their domain and, thus, indirectly powerfully affect the outcome for children and youth” (p. 16). Thus, healthy communities can help children and youth who live in high-risk circumstances overcome adversity and facilitate academic success and youth development (Benard, 2004; Wang, 1997). These communities provide youth from disadvantaged backgrounds with the support systems and resources needed to develop resiliency (Barrow, Armstrong, Vargo, & Boothroyd, 2007). Several pragmatic studies have recognized that neighborhoods which foster resilience among their youth tend to have: (a) safe recreational facilities, offer educational and employment opportunities, and accentuate preventative health care (Winfield, 1994); (b) caring adults and organizations at the home, school, and community levels (Bowen & Chapman, 1996); (c) the presence of social organizations (i.e., health care facilities, child care services, job training opportunities, religious institutions, and recreational options) that provide for healthy human development; (d) well-developed and integrated networks of social organizations that contribute to low neighborhood delinquency rates, improved public safety, school-based community services, and available religious communities (Wang, Haertel, & Wahlberg, 1994); (e) available community resources; community and school-based activities with an emphasizes on social and cultural norms to help youth understand what constitutes desirable behaviors; opportunities for youth to participate in the life of the community (Benard, 1991); high expectations for good citizenship along with the opportunities for students to develop new comforts and talents (Barrow et al., 2007); and (f) the availability of good health

care, and financial opportunities (McMahon, Singh, Garner, & Benhorin, 2004; Wang, Haertel, & Wahlberg, 1997). Because the context for childhood development extends beyond the school and the family, healthy communities are vital for youth from a variety of ages and risk situations (Wang & Gordon, 1994a).

Due to their close proximity to students, professional counselors, particularly those who are based in schools settings and community agencies, are ideally positioned to intervene in the lives of African American youth (Bryan, 2005, Ford, 1993, 1994). However, professional counselors, schools, families, or social and health agencies alone cannot address the large number of obstacles to learning that many low income and racial and ethnic minority students (K-12) in urban settings confront on a daily basis (Bryan, 2005; Wang et al., 1997). Hence, counselors must team and collaborate with school personnel, families, and community members to foster strengths-based partnerships (Bryan & Henry, 2008) and develop comprehensive programs and interventions to meet the multiple and interconnected needs of children and their families (Bryan, 2005; Ford, 1993, 1994). According to Bryan and Henry (2008),

. . . [s]trengths-based partnerships utilize the assets found in schools, families, and communities to create strengths enhancing environments, promote caring and positive adult-child relationships, strengthen children's social support networks, foster academic success, and empower children with a sense of purpose. (p. 149)

Researchers and educators believe in using the school-family community partnerships to promote protective factors that foster educational resilience (Benard, 1991; Bryan, 2005; Wang, 1997) and to help eliminate some of the barriers and risk that

many urban African American youth face. According to Bryan (2005), school-family-community partnerships are:

. . . collaborative initiatives or relationships among school personnel, parents, family members, community members, and representative of community-based organizations such as businesses, churches, libraries, and social service agencies . . . [and] involves work[ing] together to coordinate and implement programs and activities aimed at the increased academic, emotional, and social success of students served by the school . . . [Accordingly][w]hen schools, families, and communities foster protective factors, they are putting risk-reducing mechanisms in place that mediate risks in four ways: [c]hildren are less impacted by the effects of risks with which they have come in direct contact; the danger of exposure to the risk is reduced or the risk itself is modified; children's self-efficacy and self-esteem are enhanced; and children are provided with opportunities for meaningful involvement in their environments (p. 220).

Wang and her colleagues (1997) suggest that the goal of partnership collaborations should be to “. . . harness the resources of family, school, and community to create contexts that support students' learning success by meeting the physical and social wellness needs of students and their families” (p. 13).

In other words, these programs should emphasize on decreasing risk factors and promoting positive protective factors within the frameworks of their home, school, and community environments. The importance of linking the school, family, community, academic and life success is one that needs significant attention (Bryan, 2005; Bryan & Henry, 2008; Ford, 1994).

Braddock, Royster, Winfield, and Hawkins (1991) looked specifically at the relationship between participation in extracurricular sports activities and academic resilience versus academic resignation in a large sample of African American males. Data were collected using the National Education Longitudinal Study survey, which was

administered to a randomly selected group of eighth grade students from a nationally representative sample of middle schools (also determined through random selection). The researchers looked at the African American males' responses only, determining their involvement in athletics and employing multiple regression analyses to estimate the effect of athletic participation on academic resiliency as measured by a number of indices. These included a measure of educational aspirations (e.g., anticipation of finishing high school, intentions to go to college), peer status (e.g., level of perceived popularity among classmates), and academic investment (e.g., level of academic effort, attendance, interest in subjects). Braddock et al. also statistically controlled for a number of relevant variables that could affect availability of and access to athletic programs (e.g., school size, socioeconomic status of students, student test scores).

A recent study by Guest and Schneider (2003) examined extracurricular participation, looking at both athletic and non-athletic activities, and its influence on academic achievement and educational ambition. The researchers also examined contextual variables (i.e., percentage of students from the school that have gone to college and school community's socioeconomic status) that contributed to achievement and ambition. As part of the Alfred P. Sloan Study of Youth and Social Development (a 5-year longitudinal study of middle and high school students in the sixth, eighth, tenth and twelfth grades by the University of Chicago), students had completed the Teenage Life Questionnaire, a modification of instruments used in the National Education Longitudinal Study. The researchers collected data regarding the students' participation in extracurricular activities, their perceptions about whether they thought they were seen

as a “good student” and as “athletic,” control variables (i.e., gender, race, parents’ education, course sequence in mathematics, misbehavior, and grade level), and the contextual variables mentioned above. The outcome variables of achievement and expectations were measured by grade point average (GPA) and students’ self-report of educational plans following high school.

So, what accounts for the success of one and failure of the other, given that both individuals come from similarly “extremely stressed” beginnings such as single parent homes, alcoholism in the home, parents in abusive relationships, and poverty? Was it the family, innate traits, school, or community support factors that made the difference? I am interested in doing research to determine to what African Americans who serve in upper-level school leadership positions and who have faced significant barriers as children attribute to their success.

### **Problem Statement**

A critical issue facing the United States of America is the plight of single parent families, especially those whose family income levels are low. African American students living in poverty are more likely to drop out of school than White students and constitute the majority of those in the school prison pipeline (McNeely, Nonnemaker, & Blum, 2002). Each year, students leave home without graduating and this problem is exacerbated in the African American community (Edelman & Jones, 2004). According to Western, Pettit, and Guetzkow (2002), 52% of African American male high school dropouts have been incarcerated by the early thirties.

Over the past five decades, researchers have increasingly become interested in the resilience of African American youth. A requirement of resiliency is the presence of extreme risk that threatens adaptation or normal development. Risk is defined as “an elevated probability of a negative outcome” (Wright & Masten, 2005, p. 20) whereby a group of people with a specific risk factor is less likely overall to do well in some regard (Wright & Masten, 2005; Yates & Masten, 2004).

Poverty is one of the most profound and debilitating risk factors (Masten, 2001; Schorr & Schorr, 1988; Luthar, 1991). As a result of historical and contemporary racism and discrimination, a disproportionate number of African Americans live in poverty, and generally live among other African Americans who are also poor (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2001). While 11% of all U.S. families have incomes below the federal poverty line, about 23% of all African American families have incomes below the federal poverty line and are more likely to live in severe poverty (Webster & Bishaw, 2007). Further, African Americans tend to have longer periods in poverty and, therefore, are more likely to suffer from its long-term effects (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2001). Nearly 34% of African Americans under the age of 18 live in poor homes, while the national poverty rate is 17% for all U.S. youth under the age of 18 (Webster & Bishaw, 2007).

Throughout America there are African American children growing up in the same impoverished neighborhoods, in single-parent homes with limited resources, and facing financial hardships. Many African American children will become involved in the juvenile justice system, abusive relationships, and drop out of high school (Edelman &

Jones, 2004). Conversely, some African American children will pursue an education despite these obstacles. They will become successful professionals and contributing members of their communities.

Rutter (1990) described resilience as “the ubiquitous phenomenon of individual difference in people’s responses to stress and adversity” (p. 181). A large number of studies have focused on the topic of resilience in some capacity. Miller (1999) focuses on resiliency in the context of African American youth whose “distinctive racial and environmental circumstances” frequently go unconsidered in such research. He suggests that resilience contains several features and such definitions as “the ability to bounce back, recover or form a successful adaptation in the face of obstacles and adversity” encompass the many existing meanings precisely.

While research has many philosophies and methods for individual and life success, a study by Benard (2004) approached resilience from a perspective of strength as an alternative of weakness. Benard suggests that resilience research should begin with attempting to determine how and why individual strengths emerge, and then identify protective factors that permit youth to strive in spite of adversity. Shene (1999) suggests that the objective of resiliency research is to discover how certain individuals are able to be adaptive and “bounce back” from risks and challenges in life. Shene (1999) stated that the focus of resiliency research should be to discover how resiliency occurs, and the objective should be to help resiliency occur. The characteristics of resiliency and how it occurs is central to this study.

Resiliency is conceptualized as good outcomes despite serious threats to adaptation or normal development (Masten, 2001). Resiliency requires that two conditions be met: (a) the existence of high risk that threatens normal development; and (b) observable, successful adaptation as indicated by better than predicted outcomes given the high risk status (Masten, 2001; Masten & Coatsworth, 1998).

### **Significance of the Study**

As an African American administrator that faced significant challenges during my youth, I know firsthand the value of educating teachers and school leaders in understanding factors that attribute to their resilience and success of African American school leaders who faced significant barriers as children. The more we know in this area, the more we can help those we are called to serve by preparing them for the future. It is important to train all educational leaders to be culturally informed and sensitive to beliefs and practices that differ from those of the dominant culture. This research study may be helpful to principals, teachers, and counselors with establishing a rapport with African American students', helping them demonstrate resilience while facing significant challenges. Also, school district superintendents and school level leadership may gain a better understanding regarding the importance of equipping principals and teachers with professional development opportunities that focus on factors that contribute to the success of African American students demonstrating resilience. Bernard and Marshall (2003) found that an understanding of resilience can yield benefits to society that is more valuable today than ever before.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to identify what African Americans serving in upper-level school leadership positions who faced significant barriers as children attribute to their resilience and success. I will focus on individual resilience, using the definition summarized by VanBreda (2001): “[R]esilience theory addresses the strengths that people and systems demonstrate that enable them to rise above adversity” (p. 1), combined with the definition of educational resiliency by Wang et al. (1994), “the heightened likelihood of success in school and other life accomplishments despite environmental adversities brought about by early traits, conditions, and experiences” (p. 46).

The study will examine the following research questions:

1. What do African American upper level school leaders perceive as being the most significant factors or events that have contributed to their resilience and success?
  - a. What role do African American upper level school leaders attribute to their parents in their resilience and success?
  - b. What role do African American upper level school leaders attribute to school in their resilience and success?
  - c. What role do African American upper level school leaders attribute to the community in their resilience and success?

- d. What role do African American upper level school leaders attribute to participation in community organizations, churches or programs in their resilience and success?

This work was important because there continues to be the need to better understand the life experiences of African American youth who face significant challenges. This research will equip educators, school principals, and upper level district leaders with understanding factors needed to assist African American youth who demonstrate resiliency in spite of significant barriers.

### **Summary and Overview**

This study will focus on the manifestation of resilience of successful African American school leaders who lived in poverty and faced significant challenges during their youth. The goal of this study is to delineate the attributes that influence resilience and academic achievements of African American youth who lived in poverty, faced significant barriers, yet became successful school leaders. Chapter I provides an overview of the study and introduces the rationale for investigating the factors that determine what African Americans who serve in upper-level school leadership positions and faced significant barriers as children attribute to their resilience and success. In addition, chapter I presents and introduces the problem statement, the significance of the study, and research questions. Chapter II focuses on previous literature and information about the construct of resilience, provides a definition of key concepts and terms, and provides a description of models of resilience that guide research efforts. Chapter III describes the research methodology which includes the research sample, methods for

collecting data and its analysis, and any problems that emerge in my research. Chapter IV describes the participant's profiles and narratives. Chapter V describes the interpretation and findings of the data which includes summaries and samples such as interview excerpts, themes and subthemes that emerged from the data. Chapter VI provides summary, implications, recommendations and conclusion regarding the implications of the research.

## **CHAPTER II**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

It is critical to the future of a society that its children become competent adults and productive citizens. Competence generally refers to a pattern of effective adaptation in the environment, either broadly defined in terms of reasonable success with major developmental tasks expected for a person of a given age and gender in the context of his or her culture, society, and time, or more narrowly defined in terms of specific domains of achievement, such as academics, peer acceptance, or athletics. (Masten & Coatsworth, 1998, p. 205)

Chapter II presents the literature pertinent to this study. The purpose of this qualitative research study was to explore the ways in which the family, school, church and community environments contribute to the academic success of African American youth facing significant barriers in the home. This chapter will review the major environmental risk and the protective factors identified in research which are capable of supporting or hindering resiliency in African American youth. It provides information about the construct of resilience through a definition of terms and a description of models of resilience that guide research efforts.

#### **Protective Factors**

On the road to becoming competent adults many children and adolescents are faced with adversity and situations that put their development in jeopardy. Some children are considered “high risk” in terms of the level of adversity or risk factors that threaten their development and transition into adolescence and adulthood. Many resiliency studies, some of which have followed children into adulthood, found that despite the

level of adversity or compelling risk factors, a great percentage of these children became healthy, competent adults and in fact demonstrate resilience in adulthood (Benard, 1991).

While empirical research in the area of resilience is relatively new, a substantial focus over time has been placed on the effects of stress that put children at-risk for a number of adverse outcomes. Scientists in several disciplines, including health and medicine, social work, developmental psychology, and psychopathology have attempted to identify these relationships between stress and adjustment. Recently this has become a more important area of study to researchers in the school psychology and educational disciplines who are interested in helping students to become more successful across academic and social domains that include families. Unquestionably, researchers in this area have an important duty to clearly and precisely communicate what they are examining and attempting to measure with regard to resilient outcomes in children (Luthar, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000).

The way in which adversity, threatening circumstances, and thriving have been measured varies widely from one investigation to the next. When resilience is divided into domains, which often include academic, behavioral, emotional and social domains, researchers employ operational definitions that suit their specific studies. For example, academic resilience as defined by Finn and Rock (1997) involves students 1) earning passing grades throughout high school, 2) achieving “reasonable” scores on standardized achievement tests, and 3) graduating from high school on time. Tiet and Huizinga (2002) reviewed the literature and found that the outcome component of the construct of resilience has been measured using cognitive competence, academic achievement,

school-based competence, self-esteem, social resources, education, vocation, marriage and life satisfaction, psychological disorders, delinquency and behavioral disturbances.

In many sectors of society, African Americans must, and many have, overcome extreme adversities as children and through adulthood, which could have had toxic effects on school success, behavior, physical and mental health and overall success and livelihood. An excerpt from W. E. B. Du Bois's, *The Soul of Black Folk*, edited by Hamilton (as cited in Bauman and Bauman, 2001) posits, “. . . The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife . . . he simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of opportunity closed roughly in his face.” This selection speaks generally to the many extreme hardships that African American adults have had to face historically to become successful in mainstream society academically and socially.

Indicators of risk or adversity over the years have included medical problems at birth, conditions of physical handicap, parents with mental illness, alcoholism or criminal involvements, absence or loss of a parent, low parental education and vocational skill, neglect and maltreatment, institutional upbringing, family instability and/or conflict, minority status, and urban living, among others. Tiet and Huizinga (2002) noted that most researchers assess a number of variables simultaneously and, while it makes the investigations more complex in nature, it lends support to the notion that resilience is a multidimensional construct.

### **Family Bonds**

Resiliency is evident in families who provide emotional support for one another and utilize strong communication skills (Seccombe, 2002). Families exhibiting this trait are more likely to spend quality time together, share spiritual beliefs, and practice specific traditions. There are often extended members of single parent families that help provide assistance in difficult situations (Ford, 2000). These family units also exhibit a shared core of values and beliefs, which further helped to unite them in overcoming obstacles. According to Garrett, Anthrop-Gonzalez, and Velez (2010) and Seccombe (2002), if these supports cannot be offered by both biological parents, other family members such as grandparents, aunts, uncles, siblings and single mothers can provide a stable foundation for resiliency traits just as effectively.

Among African American adolescents, close relationships with extended family members are common. Historically, the extended kin network has been a central component of the African American family system (Billingsley, 1999; Hill, 1972; Stack, 1974). Within the African American community, extended family members often live in close proximity and tend to be actively involved in the lives of family members' children (Hill, 1972; Stack, 1974). In fact, when asked to identify important adults in their lives, such as role models and mentors, African American adolescents often identify adult extended family members (Bryant & Zimmerman, 2003). For example, growing up I spent a lot of weekends with other relatives including my grandparents, cousins, and others identified as play aunts and uncles. The commonalities found in each home were:

taking a bath before bed, praying before and attending church on Sunday morning with or without them.

### **Spiritual Teachings**

Although there are strengths within all cultures, African Americans have a rich history of religious and spiritual traditions and teachings, which have remained strong over time. Within my neighborhood the majority of the children were expected to be ready for the church van to arrive and take us to Sunday School and remain for the 11:00 a.m. service led by the preacher. Attending vacation bible school during the summer was just as important. Interestingly, I do not recall the mothers in the neighborhood attending church as often as the children. African Americans promote spiritual and religious growth in their children's lives by encouraging the practice of religious and spiritual teachings (Haight, 1998, 2002). These teachings occur in the homes, churches, schools, and area community centers.

In order to acquire an understanding of religious and spiritual education to African Americans, it is necessary to examine briefly the history of Africans and factors that influenced their spirituality upon arrival to America. African American's religious and spiritual teachings derived from two major sources according to testimonies of ex-slaves who lived during the nineteenth century. Initially, Africans practiced spirituality in Africa and taught their children their beliefs; and secondly during their enslavement upon reaching America, the white missionaries shared their religious knowledge and practices. According to Stuckey (1987), before coming to North America many of the Africans were from central and western areas of Africa such as Congo-Angola, Nigeria,

Dahomey, Togo, the Gold Coast, and Sierra Leone. In these areas of Africa religion was an integral part of culture. As early as 1843, slaves commented in various writings that it was common practice in communities that children, within a year or two after they were able to walk, would join in some of the religious ceremonies. Despite the African ceremonies centered on elders and ancestors, the children played a very vital role to pass on African culture to each generation. The first Africans brought with them memories of their own religious practices and beliefs. They believed in a supernatural and spiritual world. They believed in the presence of a spirit in all things and a presence of their ancestor's spirits on earth. They looked to the goodness of the spirit world for guidance (Wimberley, 1978).

Wimberley (1978) states that the missionaries taught the Africans their way of praying, their doctrines, and their rites of Christianity, as a means of Christianizing them and teaching the manner in which to behave in a “civilized world.” Even though the missionaries taught the Africans their beliefs, the Africans used their own means of interpreting the content of the teaching.

As the missionaries taught various practices and beliefs, the Africans discovered various contradictions to their own beliefs. For example, some missionaries taught them it was God’s will for them to be enslaved. This created a conflict in the African’s minds therefore they sang soulful songs and gave powerful prayers for freedom. Many African Americans created their own means of worship, which reflected a combination of West African beliefs and Christianity (Logan, Freeman & McRoy, 1990). The slaves used

metaphors, rhythm chants, music, clapping, prayers, sermons, shouting as a means of prayers, sermons, shouting as a means of religious and emotional expression.

Despite their enslavement, they sang spiritual songs and gave powerful prayers about freedom, which gave them hope in a better way of life for themselves, and their children. The African Americans believed in a God that makes “the wounded whole.” Believing that they had been wounded by their enslavement, their belief was equally strong that God’s power would one day heal their “wounds”. Because of their perception of themselves as wounded souls, they connected with the belief of God’s son as Jesus, who was a suffering servant. They believed Jesus knew all about being a wounded soul and also had many troubles during his human existence, as they were experiencing during their enslavement. They understood through the teachings of the missionaries that Jesus was a suffering servant who knew about their troubles, and Jesus would see them through their suffering. They identified with Jesus and other characters of the Bible and related these characters’ sufferings and oppression with their own. African Americans used their religious beliefs to remain resilient through slavery and other travesties.

As African Americans gained their spiritual and religious freedom secretly, they also began to use the Bible in nonreligious and for oral communicative ways. In regards to non-religious purposes, the Bible was the only reading material that the African Americans possessed. As early as 1795, it was illegal for slaves to read. Nevertheless, the Bible was their first and only reading material. The missionaries read the Bible aloud to them, and eventually gave them the Bible and taught them to read the Bible. The Bible became the primary text in African American religious education and teachings of moral

behavior. The African Americans took ownership of the stories. They identified with the Biblical stories of oppression, compassion, and freedom and the belief of a spiritual presence that existed to help them during their times of need. The Bible was a different tool for them but with the same message of hope. The African Americans also used the Bible for oral communication, which was a practice with Africans in their homeland. These skills remain vital today in their homeland. They used fables, myths, legends, songs, and proverbs. The Africans used this oral approach in religious education also. Many times the taskmasters were unaware that the African Americans were transmitting messages in their songs.

Through Bible teachings slaves learned resilient ways to live in the midst of trials and tribulations. The tradition of oral communication by storytelling became a means of expression and taught religious principles of God's presence and ways of overcoming oppression in everyday life. During this time of enslavement, the parents, grandparents, uncles, and aunts took the role of the religious educator.

According to Logan, Freeman and McRoy (1990), in Africa children were taught to value family members and others in the community in which religious rituals and celebrations were important parts of the expression of everyday life. The intent was to motivate the children to share in the rituals and celebrations, to carry on these rituals to future generations, to develop a strong moral character, and to give the children hope and faith in a better tomorrow rather than of slaves.

Slave parents began teaching their children at an early age about God, Jesus Christ, the Bible, prayer, their family histories and the spiritual life. Children were taken by parents to the religious meetings in the fields and thickets

where both parents and children were mutual sojourners ‘getting religion.’ (Wimberly, 1978, p. 18)

African Americans conveyed knowledge about life and living from one generation to the next. They passed on knowledge about their relationship with God, not what the taskmaster or missionary believed their relationship with God should be. The Africans Americans believed they were in God, for God and by their faith in themselves, and Him, He would work through them to help them cope with their situations. In order for African Americans to cope with the humiliation of enslavement, they developed systems of support, such as family, friends, benevolent societies, and the church.

For centuries, African Americans have received spiritual harmony through their religious teachings. While in church, I listened to the testimonies of many church members as they gave praise to the Lord for carrying them through their difficult times and delivering them out of dim bleak situations. Their testimonies gave me hope that God would deliver me from the projects, weekend fights and alcohol. It was my experiences in church that helped me to believe that I can experience success if I prayed and continued to work hard. According to Coles (1990), African American children attempt to understand the reason things happen to them. Therefore, they call upon the experiences and teachings of their religious life, the spiritual values they have received, as well as other sources of potential explanations. There are various factors of children living in poverty that affect their perceptions of the religious teachings; however caretakers’ reactions and behaviors are highly influential.

### School Environment

Across the United States, there are millions of public (K-12) school students from low-income urban, suburban, and rural communities who overcome personal adversity and dire circumstances, such as low socioeconomic status, inadequate resources, and fragmented services 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 from economically and socially disadvantaged backgrounds can learn at the highest levels and provide hope to others caught in similar circumstances (Wang, 1997). Even though they lack equitable access to resources and services that enhance academic performance, many lower income students still find ways to excel (Fraser, Kirby, & Smokowski, 2004), giving counselors and educators' reasons to believe that students can perform at very high levels despite economic and social disadvantages. For example, according to a report released by the Jack Kent Cooke Foundation and Civic Enterprises (2009), an estimated 3.4 million public (K-12) school students residing in households with incomes below the national median, rank in the top quartile academically (Wyner et al., 2007). They consist of students living in poverty and those from working-class families. More than one million or approximately one-third of these children received free or reduced price lunch (Wyner et al., 2007).

These high-achieving, lower-income (K-12) students are often referred to by researchers and educators as educationally resilient (i.e., students who succeed in school despite the presence of adverse conditions) and constitute an important, but scarcely

understood, segment of the public school population (Wang et al., 1994; Wyner et al., 2007). Despite their tremendous achievements in school, educationally resilient (K-12) students often go unnoticed and unrecognized, both in therapeutic and school settings (Benard, 1991). Instead of being recognized for their excellence and encouraged to strengthen their achievement, resilient lower-income students often slip through the cracks of the public education system and slide toward a dim future (Wyner, et al., 2007).

Sadly, lower-income public (K-12) students neither maintain their status as high achievers nor rise into the ranks of high achievers as frequently as higher-income students (Wyner, et al., 2007). The causes are numerous and are related to both the social environment in which low-income students live and the education they receive in school (Barton & Coley, 2009). This is especially true in urban areas with high concentrations of poverty or unemployment. For instance, low-income urban students are more likely than their suburban or rural peers to be exposed to environments that do not foster educational and economic success, such as poverty; unemployment disparities; gang violence; under-resourced neighborhoods; homelessness; frequent mobility; inadequate educational experiences; and limited resources and services (Bryan, 2005; Chau, Thampi, & Wight, 2010). These urban students are also more frequently educated in schools with fewer certified teachers; less-rigorous curriculum; less access to technology (Barton & Coley, 2009); less parental involvement in education, both at the school and in the home; fewer social support networks (Brady-Smith, Fauth, & Brooks-Gunn, 2003; Evans, 2004; Moore, Redd, Burkhauser, Mbwana, & Collins, 2009); lower per pupil expenditures; lower teacher expectations concerning their academic performance (Barton, 2003;

Bennett et al., 2004; Carey, 2002); disparities in school-based services and resources; and less access to books, computers, and other devices that stimulate or improved learning in comparison to their suburban and rural peers (Barton, 2003; Bennett et al., 2004; Evans, 2004; Carey, 2002).

Similarly, educators and researchers have documented several school characteristics that contribute to the academic underachievement of low income and racial and ethnic minority students in urban public education. For example, Kober (2001) noted that school size and culture, school district funding and resources, teacher-student ratios, teacher turnover rates, home environment, neighborhood conditions, parent participation, school policies and practices, instructional material, school facilities' physical conditions, and number of qualified/experienced teachers all have an impact on student outcomes, such as academic performance, educational aspirations, and access to higher education (Artiles, Harry, Reschly, & Chinn, 2002; Barton & Coley, 2007; Evans, 2004; Fenning & Rose, 2007).

While it is important to investigate the contextual conditions that may influence academic success for all students, it is of utmost importance to address the educational needs of urban Black students (Bryan, 2005). The achievement gap between Black and White students has been widely examined for both the scope of the gap and the reasons behind it (Fryer & Levitt, 2002). A number of factors have been identified as significantly contributing to the gap including the added challenges of overcoming poverty, unemployment disparities, and limited access to resources, and fragmented services which African Americans have historically endured in America (Barton &

Coley, 2009). This gap appears before children enter kindergarten, and it persists into adulthood (Christie, 2002; Losen & Orfield, 2002). Such a problem will continue to worsen unless something is done to improve the social environment and quality of education received by urban Black students (Wyner et al., 2007).

As African American children travel the path to becoming competent adults many African American children and adolescents are faced with adversity and situations that put their development in jeopardy. Some African American children are considered “high risk” in terms of the level of adversity or factors that threaten their development and transition into adolescence and adulthood. Many resilience studies, some of which have followed children into adulthood, found that despite the level of adversity or compelling risk factors, a great percentage of these children became healthy, competent adults and in fact demonstrate resilience in adulthood (Benard, 1991).

Henderson (1997) notes in her address on fostering resilience in the school environment that longitudinal research has in fact demonstrated that many children often identified as “high risk” do not travel on the expected path leading to problems such as dropping out of school, substance abuse, or incarceration. Henderson focuses on the importance of concentrating on protective factors, or characteristics that people possess that serves as buffers to stressful situations and adversity. One question that was vital regarding the development of competence was whether resilient children possessed special qualities or unique characteristics that enhanced their ability to overcome insurmountable odds in achieving competence when children were successful. Henderson notes that though some positive factors are innate or linked to genetic roots,

such as outgoing personality, many can be learned and promoted and thus fostered (Henderson, 1997).

Despite these incredible hardships and the presence of multiple risk factors, many African American students from high-risk environments go on to achieve not only academic success in school, but also success later in life (Byfield, 2008; Evans-Winters, 2005). It is important that counselors and educators understand why this is so and what is it that protects resilient students from the adversities they face (Fraser, 2004; Wang, Haertel, & Walberg, 1997). However, research into resiliency and factors associated with it has often neglected underserved populations for whom overcoming adverse conditions are a constant activity (Byfield, 2008; Evans-Winters, 2005; Ungar, 2005), namely African Americans.

Little is known about the environmental characteristics that stimulate academic achievement in students with limited economic and social resources (Richman, Bowen, & Woolley, 2004; Ungar, 2005). Even less is known about how environmental protective factors operate in the daily lives of African American youth (Barbarin, 1993; Byfield, 2008; Evans-Winters, 2005). In the last two decades, only a few studies have focused on resilient African American youth (Geary, 1988). These researchers found that schools should be supportive of the students and the entire family (Clark, 1983). In addition, support, friendly relationships with school peers, and positive experiences are important. Schools that provide participation in extracurricular activities are crucial to both students and parents (Braddock, Royster, Winfield, and Hawkins, 1991). Extracurricular activities can provide positive experiences as well as academic achievements. The extracurricular

activities that students get involved in can be related to governance. These are important and meaningful activities that help the ethos and the general decision-making. They also give students real responsibility, which is related to resilience.

According to Barbarin (1993),

there seems to be little media interest in or research efforts devoted to understanding African American children who live in nurturing but poor households and who experience emotionally supportive and stable personal relationships in “broken” homes; who develop a positive ethnic identity in spite of rampant denigration of their race; who steadfastly pursue education even though its relationship to gainful employment is uncertain; who abstain from addictive substances even though drugs are ubiquitous and life is unkind; and who avoid gangs, illegal activity, and incarceration in spite of pressure to belong and to make the fast buck. (p. 479)

Barbarin (1993) further commented that research on how African American children are able to survive and thrive in the face of adversity requires more attention. Benard (2004) concurred and further asserted that less information means less understanding of the needs of African American youth.

However, a study by Clark (1983) examined low socio-economic Black students' achievement and underachievement in their family context found that achieving Black students had parents who:

- Were assertive in their parent involvement efforts
- Kept abreast of their children's school progress
- Were optimistic and tended to perceive themselves as having effective coping mechanisms and strategies
- Set high and realistic expectations for their children

- Held positive achievement orientations and supported tenets of the achievement ideology
- Set clear, explicit achievement-oriented norms
- Established clear, specific role boundaries
- Deliberately engaged in experiences and behaviors designed to promote achievement
- Had positive parent-child relations characterized by nurturance, support, respect, trust, and open communication.

Conversely, underachieving low socio-economic Black students had parents who:

- Were less optimistic and expressed feelings of helplessness and hopelessness
- Were less assertive and involved in their children's education
- Set unrealistic and unclear expectations for their children
- Were less confident in terms of their parenting skills.

Ford (1993) found that gifted Black achievers reported more positive values and expectations among their parents regarding their participation in the gifted program, doing well, and exerting effort. He further concluded that numerous factors in schools can influence the achievement of gifted minority students. In a study of gifted Black achievers and underachievers (Ford, 1994), underachievers reported:

- Less positive teacher-student relations
- Having too little time to understand the material
- Less supportive classroom climate
- Being unmotivated and disinterested in school.

A related complication to low SES is living in a poor community or attending an economically disadvantaged school. A study by Croninger and Lee (2001) revealed that 15% of the students attending an economically disadvantaged school came from poverty level homes, 14% had at least one parent who did not graduate from high school, 16% were from single parent homes, 9% had three or more social risk factors, 10% had been retained, and 11% dropped out of high school (Croninger & Lee, 2001). Downey (2008) summarized, “There is little reason to doubt that students who live amid threatening and adverse environments encounter major obstacles in their path to academic success” (p. 62).

Although many authors cite low SES as the primary factor in dropout rate, Hammond, Linton, Smink, and Drew (2007) established some overall trends concerning dropouts, but concluded that no one factor predicted whether a student would be a dropout. They identified key risk factors including low socioeconomic status (SES), education level attained by parents, high disruptions in the family, number of siblings, mobility of family, and percentage not living with both parents. When multiple risk factors existed, predicting a dropout was more accurate (Hammond et al., 2007).

Frequently, parents earning incomes below the poverty level, parenting techniques, summer effect, education level of parents, and limited books in the home and technology have been identified as reasons why African American students living in poverty lag behind White students academically (Uhlenburg & Brown, 2002). For example, the summer effect describes the idea that White students have more access to intellectually stimulating activities over the summer than African American students

living in poverty. Therefore, they have the opportunity to experience continual learning whereas their Black peers do not. My summer vacations were spent in church, hanging out at the neighborhood recreation center where I received a free lunch and at the neighborhood pool. On the weekends, I was sent to my grandmothers or another relative's home. My mother only allowed me to stay with family members she trusted, had rules in the home and believed in punishing you if you disobeyed the rules. Family cohesion and positive parent-child relationships clearly can serve as a buffer against poor adjustment in children and adolescents (Duncan, Duncan, & Strycker, 2000). Authoritative parenting, which is characterized by acceptance/involvement, firm control and psychological autonomy, has been linked with many positive outcomes, such as higher grades in school, self-reliance, less anxiety and depression, and lower involvement with delinquent behaviors (Steinberg, Mounts, Lamborn, & Dornbusch, 1999). This finding crosses race, gender, and socioeconomic lines.

Children and adolescents fare less well when parenting styles are too strict without a component of warmth (i.e., authoritative parenting style) or too lax in terms of structure while being high in warmth and coddling (i.e., permissive parenting style).

Benard's resiliency model looks at three protective factors that must be present in the resilient individual's life. This notion comes out of the control theory that says that humans are self-regulatory and are constantly adjusting and adapting to their environment. Werner and Smith state,

The life stories of the resilient youngsters now grown into adulthood teach us that competence, confidence, and caring can flourish, even under adverse circumstances, if children encounter persons who provide them with the secure

basis for the development of trust, autonomy, and initiative. (as cited in Benard, 2004, p. 43)

Establishing a caring relationship or a close bond with at least one person is a protective factor used by resilient youth. The first protective factor is: establishing a *caring relationship* or a close connection with at least one person. This originates from our need for belonging, affection, and support, an inherent factor that develops at infancy. Supportive relationships are important to human development and as they provide positive support, modeling and beneficial feedback that aid in the physically, intellectually, psychologically and socially development.. Such relationships provide adolescents a venue to share and discuss their ideas that will ultimately help them to establish their own voice and justifications. The second protective factor is: *high expectation*; caring and supportive relationships impart the certainty that you have what it takes to succeed. Resilient individuals then aim for their goals, ultimately achieving in the end as a result of such influences. Providing transparent, positive, attainable expectations are a part of the function of caring and supportive relationships whether these expectations come from parents or other parental figures or other extended caregivers such as mentors. The third protective factor is: *opportunities to participate*; this person is given tasks and feels they are donating to life and to the dynamics of the family or of whatever situation in which they may be involved (sense of belonging). Bernard (1991) found that resilient people build on these characteristics and experience these protective factors in four domains, *family, school, community, and within self (host)*. Another important view under this factor is chances to participate that provide an

environment for reflection and conversation on issues that are meaningful to the individual. Such interactions and connections are a source for psychosocial development, free expression, and critical thinking (Benard, 2004). This particular model seems to present a strong advantage in providing intervention with African-American youth as it provides the foundation for motivational counseling as a treatment strategy and can be used to promote a sense of self-efficacy. It also takes the focus off of the negative aspects of a person's situation such as poverty or divorce and instead focuses on their positives and strengths and instills a greater sense of control. This model is a shift over the past ten years to a more positive approach; it explored resilience and education as well as prevention and other human services. It explored this rather than the discouragement at the overwhelming negative odds of today's youth which often predicted low success rates in life. The presence of those odds or adversity instead can be viewed as necessary to promote the exercise of resiliency factors that are needed to succeed. In her most recent publication, Benard (2004) discusses four conclusions regarding resiliency. The conclusions are based on research study findings and emphasize one prominent theme, "All people have resiliency and thus the ability to overcome adversity and ultimately succeed in life":

- Resiliency is a capacity that all youth have for healthy development and successful learning
- Certain personal strengths are associated with healthy development and successful learning
- Certain characteristics of families, schools, and communities are associated with the development of personal strengths and, in turn, healthy development and successful learning

- Changing the life course of children and youth from risk to resilience starts with changing the beliefs of the adults in the families, schools, and communities (Bernard, 2004, p. 4)

During the summer, I spent a lot of time at the community recreation center participating in sports. I enjoyed traveling on the rec van to other area recreation centers and swimming pools where I competed on the swimming team and the rec girls' basketball team. Belonging to a team meant a lot to me. The library inside the recreation center contained books that were outdated, easy readers, and in bad condition but I enjoyed looking through the encyclopedias and dictionaries and sharing with my friends what I had learned. My friends and some of the older kids recognized that I read books above my grade level very fluently. It was during these summer activities that I received affirmation, praise and recognition. Affluent students have opportunities to attend camps, access the library, and have more travel experiences whereas inner-city students living in poverty who are predominately African American do not get such opportunities (Uhlenburg & Brown, 2002).

McLaughlin, Irby, and Langman (1994) conducted extensive research on community-based, youth development programs in urban areas. In their work, they identify three major hallmarks of successful community youth organizations:

1. They focus on identifying and nurturing potential in youth.
2. They provide youth with opportunities to make authentic contributions to the community.
3. They engage the broader community.

The positive impacts of effective youth organizations on the adolescents who participate is higher academic achievement, higher expectations for high school graduation and college attendance, more self-confidence, a positive view of the future, and a commitment to give back to the community was noted.

Due to the limited experiences and opportunities of African American children living in poverty, the educational system must play an important role in decreasing achievement disparities between Whites and minorities. Minority students will make up 44% of students enrolled in U.S. public schools by the year 2020. They will also make up 54% by the year 2050 (National Center for Educational Statistics [NCES], 2000). It is already evident that there is an observed disparity in the achievement of African American students compared to White students. By reviewing data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP, 2001), the Education Trust summarizes that if minority students reach the twelfth grade, their academic performance will be several grades lower than other white students in the same grade 2007).

In other research by Connell and his colleagues (Connell et al., 1994), ratings of engagement by teachers and parents, when combined with student ratings, show even stronger direct links to the indices of risk and resilience in poor African American youth. Perhaps the most intriguing and disturbing implication of this study for our understanding of risk and resilience is that disaffected behavior in low-income African American youth can lessen parental involvement, which in turn contributes to negative appraisals of self that exacerbate disaffected patterns of action and contribute to negative educational outcomes.

Obviously, there is a difference between the academic achievement levels of students based on their race. However, assuming that this difference is the result of race is often misleading. The racial inequalities of education in the past have helped perpetuate this misleading view of educational inequality on the basis of race. Uhlenburg and Brown (2002) investigated several factors that have been suggested to be possible causes of the achievement gap. They stated that in regards to the student, fear of acting White, watching too much television, disruptive behavior, lack of effort, and lack of potential could be potential causes. Ogbu and Simons (1998) stated that there are pressures and messages in the Black community that make students view teachers and schools negatively and feel that they cannot be trusted. They believed that Black students resist conforming to school requirements because it means they are giving up their minority identity (p. 178).

Fordham and Ogbu (1986) completed a study in an impoverished neighborhood in Washington, DC that revealed African American students associate achievement-oriented behaviors with characteristics of White students. Therefore, they choose to resist studying hard and getting good grades because it was considered a form of whiteness. Fordham and Ogbu's (1986) cultural-ecological perspective suggests that years of oppression faced by Black families in the United States has caused Black students to form an oppositional culture model in which they no longer see the value of education and see success in education as a White value or trait. The effects of this perspective are quite evident in any school. During his term as a senator, President Barack Obama recognized this dilemma and stated at the 2004 Democratic National Convention,

Go into any inner-city neighborhood and folks will tell you that government alone can't teach kids to learn. They know that parents have to parent, that children can't achieve unless we raise their expectations and eradicate the slander that says a black youth with a book is acting white. (Obama, 2004, para. 7)

Popular culture and the media promote negative images of young African Americans and tend to associate being Black with academic disengagement and social deviance (Taylor, Graham, & Hudley, 1997). African American students tend to adopt a "cool pose" (Majors & Bilson, 1992) that is, displaying relative indifference to those who display achievement behaviors that are valued by society at large. This may be one esteem-protecting mechanism by which such youngsters cope with the stresses of academics and discrimination (Taylor et al., 1997). Cool pose culture is a term created by sociologists that describes how African American males find it satisfying to be involved in spending time in the streets, shopping and dressing sharply, having sexual conquests, doing recreational drugs, and contributing to the culture of Hip hop. In "A Poverty of the Mind," Patterson (2006) explains that

the important thing to note about the subculture that ensnares them is that it is not disconnected from the mainstream culture. To the contrary, it has powerful support from some of America's largest corporations. Hip-hop, professional basketball and homeboy fashions are as American as cherry pie. Young white Americans are very much into these things, but selectively; they know when it is time to turn off Fifty Cent and get out the SAT prep book. (p. 1)

Barton (2004) examined the research related to school achievement and concluded there are eight factors associated with student learning that occur outside of the school setting. The influences are low birth weight, lead poisoning, hunger and nutrition, being read to as a young child, amount of television watching, parent

availability, student mobility, and parent participation. In addition, Barton concluded all eight factors were unfavorably impacted by a family's economic status. The results of this study confirm family involvement as an important target for these interventions. For older youth and for disadvantaged older youth in particular, family is often viewed as outside the bailiwick of educational intervention. This study's results also support efforts to develop intervention strategies for increasing poor African American youth's belief in their own abilities and capacities to affect their academic outcomes and for improving their relationships with peers in the school context. Further, the results point to youth engagement as the most proximal point of entry for reform efforts designed to enhance the educational chances of poor African American youth.

Chapter II focused on previous literature and information about the construct of resilience which included definitions of key concepts and terms, descriptions of models of resilience that guide research efforts and how resilient African American youth successfully coped with the risk factors associated with poverty. Chapter III will describe the research methodology which includes the research sample, methods for collecting data and its analysis, and any problems that emerge in my research.

## **CHAPTER III**

### **METHODOLOGY**

#### **Introduction**

In this chapter, the methodology and research design are discussed. In Chapters I and II, an overview of the study and the literature review were provided to support the study's purpose which was to identify what African Americans serving in upper-level school leadership positions who faced significant barriers as children attribute to their resilience and success. In addition, the study provides previous literature and information about the construct of resilience. It identifies the definitions of key concepts and terms, and provides a description of models of resilience that guide research efforts.

#### **Research Approach**

In qualitative research, and specifically narrative inquiry, Connelly and Clandinin (2000) state it as the study of an experience as story. More importantly, it is a way of thinking about an experience, thus it is necessary to understand one's personal goals for undertaking a particular research project (Clandinin, 2007).

According to Creswell (1998), qualitative inquiry is a form of research design used frequently to explore a phenomenon or experience. Unlike quantitative research, qualitative methodology can focus on circumstances or people to acquire a deeper understanding and interpretation of the experiences of individuals in their natural settings (p. 15). Creswell states, "the researcher builds a complex, holistic picture, analyzes

words, reports detailed views of informants, and conducts the study in a natural setting” (p. 15). Additionally, Creswell notes that qualitative research is an appropriate method for a researcher to follow if he or she is willing to commit to extensive time in the field, engage in the time consuming process of data analysis, and participate in a form of social and human science research that may not conform to firm guidelines or specific procedures.

I include Creswell’s 8-point rationale for using a qualitative approach because it helped me with my own rationale, as well as helping me stay focused as a qualitative researcher.

First, Creswell explains that we should select a qualitative study because of the nature of the research question. In a qualitative study, the research question often starts with a *how* or a *what* so that initial forays into the topic describes what is going on.

As Creswell suggests, I am using a qualitative approach because I want to know *what* African Americans in upper level school leader positions who faced significant barriers during their youth perceive as being the most significant factors or events that contributed to their resilience and success. Specifically, *what* do African American upper level school leaders attribute to the role of the church, parent, school, community, and community programs in their resilience and success?

Second, Creswell (1998) explains that we choose a qualitative study because the topic needs to be *explored*. In this case, simply meaning that more research is needed on how certain African American individuals are able to adapt and recover from risks and challenges in life. According to Barbarin (1993) research on how African American

children are able to survive and thrive in the face of adversity requires more attention. Benard (2004) concurs and further asserts that less information means less understanding of the needs of African American youth.

The third consideration in deciding to conduct a qualitative study is the need to present a *detailed view* of the topic (Creswell, 1998). By allowing African American upper level school leaders to answer open-ended questions such as “Who or what do you think contributed to your resilience and success?” the study participants will be able to give detailed descriptions that create a visual of their lived experiences that quantitative research could not offer.

The fourth rationale for a qualitative study as described by Creswell (1998) is to study individuals in their *natural setting*. This includes going out to the setting of the study, gaining access, and gathering material. If participants are removed from their setting, it leads to contrived findings that are out of context. I was able to conduct three interviews in their natural setting which were their school offices. In two cases the African American school leaders asked to be interviewed away from their workplaces so they would not be disturbed and for convenience sake.

Fifth, Creswell suggests selecting a qualitative approach because of interest in *writing* in a literary style—the writer brings herself or himself into the study, the personal pronoun “I” is used, or perhaps the writer engages a story telling form of narration. During the qualitative analysis for this study, I collected rich descriptions of stories which provided structure and meaning from the participants and their life experiences regarding the barriers they faced and their resilience in becoming successful school leaders.

In his sixth rationale for a qualitative study, Creswell (1998) notes employ a qualitative study because of *sufficient time and resources* to spend on extensive data selection in the field and detailed data analysis of text information. This study has definitely been an extensive process. The five interviews were conducted over a four month period and it took additional months to transcribe. Subsequently, it took several more months to conduct the data analysis.

The seventh reason, Creswell (1998) notes for conducting a qualitative study is because *audiences are receptive* to qualitative research. This audience might be a graduate advisor or committee, a discipline inclusive of multiple research methodologies, or publication outlets with editors receptive to qualitative approaches. My dissertation chair and committee were agreeable to a qualitative dissertation study as it fit well for a study that focused on hearing what African American school leaders conveyed about their life experiences regarding the barriers they faced during their youth and their resilience and success.

Finally, Creswell's (1998) eighth rationale for conducting a qualitative approach is to emphasize the researcher's role as an *active learner* who can tell the story from the participants' view rather than as an expert who passes judgment on participants. This study allowed African American school leaders to paint a vivid portrait of their experiences through their own words rather than allowing me to be the expert. Asking each participant open-ended questions allowed the participants the liberty of providing detailed accounts of their youth and the challenges they faced from their perspectives and thus, provides a better understanding of what contributed to their resilience and success.

Maxwell (2005) emphasizes that while practical goals are focused on achieving something, intellectual goals are focused on understanding something. My intent for my study is to fulfill both practical and intellectual goals. Therefore, it is essential for me to locate common themes in the participants' responses and understand what influences contributed to their resilience and success as African American youth and adults. I designed my research questions for this study to advance my understanding of African Americans who are in upper-level school leadership positions who faced significant barriers as children and to discover to what they attribute their resilience and success.

The following research questions guided the study:

The research question and sub questions guiding this study were:

1. What do African American upper level school leaders perceive as being the most significant factors or events that have contributed to their resilience and success?
  - a. What role do African American upper level school leaders attribute to their parents in their resilience and success?
  - b. What role do African American upper level school leaders attribute to school in their resilience and success?
  - c. What role do African American upper level school leaders attribute to the community in their resilience and success?
  - d. What role do African American upper level school leaders attribute to participation in community organizations, churches or programs in their resilience and success?

As an educator who values social justice, equality, and equity, undertaking this study will allow me a chance to reflect on the significant barriers and experiences I faced during my youth and what factors contributed to my resilience and success as an African American school leader. After listening to the stories of my participants, I will also hope to identify common themes in the participants' responses. McLean (1999) states, "Stories become the means by which we make sense of our past, our present and our future, even as the stories themselves gradually fused with new stories as new experiences occur" (p. 78).

This chapter provides a description of the research setting and the criteria and method used for the selection of the study participants. The methods used for data collection and the process used for data analysis will also be explained. In addition, I have expounded on the benefits, risks and limitations associated with this research study and defined the key terms and concepts. Furthermore, this chapter provides a description of the criteria used to ensure the trustworthiness of the study.

### **Methodology and Research Design**

I selected a qualitative design and, particularly, narrative methodology, because it was important to select a methodology in which participants could tell their personal life stories. The narrative structures and words we use when crafting and telling the tales of our perceptions and experiences are significant, providing information about our social and cultural positioning. Wittgenstein (1953) explains that the limits of one's language are the limits of one's world. In order to answer the research questions, it is essential that I provide a detailed account of the experiences being studied.

A qualitative research method is ideal for identifying variables and generating hypotheses relevant to populations or groups that have been previously overlooked or understudied (Merchant & Dupuy, 1996). Although resiliency research has increased greatly, only a few studies have focused on how African-American children have been able to endure and succeed amidst adversity, and to become successful adults. According to Patton (2002), qualitative studies vary by type, purpose, and quality. Nonetheless, Marshall and Rossman (2011) noted that almost all qualitative research typically:

- is enacted in naturalistic settings,
- draws on multiple methods that respect the humanity of the participants in the study
- focuses on context,
- is emergent and evolving, and
- is fundamentally interpretive. (p. 2)

This qualitative study used a narrative research design to provide me with a systematic way of looking at events, collecting data, analyzing information, and reporting the results (Yin, 2009). Yin (2009) notes that narrative design allows the participants to be the center of the study, thereby, allowing me to collect the richest data possible. Researchers offer several reasons why narrative inquiry has taken a prominent place in understanding the experiences of individuals. Story is a mode of knowing and thinking that cannot be reduced to abstract rules and logical propositions about teaching (Carter, 1993; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). Additionally, since stories carry a temporal sequence (though told in the present time) they capture the complexity and interconnectedness of the past, present and the hopes for the future (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; McLean, 1999).

Casey (1995) used the term *narrative research* to encompass different forms of life stories and personal narratives among teachers. These include biographies, autobiographies, ethnographies and any other forms of research that involve the collection and analysis of people's lives through story. She also noted the interdisciplinary nature of narrative research which encompasses elements of literary, historical, anthropological, sociological, psychological, and cultural studies.

Casey (1995) notes that, whether implicit or elaborated, every study of narrative is based on a particular understanding of the speaker's self. In this study, the narratives serve as an avenue that depicts what African American school leaders that faced barriers during their youth attribute to becoming successful school leaders.

An important feature of narrative is that it is both a phenomenon and a research methodology. However, not all scholars use narrative in this manner (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007). There are differences of opinion on the epistemological, ideological and ontological commitments of narrative inquirers (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007). For instance, Clandinin and Rosiek (2007) make a distinction between their view of narrative inquiry and poststructuralists who may engage in narrative inquiry.

The poststructuralist may listen to stories that individuals tell her or him. But in doing so she or he will not interpret those experiences as immediate sources of knowledge and insight; instead, she or he will be listening through the person's story to hear the operation of broader social discourses shaping the person's story of their experience.

As a phenomenon, Connally and Clandinin (1990) make the claim that human beings individually and socially lead storied lives. These storied lives are then termed as experience. Other narrative researchers, such as Bruner (1986), consent to this view and define narrative as a distinctive way of ordering experience and constructing reality.

In taking a similar stance, Polkinghorne (1988) refers to narrative as the primary form by which human experience is made meaningful. Therefore the notion of experience is at the center of narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007). Narrative inquiry is thus a way of interpreting lived experience (Bruner, 1986) and constructing identity (Søreide, 2007; Watson, 2006). Connally and Clandinin (2006) further clarify that the phenomenon is *story* and the inquiry is *narrative*: Story in the current idiom is a portal through which the person enters the world and by which their experience of the world is interpreted and made personally meaningful.

The narrative carries the organization, which the researcher and the participant jointly discover through telling and retelling of the stories. By providing specific open-ended questions, each participant had the freedom to provide detailed accounts of their life experiences regarding the barriers they faced and their resilience from their perspectives and thus, provide a better understanding.

My goal was to provide narratives that would offer useful perspectives for educational leaders and teachers dealing with students facing environmental adversities and remain resilient.

I focused on individual resilience, using the definition summarized by VanBreda (2001) “[R]esilience theory addresses the strengths that people and systems demonstrate

that enable them to rise above adversity” (p. 1), combined with the definition of educational resiliency by Wang et al. (1994), “the heightened likelihood of success in school and other life accomplishments despite environmental adversities brought about by early traits, conditions, and experiences” (p. 46).

### **Key Concepts**

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

1. **Resilience** - “the strengths that people and systems demonstrate that enable them to rise above adversity” (VanBreda, 2001, p. 1); “the heightened likelihood of success in school and other life accomplishments despite environmental adversities brought about by early traits, conditions, and experiences” (Wang et al., 1994, p. 46).
2. **Educational Resiliency** - the heightened likelihood of success in school despite environmental adversities brought about by early traits, conditions, and experiences (Wang et al., 1994)
3. **Economically Disadvantaged** – A student who qualified for and received free or reduced lunch based on Income Eligibility Guidelines set forth by the National School Lunch Program of the US Department of Agriculture (U.S. Department of Agriculture [USDA], 2008).
4. **Upper-level Leadership** – Someone holding an administrative level position in a school such as an assistant principal or principal or an upper level administrative position at the district office such as a chief officer, assistant superintendent or superintendent.

5. **Academic Success** – a student who has graduated from high school and attended some form of higher education such as a college or university.
6. **Spanking/Whupping** – to discipline a child by using an open hand and striking the child's backsides without causing physical harm.
7. **Corporal Punishment** – the use of physical force by a parent or caretaker with the intention of causing a child to experience pain but not injury and administered for the purpose of correction or control of the child's behavior for exhibiting unacceptable behaviors (Straus, 1994). In this study, corporal punishment was administered on the buttocks with the use of the hand or belt in a non-abusive manner.
8. **Abuse** – the use of physical force by a parent or caretaker with the intention of causing a child to experience pain and injury.
9. **Molestation** – a crime involving a range of indecent or sexual activities between an adult and a child.

### **Research Participants**

I used convenience purposive (criterion-oriented) sampling to identify participants for the study. Purposive sampling strategies are designed to enhance understandings of selected individuals or groups' experiences and for developing theories and concepts (Creswell, 2004). According to Creswell, purposeful sampling selects individuals and sites to learn or understand the central phenomenon. Welman and Kruger (1999) consider purposive sampling to be the most important kind of nonprobability sampling to

identify the primary participants. The participant sampling was also be a sampling of convenience as I selected participants who also lived in my county of residence.

In order to recruit participants, I networked with professional contacts called gatekeepers. Gatekeepers were informed that study participants must meet the following criteria: (a) male or female African American; (b) standing principal or in an upper-level School leadership position; (c) faced significant barriers as a child; and (d) economically disadvantaged as a child.

I received the names of possible participants through word-of-mouth recruitment by my gatekeepers after they spoke with potential participants about the study. Potential participants who were interested in the study contacted me via email, phone calls and through face to face conversations.

I was able to interview two female principals and three male principal participants representing all level of K-12 schools in this study (see Table 1). I chose five participants because it is a manageable number for obtaining detailed and meaningful accounts of their personal life stories. Each interview session lasted two to three hours. The interview consisted of two elementary, two middle, and one high school principal. Once the principals agreed to participate in the study, each was given an interview appointment time and date, and I either emailed or gave them two consent forms. One copy of the consent form was for the participant to keep and one signed copy for my study files. Included in the consent, each participant was assured confidentiality due to the sensitive nature of the conversation.

Table 1  
Participant Profiles

Name (Pseudonyms)	Gender/ Race	Age Range	Years of Experience	Current School Setting
Ann Hawkins	Female/ African American	52	27	Elementary School Predominately White
Penny Blue	Female/ African American	42	6	Middle School Predominately Black
Robert Buck	Male/ African American	40	9	High School Predominately White
Larry Stock	Male/ African American	36	10	Middle School Predominately Black
Rick Hoover	Male/ African American	58	33	Elementary School Predominately Black

I used pseudonyms for all the principal names, school names, and school district. After the interview, each principal thanked me and said they enjoyed the interview. Two principals communicated that it was still difficult reflecting on situations that brought them emotional pain during their youth. Three principals became teary eyed during the interview. I feel that it is important to preserve the authenticity of their voices.

### **Myself as the Researcher**

In order to gain perspective for my research I need to specify my own personal background. It is important to explore my upbringing in order to determine where my values and beliefs originated. I served as both the participant and researcher. Moustakas (1994) recommends that the researcher fully disclose any personal biases and experiences related to the phenomenon being studied. In this case, it is pertinent that I disclose my

personal biases or experiences that may hinder me from effectively recording the experiences of the African American participants in this study

My sister and I were raised by our mother in a segregated low socioeconomic community for single mothers called Kimberly Park Projects. As a child, I had no knowledge that we were considered a family living in poverty. My mother received food stamps each month and when we became sick or needed immunization shots we visited the health clinic. The majority of the mothers did not graduate from high school and worked in factories, cleaned houses, or were unemployed.

At an early age my sister and I were taught that your physical appearance was very important. We were expected to take a bath each night, keep our hair combed and dress neatly. That teaching followed me through every stage of my life and I have passed that value on to my children.

During my elementary years, I remember walking miles to school from kindergarten to the sixth grade. I recall walking to school in the rain, sleet and snow with the kids in the neighborhood and watching the school buses filled with white students pass by. I vividly remember being afraid of the African American teachers in my elementary school. Nevertheless, I did my best in school and received recognition and praise from my teachers, but not my mother. I have no recollection of my mother attending parent conferences, PTA meetings or helping me with homework. Although she did not verbally express her expectations regarding my behavior and school work, I knew what they were because I would occasionally hear her talking on the phone and providing advice to relatives who had children misbehaving in school.

Meeting my mother's expectations was important to because I wanted to please her. More importantly, I hated the beatings my sister and I received when we did not meet her expectations or follow the rules. As previously stated, for years we encountered beatings with belts, shoes or whatever my mother could put her hands on. Today, I believe the beatings would be considered abuse. Whenever she was anger, I remember praying, Lord please not another beating.

Sometimes her advice included praying for your children and bringing them up in church. My sister and I knew that attending bible study, Sunday school and the 11:00 church service was our weekly ritual. The church bus would pick up some of the children in the neighborhood and a few parents would meet their child at church. Playing church with my friends was an activity I enjoyed. We used the names of some of the old ladies in the church. I remember being "Shouting Sister Shirley" and my friend was "Praying Sister Pam." We pretended to have a singing Deacon and "Preacher Paul." We never played church in front of our parents because we knew they would not approve of this type of behavior. Today, attending church with my family is another tradition that I still have.

There was another tradition called redistricting that occurred in my community every two or three years. Upon entering twelfth grade, I had attended seven different schools and this was the first time I attended a predominately white school. The two African American school counselors reviewed my transcripts that noted the seven schools I had attended and my honor roll status but no SAT scores were visible. They met with me and discussed my potential as a future college student. They did not allow me to use

poverty as a scapegoat for not attending college but assisted me with completing the necessary SAT registration documents, financial aid, and college applications. I attended North Carolina Agriculture & Technical State University and graduated with honors. I will always consider my high school counselors as my guardian angels assigned to lead me out of the projects and poverty.

After getting married, I began teaching third grade, gave birth to my first child and later twins. When searching for our first home to purchase, we perused in predominately white neighborhoods only. We knew that by living in a middle-class white neighborhood, our children would have an opportunity to receive the best education in high performing schools along with their white peers. As our children grew, we realized that their best friends were white, middle-class and lived with both parents.

When I reflect on the barriers I faced during my youth, it is hard to believe that I have three adult children with college degrees from the largest university in North Carolina. I believe that teaching my children about the importance of prayer and spirituality had major impacts on my children's lives. For instance, my son will graduate from law school in May, 2014, his twin sister will graduate from veterinarian school in 2017 and my oldest daughter is happily married with two children. Over the years, I have relied on my faith, values, experiences, and dreams when faced with difficult challenges and have taught my children to do the same.

## **Participants**

Demographic information for the five African American school leaders was obtained from each participant prior to the start of the interview and displayed in Table 1.

The age range of the participants was from 36 to 58 years old. All participants lived in the Southeast at the time of the interview. The interviews were conducted and analyzed over a 16-week period from June 2013 through October 2013.

My first interview was with Penny Blue, a 42-year-old African American female principal at Enion Middle School for the last 6 years. Previously, she had been a technology specialist and elementary school teacher. Penny was informed of my research topic by one of our colleagues and she expressed interest in speaking with me. When I called Ms. Blue to discuss my research and possibly scheduling an interview, she stated, “No one has any idea of what I went through as a child.” I was elated to know that I would be the first person to whom she would share her hidden secrets and challenges she faced during her youth.

After interviewing her, I felt compelled to interview myself. As 52-year-old elementary school principal for seventeen years, I have had an opportunity to work in all demographic settings. However, as an elementary school teacher my experience was working in high needs and Title I schools only. While teaching elementary school, my principal encouraged me to begin working on a master’s degree in administration. She believed that I would be a good administrator because of the positive relationships I established with the African American students and their families. Later, I was an assistant principal serving in elementary and middle school and currently am the principal at Gaston Elementary School.

I interviewed 40-year-old African American Robert Buck. Robert has been the principal of Jordan High School for the last three years. He began his professional career

by teaching high school for nine years and then was an assistant principal for two years. He has been nominated as “Principal of the Year” several times by his colleagues. Currently, he serves on several school district committees. Although Mr. Buck and I have never worked in the same building, I consider Mr. Buck to be a trusting friend. After sharing my dissertation topic with him, he informed me that he had experienced terrible childhood challenges that continue to bother him. He agreed to participate in my study. The three-hour uninterrupted interview took place in my basement as he requested.

Mr. Larry Stock was selected to participate in my research study after I sat beside him during a meeting regarding the academic achievement of African American males. Mr. Stock has been a middle school principal for seven years at Bulls Middle School. Previously, Mr. Stock had been an assistant principal and teacher all on the elementary and middle school levels in the Southeast. He has only worked in predominately African American Title I schools that are considered by the state as low performing schools. Prior to the interview, I did not know Mr. Stock, but I had heard other colleagues refer to him as a strong school leader. When I asked Mr. Stock whether he would be interested in participating in my research study, he was very enthusiastic and agreed to participate. I interviewed Mr. Stock in his office at his request.

My final interview was with 58-year-old Rick Hoover. Mr. Hoover has been a school principal for 33 years. Currently, he is an elementary school principal and formerly a teacher, assistant principal, and an elementary, middle and high school principal. Throughout his career, he has worked in two school districts with various

demographic populations of students ranging from low performing Title I schools to schools identified by the state Department of Public Instruction as Schools of Excellence. A gatekeeper informed Mr. Hoover of my dissertation topic and following a meeting I provided him with additional information. Mr. Hoover agreed to participate in my study. I interviewed him in a quiet restaurant at his request. We sat in a corner of the restaurant with both chairs facing each other. The participant interviews consisted of the following 19 open-ended questions:

### **Participant Interview Questions**

Share about the purpose of the study and some information about my background.

1. I'm interested in hearing the story of your life, starting with your childhood.  
Tell me about your growing up experiences as a child.
2. . . as an adolescent in middle school and high school.
3. . . after high school.
4. . . as a young adult starting on a career.
5. . . from your early career until now.
6. Tell me about growing up in your family. What was it like?
7. Tell me about the influence that your family had on you growing up.
8. Tell about your experiences with school.
9. What did you do when you were not in school? How did you like to spend your time? Were there any school groups to which you belonged or participated in?
10. Do you think that you were different from your peers in school?

11. What factors or events do you think contributed to your academic success?
12. What impact did the school play on your academic success?
13. How did the community or neighborhood impact your academic success?
14. Who or what had the greatest influence on your life?
15. Who or what do you think contributed to your resilience and success?
16. Based on your life experiences, how do you define success and resilience?
17. Since you are a success story, what suggestions do you have for other parents and school leaders regarding students demonstrating resilience while facing challenges at home?
18. Do you believe that you have innate traits or characteristics that were influential and contributed to your success?
19. That concludes my questions. Is there anything else that you would like to add at this time?

Thank you for participating and remember that your responses are confidential.

### **Research Setting**

The study was conducted in Southeast. The Southeast school district serves more than 72,500 students across 126 schools in urban, suburban and rural areas. It is diverse in its student body and in its academics. The district serves students speaking more than 100 dialects representing nearly 100 countries. The school district in the southeast has more than 10,000 special education students and approximately 15,000 advanced learners. In addition, it provides non-traditional educational settings for students who are at risk of dropping out.

Specific interview sites depended on the location of the participants' place of work and their request. I had received approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) and district consent to conduct research prior to visiting schools.

### **Data Collection Methods and Processes**

After getting approval from The University of North Carolina at Greensboro's Institutional Review Board and the Southeast School District, the selected participants were provided with an Informed Consent form. Any questions that they had related to the research were answered prior to the beginning of the actual interviewing session.

The first method of data collection was conducting the face-to-face interviews. In particular, qualitative face-to-face interviews with pre-determined, open-ended guiding questions provided focus and structure while allowing for flexibility to probe beneath the surface of the responses (Patton, 2002). In order to maintain consistency in data collection, each participant was asked the same interview protocol questions, but probing questions varied by individual participant.

Each audio recorded interview was in-depth lasting between two and three hours. Xuehong (2002) stated, "If one wants to acquire an in-depth understanding of the essence of matters, the researcher must go deep into life and conduct detailed observations and investigations, and especially the concrete socioeconomic background that give rise to such matters" (pp. 47–48). Furthermore, Lichtman (2010) explains in-depth interviews can be described as a conversation between the researcher and the participant. She states, "The purpose of in-depth interviews is to hear what the participant has to say in his own words, in his voice, with his language and narrative" (Lichtman, 2010, p. 143).

According to Seidman (2006),

interviewing provides access to the context of people's behavior and thereby provides a way for researchers to understand the meaning of that behavior. A basic assumption in in-depth interviewing research is that the meaning people make of their experiences affects the way they carry out that experience . . . Interviewing allows us to put behavior in context and provides access to understanding their action. (p. 10)

The interviews were conducted in the office of the principals, a restaurant, and two interviews took place in my home. I requested the assistance of a transcriptionist due to time constraints. She signed a confidentiality form. The interview protocol (see Appendix A) was designed with open-ended questions to allow for participants' perspectives to unfold (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). Interviewing was an important data collection method and protecting the identity of the African American school leaders was a primary concern. Thus, interview transcripts are stored in a locked file cabinet in my home for three years at which time everything will be destroyed.

### **Data Analysis**

When a researcher begins collecting data, the analysis begins. "Data analysis involves organizing what you have seen, heard, and read so that you can make sense of what you have learned" (Glesne, 1999, p. 130). According to Patton (2002), the mere act of collecting data generates ideas, themes, and patterns that emerge from the process of conducting the interviews. I went through all the transcripts while listening to the audio tape to ensure that there was no discrepancy between the audio tape and the typed transcripts. I read through the transcripts a second time carefully, jotting down all ideas that came to mind. I noted the underlying meanings of quotes and terms in the margins

using two or three words. This process laid the groundwork for the beginning stages of the coding process. During the initial coding process, my focus of identifying text segments was a priority. After establishing initial themes, I noted significant statements of each participant based on my research questions by highlighting and coding a word or phrase that accurately described the meaning of the particular segment using a different color marker for each participant. In order to keep my segments organized, I placed each statement identified as significant attributes or events under the following headings: parenting, school, church, community, community organizations and programs, as attributes to each participant's resilience and success. According to Bogdan and Biklen (1998), codes can address many diverse topics. Creswell (2004) suggest that after completing the coding of all text, the researcher should develop a list of all code words. I reduced the codes to themes and ultimately formulated a major idea. Finally, I wrote a detailed description of the life story of each participant and what insights the participant and I were able to ascertain about their resilience.

As a narrative inquirer, I must be conscious of what Cottle (2002) cautions about listening to the stories of others through our own lenses. He states,

We often run the risk of making the story of the Other become what we wish or need it to become, not necessarily what he or she wishes or needs it to become. . . . Moreover, and in the natural evolution of the narrative, we hear the Other as we wish and need to hear him or her, not as he or she necessarily may wish or need to be heard. (p. 536)

I need to honor the stories of the participants by affirming the individual contributes attributed to their resilience and success.

## **Subjectivity**

I need to embrace my subjectivity “as a garment that cannot be removed” and integrate who I am in the process (Peshkin, 1988, p. 17). I served as both the participant and researcher. Moustakas (1994) recommends that the researcher fully disclose any personal biases and experiences related to the phenomenon being studied. In this case, it is pertinent that I disclose my personal biases or experiences that may hinder me from effectively recording the experiences of the African American school principals in this study. Drawing from the subjectivity techniques of Peshkin (1988), I have identified several subjective I’s that may impact my perception of the study participants. First, I recognize my Racial I as a subjective lens in which I need to monitor. Because I am also African American, I must remain aware that I am not an “African American expert”. In other words, I need to keep in mind that I don’t know everything there is to know about African American people who faced significant challenges in their youth and what attributed to their resilience and success as adults. As an African American child living in poverty, I observed my mother being physically abused by her boyfriend, excessive alcohol in my home, and changed schools every two to three years. However, I remained resilient and became a successful school principal. Therefore, I want to research this topic to gain more understanding regarding African American school leaders that faced challenges and the attributes that contributed to their resilience and success.

Second, I will uncover my Occupation I. Similar to the Racial I, I need to remain sensitive to new thoughts, ideas, and philosophies regarding the influence of the profession on the study topic. It is also pertinent to acknowledge that I entered the

research project as a principal. This will help me determine my position and thus declare the lens through which I interpret the stories. Although I may be able to identify with some of the barriers the participants faced as children, I may not have encountered the same everyday life experiences and barriers they encountered in their homes, schools, and community's during their youth.

While conducting my research, it is important for me to reflect on and acknowledge how my experiences have shaped my perspective and views in regards to the topic that I am researching and continue this process throughout my data collection. Since I am an African American conducting this qualitative study and was also at risk during my youth, my personal experiences could have influenced and shaped the way this research was organized, written, collected, and interpreted. Therefore, I was cautious to avoid adversely influencing the course of this study, with procedures implemented to curtail personal biases and assumptions. In order to guard against researcher bias resulting from personal life experiences, and in order to improve the credibility of this study, I felt it was important to document any assumptions and biases in a reflective journal before and after each interview was conducted.

Peshkin (1988) refers to subjectivity as the qualities that an investigator brings to the research process that affect observations and results. He notes these qualities have the capacity to filter, skew, shape, block, transform, and misconstrue what transpires from the outset of a research project to its culmination in a written statement (p. 17). I will also be cognizant of our different educational backgrounds, social and professional positions so as to avoid making assumptions during the data analysis process. Being

aware of my own educational background is also significant in the data analysis process. This will help me become conscious of my subjectivity and hear another's story without immediately responding with my own story (Cottle, 2002, p. 535). As an African American school principal researching the experiences of other African American school leaders who faced significant barriers during their youth, I have the potential to impose my own story on their stories. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) suggest the narrative researcher's experience is always a dual one, always the inquirer experiencing the experience and also being part of the experience itself (p. 81). Throughout my research, I kept a reflective journal in which I recorded the emotions and innate responses that emerged as well as my personal thoughts and feelings after each interviews. Being aware of my subjectivity allowed me to truly listen to the participants' childhood experiences from their perspectives and not what is important to me.

### **Establishing Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness is the process through which qualitative researchers meet the criteria of (a) credibility – the assurance that there is a fit between the respondents' and the researchers' views; (b) transferability - the ability to generalize information from the case studied to other similar cases; (c) confirmability – the objective presentation of information in clear, discernable ways; and (d) dependability - the process logical, traceable and documented (Harrison, MacGibbon, & Morton, 2001; Patton, 2002). In short, trustworthiness may be defined as “the quality of an investigation (and its findings) that made it noteworthy to audiences” (Schwandt, 2001, p. 258). In order to ensure rigor

and trustworthiness in the present study, I employed several techniques as outlined in the following sections.

### **Credibility**

The credibility of a study is largely predicated on a technique called triangulation. Triangulation involves combining multiple observers, theories, methods, and data sources to gather and analyze the data (Patton, 2002). The present study employed two types of triangulation: analyst triangulation and methods triangulation. In order to provide triangulation of sources, I conducted analyst triangulation. This required me to use multiple analysts to review my findings. I accomplished this through peer debriefing and member checking. Peer debriefing involved enlisting the support of a skilled colleague to discuss evolving suppositions and findings from the study (Patton, 2002; Schwandt, 2001). This allowed me to clarify my thoughts, to probe any biases that I may have, and to challenge presumptions or interpretations throughout the study. Member checking involved restating or summarizing information and then questioning the participant to determine accuracy. Since my participants work in schools where I am employed, I have established a rapport with them and will continue striving to build that rapport. This helped me to obtain honest and open responses from my participants. This ensured adequate representation of their ideas and comments (Patton, 2002).

### **Transferability**

Transferability refers to the degree to which the results of qualitative research can be generalized or transferred to other contexts or settings (Hoepfl, 1997). In order to establish this criterion, I used the techniques of thick description and reflective

journaling. I provided a *thick description* of the study in order to leave an audit trail, providing an opportunity for other researchers to determine a conclusion about the transferability of the study. The *reflective journal* assisted in systematically monitoring my predispositions and also provided a record of introspection and understanding on the part of the author. From a qualitative perspective, transferability is primarily the responsibility of the person doing the generalizing.

### **Confirmability**

In order to meet the criterion of confirmability, I needed to demonstrate that the information in the study was presented objectively and in a clear, discernible way (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To accomplish this, the techniques of triangulation and reflective journaling were utilized.

### **Dependability**

In order to establish the criterion of dependability, I was responsible for demonstrating how the process was logical, traceable, and documented (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). It was anticipated that reflective journaling would help assist with this endeavor. Patton (2002) suggested establishing an audit trail to verify the rigor of the fieldwork and confirmability of the data collected to minimize bias, maximize accuracy, and to secure impartiality. I used the following components as the audit trail, as recommended by Onwuegbuzie, Jiao, and Bostick (2004): (a) raw data – using interview records, audio recording and reflective journaling; (b) data reduction and analysis – using theoretical notes, and hypotheses of concepts; (c) data reconstruction and syntheses – using structured categories, findings, and interpretations; (d) process notes – including audit

trail notes, methodological and trustworthiness notes; (e) intentions and disposition – using a reflection journal with expectations and predictions); and (f) instrument development – establishing protocols. The use of these methodological procedures ensured that the study met the trustworthiness criteria (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

In addition, all interviews were audio recorded using a digital recorder that allows an easy transfer to the computer software that I used to store and manage the data. All interviews were transferred to the computer database and a back-up file within 48 hours of completion. Next, I used a rich description to support my analysis of the data. I used quotes that enriched my analysis and notes, which allowed the data to speak for itself. Utilizing grounded commentary also allowed me to cite specific behaviors or attitudes that affect resiliency in African American upper level leaders and enabled the theory that emerges to be more authentic and grounded in the relevant data.

In addition, I completed “member checking” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) with all five of the participants. Member checking was done during the interview process and at the conclusion of the study. Since my participants work in the school district where I am employed, I have established a rapport with them and will continue striving to build that rapport. This helped me to obtain honest and open responses from my participants. During the interview, I restated or summarized information and then questioned the participant to determine accuracy. This allowed participants to critically analyze the findings and comment on them. The participants can either affirm that the summaries reflect their views, feelings, and experiences, or that they do not reflect these experiences.

In this study, the participants affirmed the accuracy and completeness. Therefore, the study is said to have credibility.

### **Limitations**

According to Ary, Jacobs, Razavieh, and Sorensen (2006), qualitative research has inherent ethical issues, which may place limitations on the study. The kind of information gleaned from the study may be very personal or may be illegal (for example, if a principal had to use a weapon to defend his family and someone was hurt in the process). This study delved into personal information, but only to the degree that the participants were willing to go.

This study identified commonalities that the participants viewed as contributing factors that impacted their resilience. Hopefully, this information will be helpful to principals, teachers and counselors working with African American students dealing with challenges in their homes while remaining resilient in school.

Methods of data collection could pose limitations of a different sort such as participants' accounting memories of past events in their personal histories. Psychological research indicated that memory is a process of reconstructing based on what one is currently experiencing, not a "dredging up" of events that actually occurred (Dawes, 1991). Dawes labeled this phenomenon, the bias of retrospection. If retrospective bias exists in my data, it could cause some scholars to question the validity of data generated from participants' responses to interview questions, as well as my own recollections of lived experiences.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Open and honest participant responses to probing questions could potentially place the school leader at risk and potentially strain relationships with parents, teachers and the school community. As the researcher, I spent considerable time with participants (Creswell, 2004), and complete anonymity of the participants was guaranteed through the use of pseudonyms to identify principals and the school district. Any information that could identify familiar district characteristics was coded or eliminated (Creswell, 2004). Along with the above-mentioned, I had developed positive relationships with the participants that involved equal dialogue and communication and made it clear that participants were allowed to end the interview upon request. Also, all participants were required to sign consent and confidentiality forms.

### **Summary**

Chapter III describes the research methodology which includes the research sample, methods for collecting data and its analysis, and any problems that emerged in my research. The chapter explained the processes and procedures that were used to conduct this study. In addition, I discussed my roles and responsibilities as the researcher and the participants and gatekeepers were acknowledged. The qualitative methodology used in my study allowed me to accomplish a primary goal which was to gain insights into the challenges that African American school leaders faced during their youth and what attributed to their resilience as successful school leaders.

This study allowed the participants to convey their stories in their own words, in their own voice, and with their own language, and in a narrative style. The information

that I gleaned from the participants may help fill a void in resilience research by addressing some of the unknowns surrounding how African American youth who faced significant challenges during their youth demonstrated resilience and became successful school leaders.

## **CHAPTER IV**

### **PARTICIPANT PROFILES AND THEIR STORIES**

In an effort to hear the stories and understand the experiences of the five African American school leaders, I created brief vignettes that described significant challenges they faced during their childhood and adolescent years. The vignettes were member checked for accuracy and approval and are shared below.

The demographic information for the five African American school leaders was obtained from each participant prior to the start of the interview and is displayed in Table 1. The age range of the participants was from 36 to 58 years old. All participants lived in Southeast at the time of the interview. The interviews were conducted and analyzed over a 16-week period from June 2013 through October 2013.

For the purposes of confidentiality, a pseudonym is used to identify each participant. Participants' demographic information is provided to assist readers and potential users of this research in assessing similarities and commonalities of the five participants.

#### **Interview 1: About Penny Blue**

My first interview was with Penny Blue, a 42-year-old African American female principal at Enion Middle School. She has been principal at Enion Middle for the last 6 years. She is divorced and the single mother of one son whom she adores. Previously, she had been a technology specialist and elementary school teacher. Penny was informed

of my research topic by one of our colleagues and she expressed interest in speaking with me. When I called Ms. Blue to discuss my research and possibly scheduling an interview, she stated, "No one has any idea of what I went through as a child." I was elated to know that I would be the first person to whom she would share her hidden secrets and challenges she faced during her youth. Our interview began with Penny sharing the death of her father even though she does not remember him. She stated:

Well, I guess I'll start back in elementary because that's when I guess I realized things in my home were different from others. My father was killed tragically in a motorcycle accident and I was two years old at the time. So therefore that left my mother a single parent with three girls me being the baby . . . and later on in my life I found out she had a son when she was 16 years old and he was my older brother. I really don't remember my dad because I was around two years old when he died. My mom ended up remarrying and that's when my memories started to come into play. During that time, we had a normal home, lived in a nice two bedroom house with a garage and just seemed like normal middle class family.

Penny remembered things began to change in their home but she wasn't sure why. She remembered her mom's sad face and smiling very little. As she got older, Penny could not remember her mother showing any affection towards her or her sisters. She did not remember her mother hugging or saying that she loved her or her sisters. She did recall being very close to her sisters. Penny thought maybe it was because of the awful man her mother married. She remarked:

Anyway the man she ended up marrying, today I call him, "The Devil." Then, I called him daddy because that's who he was to me, I didn't know I had another dad at that time. . . . I remember times he would come home and just beat my mom to a pulp. I mean he would beat her with his hands, his fist, and this old fishing rod. My mom would have whips, bruises and black eyes. He would do all of this in the presence of me and my sisters.

Penny discussed wanting so desperately to help her mom but she was too afraid of what would happen to her. She explained:

As a child I saw what anger was and I was terrified. I wanted to save my mom because I loved my mom but I was scared for my life. As a child when you see somebody beating another person and they don't have any defense . . . and she couldn't fight back it was just a horrible thing to see but it became the norm in my house. . . . I was always walking on pins in the house. I didn't want to make the wrong step, didn't want to say the wrong thing, and didn't want to eat wrong . . . I was scared to do anything because I was scared that he was going to whoop me.

Penny did not get as many whippings as her sisters because she was the youngest and smallest. She remembered watching her stepdad beat her sisters terribly. She shared:

I didn't get the torture my sisters received. I was always the observer. Not to say I didn't get whippings, I did. My mom really never whupped us. Maybe every once in a while but it wasn't anything like he did . . . and I would see what he did to my sisters. I mean he would beat my sisters and they were in elementary school. He would beat them like they were grown folk.

She recalled her mom always being at work and her stepdad was always home. However, he would spend all the money. She did not know what he was spending the money on because he was not buying food, clothes or anything for the house. She remembered the refrigerator having only water and a few cans of food in the cabinet. Then she discovered what he was doing with the money. She said:

Come to find out he was drinking up the money, gambling the money away, just doing whatever he wanted with the money. We had the bare minimum in our home. There were times when mom would sit at the table and just watch us eat. She wouldn't eat anything but she wanted to make sure we had enough food to eat.

Her stepdad believed in punishing them severely. She talked about the time her sisters and she played a joke that went bad. Her stepdad really hurt her. She stated:

You know those little plastic runners you have in your house and on the bottom they have the little prickly things. So playing a joke we turned it over so the person that walked into the kitchen would step on them and it would stick your feet . . . we were just playing around. I was in elementary school . . . like the first or second grade and I had turned it over for somebody to walk over. Well, I forgot all about it and nobody walked over it. When he got up he went to the kitchen and he walked on it and Oh my God! I remember him taking that runner and putting it on my head and pressing those little prickly things on my head. I cried and cried.

Penny shared that their house was full of pain in some form or another. Her stepdad did not believe in sitting them down and talking to them when they did something wrong. Instead, when he got angry, he would whup them with anything. Janet explained why her sisters received another whupping. She said:

One of my sisters wore glasses and we were outside riding our bicycles having a good time and my middle sister fell off her bike and lost her eyeglasses . . . We were trying to find her glasses, but couldn't . . . we looked everywhere. So we went back home and we didn't tell him. Instead, we told our mom about her glasses and evidently she told him. I just remember him beating the crap out of my sister. When I say beat I'm not talking about with a switch; I'm talking about with his hands and a belt. He was kicking and just beating my sister because she lost her glasses.

Soon they were not allowed to have friends over to the house or go anywhere. They felt like they were in bondage. She did not know why her stepdad did not want them socializing with anyone until she caught him molesting one of her sisters. Tears flowed to her eyes as she explained:

I happened to walk in the room and saw him doing things to my sister . . . and he said I'll get it if I told anybody. He said he was going to kill you, your mama and your sisters. So imagine me getting those words told to me at a young age and not knowing what to do. I wanted to tell my mom. I was looking at my sisters and knowing how they were being treated and what was happening to them . . . and you knew it was wrong 'cause you don't do things like.

Penny discussed how badly she wanted to tell someone at school about what her stepdad was doing to her sisters. But all she could think about was how much he would hurt her mom and sisters. She stated:

I remember going to school which was considered my safe place and the day someone brought those puppets to school and talked about things like that happening. I wanted to tell so bad but I was scared 'cause he said he was going to kill us and I believed him. I just knew he would beat my mom crazy and beat my sisters terribly too. So I didn't tell anyone 'cause I was too scared.

Penny remembered it was hard concentrating when she read. Often times her mind would end up thinking about what was going on at home. She contributed her reading disability to the problems at home and she tried to hide this too. Penny recalled:

I hated reading. I would always think about what was happening at home. No one knew my reading deficiency because I worked really hard at not letting anybody find out so teachers didn't know I had a reading deficiency because I was able to do the work and I got through. My reading deficiency didn't show up until I got to high school and I think that's kind of funny now. But it didn't show up until I got to high school.

Penny explained that her mom could not pay the rent so they had to move in with her stepdad's parents. She thought things would get better because they were around, but it did not. Her stepdad found a way to get what he wanted. As tears streamed down her face she said:

He took my sister away from the house to do what he wanted to do with her and then he would bring her back. He still got drunk and he still beat my mom not as bad as he did when we were in the house by ourselves but he would still do those things.

Privately, Penny and her sisters talked to each other about the things their stepdad was doing and how they wanted to get away from him. They always checked on each other especially after one of her sisters had been molested. Solemnly, she continued:

My sisters knew that I knew everything ‘cause we would talk about it in private sometimes. I would ask, “Did he hurt you?” We would cry and talk about things. About what he did and they would share those things with me. And we would try to conjure up how we could tell mom . . . how could we leave him . . . where would we go and . . . you know he’d find us cause my mom had left him several times. She would leave and go to her mama’s my grandma’s house and he’ll come . . . she’d be right back with him it was like she’s never going to leave this man and he’s going to continue doing what he’s doing to us.

Penny talked about how things went from bad to worse. One of her sisters became pregnant by their stepdad and they were taken away from their mother. She said:

Mom knew about the beatings we got but I don’t think she knew about the other stuff . . . but my sisters felt like she knew and just didn’t want to do anything about it. So in sixth grade my middle sister ended up getting pregnant and it was his. And that’s when everything went topsy turvy. We were taken away from our mom . . . my sister had to have an abortion . . . we went from foster care to foster care.

While shaking her head, she stated that by the time she was in sixth grade, she was in the Social Services system. She referred to herself as a product of the system. She hated living in foster care and wanted to go back home. She smiled as she discussed going home to her mom. She expressed:

Finally he had to go prison for molesting my sisters . . . my mom had to go through all kinds of counseling and stuff to get herself together . . . then she would be able to get us back. Within one year, I went to four different middle schools because of the different foster homes I had to live in before moving back in the projects with my mom. Then my sisters and my little brother who was my stepdad's son came back home and then my oldest brother came to live with us. I had not seen him in so many years . . . and so it was my mom and five kids living in a 2 bedroom apartment. I thought things would be fine until I answered a frightening phone call.

Suddenly, Penny began tapping her foot on the floor as she explained how she felt listening to this voice on the other end of the phone. Sadly she recalled:

I remember answering the phone call and it was one of those collect calls and as I listened to who it was I got very nervous cause it was him calling. I remember thinking, how did he get our number . . . when you're in prison. Then all of a sudden I remember hanging up the phone and . . . this nervous feeling coming all over me . . . I thought, God he knows where we are. Then I remembered, he's still in prison so we're okay. I never said anything to my mom about that call but knowing that now he was calling and that she was accepting his phone calls.

Penny shared that she could not believe her mom was talking to him again. She remembered coming home from school and there he was. She expressed her disappointment:

I mean you walk through the door and there he comes from around the corner. I think I had just got in seventh grade . . . and he was not supposed to have any contact with us . . . that was the rule. Before we knew it he started coming through this path in the projects . . . and come in the back door. At first she may not have known what went on before we were taken away but now she knew and she let this man back.

Penny and her sisters felt that it was just a matter of time before he would start molesting and beating them again. She remembered being so angry with her mom and

wondered if her mom really loved them. She expressed that they were more fearful now than before. She said:

So we had all this anger and stuff. And so of course we're watching ourselves . . . you know not to say nothing wrong. We would tell each other not to say anything to anyone or they're going to take us away. You know you don't want to leave your mama. You love your mama regardless of whatever, you love that mama.

It was obvious the girls would rather live in fear and stay with their mother than to live in a safe home with someone else. Unfortunately, a relative found out that he was spending time with them. Penny's mother knew that if the relative told the police that she was allowing him to come to their house that she would get in trouble. So she told her girls the following:

I'm going back to live with him. I've got to find somewhere for y'all to go live. I don't know who you will be living with but you will be alright. She was giving us away so that she could go with him.

Obviously, Penny and her sisters were angry, hurt and confused once again. She talked about wanting to run away from home but she did not. Penny recalled thinking about how badly they had been treated by him. She said:

I was confused. This man has beat you . . . messed with your girls, beat us, treated us bad. And I forgot this one little part I remember we were in the house. I was in first or second grade . . . eating dinner and he took a preserve jar and threw it at my head. The jar went right by my head into the wall and stuck in the wall and there was a hole in the wall. So when you say mentally crazy scared of this man I mean the fear was in me. So I'm thinking my mama go sit there and tell us . . . I don't understand. I couldn't understand it then and to this day, I still don't understand it. So for me I wasn't good enough. This man was what she wanted she didn't want us. What did we do to make her want to go back to him? What did we do? What did I do?

Penny noted that she and her sisters cried and cried. They did not know who was going to take them and they did not want to be separated from each other but they were. She explained:

Here we go separated again. I had to go live with an aunt and uncle. Another one of my aunts took another sister and my sister that had received the most abuse; got pregnant by our stepdad; had an abortion and ended up being placed in another foster home. To this day, I still don't understand why no one took her, why didn't she get to go live with somebody in the family like we did.

Penny talked about how much she worried about her mom and her little brother living back with her stepdad. She knew he would end up back on drugs and alcohol. They would be in a bad situation. By now, she understood social services became her parents. They were the ones that had control of her. Convincingly she said:

I was a system's child. That was my biological mom but she had no rights to me. Social Services said that I couldn't go with her, so I couldn't go. I wanted to go and I thought I could go but I couldn't. I couldn't nor could my sisters and we were in the system till we turned 18 years old. My aunt never adopted me.

Penny thought her struggles were over. She had a safe place to live. There was no fussing, fighting, alcohol and drugs. She thought she would finally have some peace. Unfortunately, problems continued to follow her. Now she had to deal with her aunt's jealousy and envy. She commented:

My cousin and I had a sibling relationship . . . we fussed and fought all the time. My cousin and I didn't get along and for whatever reason she didn't like me. I guess I was invading her space and now she had to share her home and her mom with me. I didn't understand at the time cause I was like why are you being so mean . . . I was never mean to her . . . and my aunt got jealous of the relationship I had with this lady at church and she lied on me and deceived me too.

While visiting another aunt, Penny's cousin told her the terrible things her aunt was saying about her. Penny recalled:

I remember her saying Aunt Betty is talking about you. She's talking about how you don't listen to her and you don't do this and don't do that. She was saying how you don't talk to guys and she was wondering if you were gay.

Penny indicated that she was doing everything that she was being told. She expressed not wanting to go to another school because between sixth and seventh grade, she had already attended four middle schools.

Throughout my interview, it became very apparent that she faced significant barriers throughout her childhood. As a child, she endured verbal and physical abuse from her stepdad. She expressed how difficult it was watching her mother and sisters receive the same abuse but more intensely. Again, she became teary eyed as she discussed the horrific experiences of her sisters being molested and later becoming pregnant by her stepdad. This was an indelible event that she will never forget. For years, Penny lived in fear, moved from foster home to foster home and attended many different schools. The most devastating event was when her mother chose their stepdad over her children even after knowing what he had done to them.

As previously stated in Chapter I, research has many theories and approaches for individual and life success, a study by Benard (2004) approached resilience from a perspective of strength instead of weakness. Benard suggests that resilience research should begin with attempting to determine how and why individual strengths emerge,

and then identify protective factors that permit youth to strive in spite of adversity. In Chapter V, I will discuss what Penny attributes to her resilience and success.

### **Interview 2: About Ann Hawkins**

In order to gain perspective for my research I needed to specify my own personal background. It was important to explore my upbringing in order to determine where my values and beliefs originated. I served as both the participant and researcher. Moustakas (1994) recommends that the researcher fully disclose any personal biases and experiences related to the phenomenon being studied. In this case, it is pertinent that I disclose my personal biases or experiences that may hinder me from effectively recording the experiences of the African American participants in this study.

After interviewing Penny, I felt compelled to interview 52-year-old Ann Hawkins. Ann is married with three adult children. She is very proud of her three children and adores her two beautiful grandchildren. Her oldest daughter has graduated from college, got married and has given Ann two grandchildren. Her son is in Law school and his twin sister is in Veterinary school. At the time of the interview, Ann had been an educator for twenty-seven years and seventeen of those years as a school principal. She has worked in schools with varying demographics including predominately African American and White, Title I and schools identified by the state as Schools of Excellence. As an elementary school teacher her experience was working in high needs and Title I schools only. Ann's elementary school principal encouraged her to begin working on a master's degree in administration. She believed that Ann would be a good administrator because of the positive relationships she established with the African American students and their

families. Later, she became an assistant principal serving in elementary and middle schools. Currently, she is the principal at Gaston Elementary School.

As an African American child who grew up in a single-parent home, an underprivileged neighborhood, with inadequate resources and poverty, Ann has been interested in understanding the influences that contributed to her resilience and success. For years, she meditated on the choices her sister and she made during their adolescent years. For that reason she decided to be a study participant and research what motivated her to continue to excel academically and pursue a professional career no matter what obstacles she faced.

She used the same interview process and questions with herself as she did with her other participants. After asking herself a question, she paused and responded to the question. The interview took place in the basement of her home. She began the interview by telling the story of her life, starting with her childhood experiences and her experiences as an adolescent in middle and high school. Ann shared the following:

I grew up in low-income housing projects. My mother dropped out of high school in the twelfth grade and moved to another state with my dad but they never got married. By the time I was three years old, my mother became a single parent of three girls. I only recall my oldest sister and me living with mom. When my baby sister was five days old, my mom gave my baby sister away to her best friend, Ms. Effie. So I don't recall my baby sister living with us and it was never really talked about. As I got older, I remember hearing that our father, who I don't remember living in the home either told mom that in order for them to stay together someone else had to raise my baby sister because they could not afford to take care of three children.

Ann recalled seeing her youngest sister playing outside because Ms. Effie was also the single parent of one son and lived in the same projects across the parking lot

from them. As she grew older, she remembered the kids in the neighborhood telling her that she and her baby sister looked alike.

Vividly, she remembered her mom catching the safe bus to work because they didn't have a car. Her mom worked cleaning houses, dormitories, and worked in a factory. Interestingly, Ann shared that the low-income projects were only for single mothers and their children to live, however, most of the mothers had boyfriends who lived with them or spent most nights with them. Ann's mother's boyfriend named Mr. Bud stayed weekends with them. Ann did not know Mr. Bud's age but he looked much older than her mom. He was very controlling and bossed her mother around. Ann recalled her mother and Mr. Bud drinking alcohol and fighting for years on the weekends. She said:

You know I remember the times when Mom would drink alcohol and get drunk and the next day she would be so sick and vomit over and over again. I don't know when she started drinking because I was so small, but as I grew I remember her and Mr. Bud getting sloppy drunk on the weekends. I hated Fridays because he would always come over to the house with two brown paper bags. One bag would have a bottle of Vodka for my mom and the other bag had a bottle of Wild Irish Rose Boone Farm Wine. Although he was already sloppy drunk, he still had another bottle to drink. I remember he would give mom some money and during the fight he always asked for it back.

Ann stated the alcohol transformed them from two caring people into two violent destructive people. Usually, within an hour after they both were intoxicated, the arguing, fussing and fighting would begin. Ann indicated that she hated Fridays and sometimes Saturdays. She stated:

Just about every Friday or Saturday night the police would be at our house because mom and Bud would be fighting. I recall seeing him punch mom in the face and black her eyes. Sometimes he punched her in the nose and blood would be everywhere. I know he broke her nose at least twice because I remember going to the emergency room. We had at least fifteen or twenty stairs inside our apartment and I remember him kicking her down the stairs. My sister and I would run in our bedroom and cry and beg him to stop. Mom never had him arrested. She just told the police to make him leave.

Ann stated she did not know which she hated the most the weekends or Mr. Bud because they both brought her fear and agony. When she and her sister were around seven or eight years old their next door neighbor told them to come over to her house whenever they began arguing. Ann thought that was interesting because her neighbor and her boyfriend got drunk all the time and they fought too.

Ann stated she hated Mr. Bud so much that by the time she was ten or twelve years old she was trying to figure out how she could kill him and get away with it. She talked about sleeping with a knife under her mattress when he was there. Ann shared the time he put a gun to her mother's head. Tearfully, she said:

One night, we were getting ready to go to bed and my sister and I could hear them arguing downstairs. They both were drunk and mom told him to leave. Instead, he went to his car and got his gun and put it to my mom's head and said he was going to kill her. I remember us begging and begging him not to shoot her. So he turned to do something and we ran out of the house and he came running after us. We had on our pajamas but we kept running and running until someone picked us up and gave us a ride to somewhere.

Ann discussed the times he would make her ride with him to the store and they ended up in a liquor house and he drank and drank. One day she thought they would end up in a car wreck or get stopped by the police, but it never happened. One of her most

frightening events was during middle school. She remembered some kids in the neighborhood came running to tell her that her mom, Mr. Bud, his son, and three other men were in her front yard arguing. Ann explained this terrifying few minutes:

I went running home to see what was going on. It was my mom, Mr. Bud, his son, one of my mom's brothers and two of his friends outside arguing. My uncle was telling Mr. Bud that he was tired of him hurting his sister and it was going to stop. Before I knew it, Mr. Bud pulled out his gun and pointed it towards my uncle and my uncle's friend tried to pull out his gun but Mr. Bud shot him in the hand. My mom fell to the ground and I remember screaming hysterically because I thought she had been shot, but she wasn't.

Ann said that she will never forget that day. Nonetheless, within two or three weeks Mr. Bud was back staying weekends and the arguing started again. She described:

I could smell the alcohol and hear their loud voices. My mom called her brother to come and help her because she knew they were about to fight but my uncle never showed up. As mom talked on the phone, Mr. Bud jerked the phone from her hand and hit her in the head with it. Later I found out that my uncle had told her that since she kept letting Mr. Bud come back that he was not coming to defend her anymore. He told her that his friend was almost killed trying to help her and he knew she was going to keep letting him come back. My uncle never came back to help us.

Ann said the alcohol, verbal and physical abuse went on for at least fifteen years. She said Mr. Bud never hit her or her sister. However, when her mom and Mr. Bud would break up her mom would take her anger out on her sister and her. She stated:

Mom would beat us for little stuff when she was mad at Mr. Bud. She would come in our bedroom and open up our dresser drawers and if our clothes were not folded neatly and in stacks, she would dump our clothes out on the bed and after beating us with a belt we had to fold them up and when we finished she would come and check to see if we had folded them correctly.

Ann recalled another time her mom whooped her because she had not folded the clothes correctly after taking them off the clothes line. She said:

One of my chores was to take the clothes off the clothes line, fold them and put them in the clothes basket. Well, I knew how mom liked the clothes folded. I had been folding them for years and she was very peculiar regarding the way clothes were hung on the clothes line and folded after they were taken off the clothes line. Well, I folded two towels the wrong way. When she saw those towels, she got her belt and beat me anywhere the belt landed. I can still hear her saying, "I'll beat you till your nose bleed." And that's what she did. The belt hit me in my face and my nose actually started bleeding. Otherwise, I believe she would have kept beating me.

Ann continued:

I was in middle school and my mom had let me go to a dance at the community recreation center. Well, my curfew was eleven o'clock and I walked in the house at eleven fifteen and I got the living daylight beat out of me.

She continued:

Another time my sister had skipped school and mom found out. Well not only did she beat my sister, but she beat me for not telling her. This time she made us pull our pants down and beat us terribly. After she finished, I remember rubbing vaseline on my butt and legs because they had stinging whips.

Ann talked about the worst beating she had ever gotten. She remembered it was in the summertime, because her bedroom window was open. Her mom had just come home from work and noticed that someone had been messing with the nail polish and perfumes that were sitting on her dresser. Her mother was very peculiar and meticulous about certain things. Ann continued:

Mom yelled, ya'll girls get in here . . . who has been messing on my dresser? My sister and I said not me. Mom said, one of ya'll is lying . . . I don't keep my things like this so somebody's lying . . . which one of you was on it? Again, we both said, not me. Before we knew it, mom had taken off one of her shoes and started beaten us with it. My sister ran out the house and after she realized my sister had run away from her and out the door, she went after her. Mom chased her behind our apartment building yelling, cussing and saying, wait till I get you . . . you won't run no more! Everybody outside was laughing at us and we were so embarrassed.

Ann explained how she could go on and on telling me about the terrible beatings they received. She said her mom would beat them for some of the smallest things from the welfare check coming in the mail late, to running the bath water too hot, to putting the pillow in the pillow case incorrectly, to not saying your prayers before bed. Ann thought it seemed like they got a beating every other week.

The challenges that Ann faced were severe for a young child. She recalled her freshman year in college and feeling a sense of relief when she found out that Mr. Bud died.

After 30 years of experiencing significant childhood obstacles, Ann stated she was determined not to mimic her upbringing of living in poverty, single parenting, abuse, alcohol and beating her children and having a dysfunctional family.

### **Interview 3: About Larry Stock**

I also interviewed 36-year-old African American male school principal Larry Stock. Larry married his college sweetheart and they have two children. He proudly articulated that he was still madly in love after being married eleven years. He has been a middle school principal for seven years at Bulls Middle School. Previously, Larry had been an assistant principal and teacher all on the elementary and middle school levels in

the Southeast. He has only worked in predominately African American Title I schools that are considered by the state as low performing schools. Prior to the interview, I did not know Larry, but I had heard other colleagues refer to him as a strong school leader. He was selected to participate in my research study after I sat beside him during a meeting regarding the academic achievement of African American males. When I asked him whether he would be interested in participating in my research study, he became very interested and agreed to participate. I interviewed Larry in his office at his request.

When I arrived at his office, he was eager and ready to begin the interview. I began by asking him to share the story of his life, starting with his childhood, adolescent, middle, and high school experiences. He said immediately:

On the surface it would appear that I grew up in a well to do middle class home with a mother and a father. I truly came up in a community where everybody knew your mother and father. They also knew the transgressions of your mother and father. So there were some past experiences that I had that my family carried as far as alcohol, infidelities and fighting.

He shared:

My father was very promiscuous. He would leave home going to work and days would go by before he came back home. I guess you could say he was a ladies man. I remember hearing my mom crying late at night when my dad had not come home.

He continued:

Some mornings my mom's eyes would be blood shot red and swollen from her crying all night. She would get up the next morning, dad still not there and go to work. I was around six or seven, with three older brothers. My brothers and I would hug her and tell her we loved her. I still remember her being so sad.

Larry discussed:

My dad would come home after being gone two or three days with lipstick on his shirt, reeking with alcohol and just drunk. My mom would cuss him out and he would slap her around and knock her down. I remember mom having to go to the hospital. She told the doctors that she had fallen down some stairs, but I knew my dad had stumped her so hard, he broke her leg. Again, my brothers and I were so scared so we would run outside to the field as a way to escape.

Unlike Ann, the police did not come to Larry's house. He grew up in a rural area with only a few things to do, go to church, hunt, or engage in inappropriate activities. There were no recreation centers or YMCAs. Larry explained that his grandparents were sharecroppers and owned part of the farm and worked for the white man. His parents were both factory workers and owned a farm. They grew their own vegetables and raised their own hogs. Larry helped with farming, hunting, and going to school. He stated that some of his personal experiences were good and some experiences were bad and that he is still carrying some painful scars from some bad experiences his childhood.

He said:

Well, prior to being an adolescent, I had an experience with a family member in which I was sexually molested by a male . . . and so I was thinking that I was wrong all these years . . . that I had done something to make him do that to me.

He commented:

. . . after being molested I had a lot of anger in me . . . I was very distrusting of a lot of people, particularly males. And this was someone that was well respected in the church and well respected in the community. So I felt that no one would believe my story and so I felt that I didn't have a voice.

He continued:

As an adolescent, in middle school I became quite angry . . . I tried to burn down the school. I actually broke into my school. Also, in elementary school I tried to set the school on fire and burn the school down. So I know that sounds bad but that's who I was. I was always angry.

Larry discussed that he did not care about what he did or if he got caught. He did not trust anyone and he took his anger out destructively. He remembered skipping school and getting whippings when he did wrong but it did not stop him.

Larry shared:

I would do a lot of vandalism. I would steal. I would drink alcohol. I would skip school and get suspended off the bus and out of school. I did all these things until I got caught and was charged as being an unruly juvenile.

Larry expressed what happened in court. He did not care about getting caught because he was so angry. He said:

. . . I went to court, pled guilty about everything because they had my fingerprints on things . . . so now I was in the juvenile system and I was still mad. That didn't bother me either. I blamed my acting out on that family member that had molested me. At first, my parents refused for me to get counseling cause and they didn't know why I would be so mad . . . because I was a yes ma'am, no sir type of guy to certain people until I got mad.

Larry continued to discuss how difficult it was for him to trust people. He commented:

. . . once my trust was violated I became a different type of individual. I became a boy scout . . . but I heard that there were some scout masters who were also molesting kids . . . and doing those kinds of things so at first I didn't trust a lot of individuals . . . due to what had happened to me as a child.

Larry stated that his teachers did not want him in their class. He remarked:

She (teacher) said I know you still have this probation officer that is seeing you . . . I don't know how she knew and all the staff knew . . . we want to know why you are you on probation...teachers used to hate to see me coming . . . once I got mad I was the kid that would probably be considered BED. Later, they found out that I was ADD.

Larry did not like his brother because he made straight "A's in school. His parents considered him perfect. He commented:

I grew up detesting my brother because he was the one that I should have been. My dad made comments like . . . you're not supposed to be here . . . we shouldn't had you . . . and so I had this resentment. I had hatred toward my dad . . .

Larry said that his parents still do not know that he was molested. He did not feel that his mother would be able to handle it. He also felt that his father would become very violent if he would have told him. His wife is the only person he had confided in telling this awful secret.

Larry experienced many struggles and hardships early in his life. For many years he observed his father's infidelity, heavy drinking, and physical abuse of his mother. He committed crimes including vandalism, stealing, trespassing and became a part of the juvenile system. In addition, he skipped school and received out of school suspension for damaging school property. During his childhood, Mr. Stock became involved in several unruly behaviors that he has been able to bury. However, the molestation continues to lie dormant within him and awakens in his mind periodically.

#### **Interview 4: About Robert Buck**

I interviewed 40-year-old African American principal, Robert Buck. Robert has been the principal of Jordan High School for the last three years. He is married with one daughter. Mr. Buck is very active in his church and serves on the board of several community organizations. He began his professional career by teaching high school for nine years and then was an assistant principal for two years. He has been nominated as “Principal of the Year” several times by his colleagues. Currently, he serves on several school district committees. Although Robert and I have never worked in the same building, I consider him to be a trusting friend. After sharing my dissertation topic with him, he informed me that he had experienced terrible childhood challenges that continue to bother him. He agreed to participate in my study and the three-hour uninterrupted interview took place in the basement of my home as he requested.

I began by telling Robert that I was interested in hearing the story of his life, starting with his childhood experiences and continuing through his adolescent, middle and high school years. He began by discussing his community.

I am the younger of two children . . . my mother raised two boys. I've never known my mother and father to be together as a child . . . they were either already divorced before I was born or getting divorced . . . but I've never known him to be in the home. We lived in a little poor area; I come from one of the poorest counties. If you rank them from richest to poorest in North Carolina's 100 counties, it was 95 when I was growing up . . . it was rural, farming, peanuts, tobacco, cotton and those types of things people did. Not a lot of industries or anything like that . . . probably about 2000 people in it growing up and about 1500 when I went to college and I was 18 so it had much less . . . everybody was poor . . . you didn't know you were really poor . . . so poor people that lived in the trailer park and we eventually moved there too. For some reason, we thought people in the trailer park had some money. So that's what poverty was like there.

Robert stated that he did not know anyone that had lived outside of their town, so to them everyone was doing well financially. He thought economically everyone was the same.

His mother got married and moved to Kansas and Robert and his brother lived with their grandparents from birth to five years. Robert recalled his mother and stepdad moving back when he was about six years old. He remembered several people living in the trailer with them. He stated:

My mom was the only person working. My mom's older sister was in college but her two kids lived with us. So my mom was taking care of her sister's two kids and us, plus she had a grown brother who stayed in the house . . . but he did not work. Then you had my grandmother there.

Robert discussed his living arrangements as being too crowded and days when the cabinets only had a jar of peanut butter and cereal to eat. He could not understand why his mother and grandmother had to take care of his aunt's children. He was excited when his mother and father rented a trailer for his immediate family to live in. They no longer had to live with his grandmother. His mother and stepfather remained married for about ten years and divorced. He recalled his grandmother forcing him to call his stepdad, "daddy." He stated:

I remember distinctly getting ready to get a whipping because I called him by his first name instead of calling him daddy like my brother had decided to do . . . I think it was because my brother never really had his dad near him. My dad lived less than three miles away. So I already had somebody to address with that position or title. And, as a child, I just thought it was wrong to call two people daddy when I knew he wasn't my daddy. But my grandmother being old fashioned thought that since my mother had married him it was appropriate to do that.

Robert realized that his stepfather treated him differently. He explained:

There was always a difference between me and my brother and my stepfather made it very evident. My brother has a different father than me of course. He's darker skinned. I'm lighter skinned. And there was always a difference. My stepdad always did different things with him and for him and I could feel it. So even after they divorced, my stepdad lived with us a few years. I never really felt that I was his son. It was never any love or compassion from what I can see.

Robert continued:

After my stepdad moved out I distinctly remember going to where he was living this was with the woman who he had committed an affair with while he was with my mom. Now he's staying with this lady. And so, I go see him because we were having some financial hardships. I go and ask him for money to go on a class trip. And he says to me, I'm not your daddy . . . but my brother could go and get money.

Robert discussed being made to go to church with his grandmother and what happened if he did not want to go or if he misbehaved at church. He remarked:

Our grandmother took us to church because we were with her a lot of the time or it was because my mom didn't want to go to church. My mom and grandmother made sure that we went. If you acted up at church you got beat at church. When I say you got a beating, you got a beating. I got lots of beatings but it wasn't because I said I didn't want to go to church or because I acted up while I was in church. I don't know why I got so many beatings, but I did.

Robert shared an experienced that shaped his life. He said:

I remember that my brother had an older friend in the trailer and I was molested on that particular day. That experience was my first sexual experience and it has shaped some of the things that have occurred with me now. My mother and brother still don't know this happened because I never discussed it and I probably never will.

Robert was teased in middle school. He commented:

Most middle school or high school boys and girls would say you are using a feminine type of behavior. So in middle school and high school I was teased. In this day and time they would call it bullying. Back then they just called it boys being boys and girls being girls. . .the word gay wasn't used back then. . .word most often used was faggot or you acting like a girl or you dressing like a girl or you talk like a girl. I think I was picked on because of my conversation and mannerisms that I picked up from being around my mom and her friends.

Robert's brother also teased and bullied him. He noted:

My brother would be just as rough with me as the kids at school. He felt it was okay for him to call me a faggot but he did not want other people to say it. I didn't like it when he called me a faggot either, but he did anyway.

Robert knew his family did not have any money. There were times when he was not sure if he would have a home to come to. He explained:

I would be leaving home my senior year and I knew that we had not paid our trailer rent in months so we left for school with the mindset that every morning when we walked to school that we might come back and not be able to get in the house. Where I come from they would actually come during the day and pull the trailer away. So you could in essence leave one morning and come back and the spot where your trailer used to be water is disconnected, piping is disconnected, everything and it's gone, literally. So everything you have is now gone. I was always worried that our trailer would be gone.

Robert discussed being worried about his mom not having money to pay the rent. He knew that his brothers' father had a good job but no one wanted to ask him because he hated giving his mother any money.

So this particular time, it was a very difficult season for my mom 'cause here she was with two boys and she can't pay her trailer payment. I thought . . . my

brother's father is an engineer . . . and he would only send her \$50 a month and she could not ask him for anything extra because they had to actually make him pay the \$50. But he makes a lot of money . . . but here she is taking care of his son and even sometimes begging him to send more money because his son was on the basketball team and he needed a pair of \$50 shoes. He told my mom to buy it with the \$50 he sent her.

Robert shared an injury he received from his drunken uncle.

In high school, my mom was taking care of her brothers, even when she didn't have a job, they could come to our house and live without paying any rent. Eat without buying any food . . . I'm not liking it because you sleeping in my room. . . and you don't have good hygiene and you sleeping in my room and making my life miserable and my brother has his own room and here I am sleeping in this room that has two twin beds in it but why I got to be in the room with you. This is my mama's house and you drunk, and you smell badly . . . And we already didn't have anything and one day we ended up getting in an argument because I told him about himself. Well he had a plate in his hand and . . . he slapped me in my face with the plate. The plate broke and cut a main artery near my ear. In high school I dealt with that type of abuse.

He continued:

Later . . . that somehow in four weeks my mother had started to sell drugs. Eventually, using drugs evolved because my mother was normally a size 18/20W, just depending and her size dropped to about 8 to 10, which is a significant weight loss. So I didn't want to believe it but my brother made it clear to me that mama's doing drugs herself.

Robert talked about getting upset when his mother spent the money he needed for school, especially because their house was still repossessed.

Once I got home from college and I was expecting my next check to come. And so I'm asking, "where's my check?" Calling down there, "where's my check?" Almost every day, I'm calling saying, "when y'all go send me my money?" They said well, we've already sent that money. I'm around the house saying I don't know when my money coming. My mama hear me saying I don't know when my

money coming . . . And so later on, I'm 'bout to get the police involved, trying to figure out what happened to my money . . . so she sits me down and she said the money came. And she spent the money. Now instead of spending the money on the house payment because we were behind paying it . . . she acted as if that's what she did with the money but I don't believe that ever occurred. So when I came home from college I found out we had moved somewhere else because the house had been repossessed.

Robert recalled one of his biggest childhood disappointments:

I remember my dad would always make promises that he was coming to do certain things or he was going to do this, do that. We would always spend most of our time fishing. This time my daddy said we're going to New York. I had a brown suitcase . . . and I packed my clothes to go with him to New York. I sat on that suitcase and every light that came by I could see the lights, when they hit the blinds so I would look out and . . . I'm a child, maybe seven or eight, I guess. And every car that comes by I'm looking. As a matter of fact, I moved from the chair, I'm now sitting on the suitcase by the window so I won't have to continue to get up . . . I sat there by the window so long looking out of the window that I fell asleep. And the next thing I remember my mama was putting me in the bed 'cause I had sat there and fallen asleep with my head pressed against the glass waiting on him to come.

Robert was worried about his mother's life style. He knew that she performed illegal acts to get what she wanted or to provide for her children. He remembered:

She would drink, smoke pot and do crack maybe . . . I couldn't ask her to send me money. Because if I asked her for money I didn't know how she was going to get it. Or should I say, I know she wasn't working. She was either selling drugs or she was doing prostitution. She was doing one of the two to get money.

Robert's hardships were similar to the other participants. He lived in poverty, abused, bullied, disappointed and molested. His mother's behavior also contributed to his hardships. Although his mother was determined to make money, often times she was involved in illegal acts such as selling and using drugs, prostitution and even stealing

money from her son. Robert stated that no matter what his mother did she was the best mother in the world and was determined to help her financially one day.

### **Interview 5: About Rick Hoover**

My final interview was with 58-year-old Rick Hoover. At the time of the interview, Mr. Hoover had been a school principal for 33 years. He is happily married with no children. He enjoys golfing and traveling. Currently, he is an elementary school principal and formerly a teacher, assistant principal, and an elementary, middle and high school principal. Throughout his career, he has worked in two school districts with various demographic populations of students ranging from low performing Title I schools to schools identified by the state Department of Public Instruction as Schools of Excellence. A gatekeeper informed Rick of my dissertation topic and following a meeting I provided him with additional information. He agreed to participate in my study. I met James at one of his favorite breakfast restaurants to conduct his interview. We sat in a corner of the restaurant with both chairs facing each other.

Again, I began by telling Rick that I was interested in hearing the story of his life. I asked him to start by telling me about his childhood, adolescent, middle and high school experiences. He noted:

Well I grew up in Washington, DC with both of my parents. They both graduated from college and had good jobs working for the government in Washington, DC. At an early age I knew that I would be going to college. We lived in a two-story home and folks on the outside thought that we were the perfect family.

Rick continued:

Our neighbors had no idea that my dad was an alcoholic and that my parents did not get along. My dad used to beat up on my mom when he got drunk. My mom was very pretty and my dad was so jealous.

Rick stated he loved his dad, but he hated him when he was drunk especially when he hit his mom. He recalled being afraid of his dad because he was so violent. He stated:

I remember my mom and I would lock the bedroom door or crawl under the bed when my dad started cussing and fussing. One night when we had locked ourselves in the bathroom, he knocked a hole in the door, unlocked it and pulled her out by her hair.

Rick remembered having bad stomach aches in the first and second grades. He knew it came from his parents fighting. His teachers would ask if him if his mom had taken him to the doctor because it happened so frequently. He never told his teachers what was bothering him. His dad had warned him that if he told anyone that he would beat him and his mother. He continued:

Whenever I came in from school and opened the door, I would always say, "Mom I'm home." She would respond by saying, "I'm in the kitchen" or whatever room she was in at the time. Well, this day she didn't say anything. I remember my heartbeat pounding and I said it again, mom. Then, I heard her crying and it was because my dad had called and told her that when he came home he was going to beat her you-know-what because someone at his job had seen her at the store and saw the bruise on her arm and asked him about it.

Rick had seen his father grab his mother by the neck and choke her. He commented on the bruises, bloody noses, and black eyes his mother received. His mother

was light skinned so she tried to use heavy makeup to cover up the marks. Rick remembered trying to hide his dads' alcohol but that made things worse for his mother. Then he described a traumatic event that changed his life forever. He revealed:

In the fifth grade, I came home from school and found my mother dead. My father had shot her in the head. The police was there and I did not know what was going to happen to me. Someone called my grandmother in North Carolina and she came and got me. I went to live with her in another state. I did not know that I would be living differently until we pulled up to this little old shabby house. I couldn't believe that's where I would have to live. That was the first time I ever noticed financial hardships.

Rick discussed the hurt, pain, and loneliness he felt when his mom and dad were gone. After moving in with my grandmother, I use to spend a lot of time crying for my mother and father. His grandmother could not afford to buy him the things like his parents. He noted:

My grandmother was really good at doing different things. There were times when she worked two jobs. She worked as the video store manager and a waitress at a restaurant. Another time, she worked in a furniture factory and sold home décor stuff. She would work little odd jobs if necessary to make extra money.

For ten years, Rick was raised in an upper-middle class home with both parents. Now he had to live with a poor grandmother that did not even graduate from high school. Later, she did earn a GED. He stated the following:

My grandmother went back to school and became a phlebotomist. She got a job as an emergency room phlebotomist. Then she got a job working at the health department drawing blood. She would say, well I'm making a little more money with this job. It's not much and don't expect to be living like you did in DC because I don't have it.

He knew that his grandmother worked hard to provide for him. When he was in high school he recalled:

She went back to school online and got an Associate's Degree in health management and started working at a doctor's office. For several months, I watched her study late at night after she had worked all day and wanted to help her.

Rick did not know he was getting free lunch. He remembered asking his grandmother for extra money to buy snacks. She said:

Child, I barely make enough money to pay all the bills around here. Your mom and dad had money extra money to buy extra stuff but you need to get use to just eating the food that you get free at school.

Although Rick did not face as many obstacles during his youth as the other participants, his obstacles definitely affected his emotional stability. Certainly, living with a functional alcoholic dad and watching his mother receive verbal and physical abuse for ten years was traumatic. Also, keeping his hideous family secret and hidden fear to himself for ten years was agonizing for a young child. He never imagined losing both parents and at the same time. However, like the other participants, Rick made it.

I shared their stories with their permission and with great compassion for their personal journeys. Their stories provided explicit descriptions of the barriers they faced during their childhood and adolescent years.

## **CHAPTER V**

### **DATA ORGANIZATION AND ANALYSIS**

Chapter V describes the common themes and subthemes that emerged from the data. According to Gelman (1991) resilient children have “clusters” of protective factors, not just one or two. Therefore, it is important to highlight positive behaviors that were found as common threads and reoccurring themes. Direct excerpts from the interview transcriptions are used to reflect participants’ responses to the interview questions relating to the themes. Their stories paint a portrait of the factors they believe contribute to their success as school leaders despite facing significant adversity during their youth.

The use of in-depth interviews in this research project was an important aspect in understanding the resilience of African American school leaders who have transcended hardships and difficult experiences in their childhood that threatened to have irreparable effects on their potential for success. There are scores of factors that might influence the development or exercise of resilience through difficult situations. Thus, it is important to consider the specific stories and narratives provided in the interviews that reveal themes or factors that might otherwise go undiscovered.

In asking respondents to answer questions and encouraging them to expound as much as they desired, many respondents shared extensive details about their lives, their journeys, and how they were able to demonstrate resilience. The participants were not asked how they felt about discussing and contributing to the research on African

Americans in upper-level school leadership positions who faced significant barriers as children. However, a theme that emerged was that all participants felt that conversing and contributing to this research was of utmost importance. They provided several reasons for its importance:

- being able to tell their stories in a manner that might benefit the larger African American community,
- being able to honor those who helped them along the way and fostered the resilience that has become a part of their innate beings,
- being able to talk about the plight they felt they had already overcome and that they were experiencing now was therapeutic for them.

My first interview was with Penny Blue. When I called Penny to discuss my research and possibly scheduling an interview, she stated, "No one has any idea of what I went through as a child, but maybe this will help another African American child." I was elated to know that I would be the first person to whom she would share her hidden secrets and challenges she faced during her youth.

When I talked with Ann Hawkins, she was somewhat reserved and commented that she will be happy to share her childhood experiences. She said she really don't know how she survived but for me to be prepared because she had a lot to tell. After Robert Buck agreed to participate in the research, he commented that he had experienced terrible childhood challenges that continue to bother him and there were important people that helped him during those rough times. Rick Hoover smiled as I talked to him. He commented that his life started off well and in a manner of years it changed in a way that

he never imagined. Then Larry Stock said that I would be shocked to learn about some of his embarrassing experiences. During the interview he became very emotional.

Many participants expressed how the stories of successful African-American school leaders are so important for the youth of today to hear because they have a different struggle than even those just two generations removed. Many participants felt that resilience is even more important now, as leaders, parents, family members, educators and other people who touch their lives have the responsibility to pass on the stories.

Although the participants' stories are told in the present time, the stories carry a temporal sequence while capturing the complexity and interconnectedness of the past, present and the hopes for the future (Connelly & Clandinin, 2000; McLean, 1999).

The study examined the following research questions:

1. What do African American upper level school leaders perceive as being the most significant factors or events that have contributed to their resilience and success?
  - a. What role do African American upper level school leaders attribute to their parents in their resilience and success?
  - b. What role do African American upper level school leaders attribute to school in their resilience and success?
  - c. What role do African American upper level school leaders attribute to the community in their resilience and success?

- d. What role do African American upper level school leaders attribute to participation in community organizations, churches or programs in their resilience and success?

### **Research Question 1**

A common thread that was essential to the resilience and success of all five participants was the presence of caring, supportive, and empowering relationships. These relationships included the support of at least one person within the students' ecosystem (i.e., family, school, or community environment). When asked, "What do African American upper level school leaders perceive as being the most significant factors or events that have contributed to their resilience and success despite adversity?", the participants first identified the people who made a difference in their lives. The participants vibrantly described the qualities of these people, and how these social support providers not only expressed genuine interest and care, but also empowered and inspired students to succeed. For that reason, one central theme present in the data is:

1. Precise Parenting Practices contributed to the resilience in African American school leaders.

The participants attributed precise parenting practices used in the home, school, and community by their parents as the most significant factor that contributed to their resilience and success. Within the domain of *Precise Parenting Practices* two subthemes were identified. These subthemes included: (a) parental corporal punishment as extrinsic motivation; and (b) parental supervision networks within the community

### Precise Parenting Practices: Parental Corporal Punishment as Extrinsic Motivation

The first sub-theme, *parental corporal punishment as extrinsic motivation*, related to the participants who received parental corporal punishment (i.e., the use of physical force by a parent or caretaker with the intention of causing a child to experience pain but not injury and administered for the purpose of correction or control of the child's behavior for exhibiting unacceptable behaviors (Straus, 1994).

Of the five participants, four stated that parental corporal punishment (i.e., "whuppings" or spankings) was a source of discipline for not following rules or misbehaving, as well as a motivator for demonstrating appropriate behaviors in the home, school and community.

Ann identified corporal punishment as being the most significant factor that contributed to her resilience and success. She stated:

When she (her sister) got a beating we didn't get spankings we got beatings and when she got a beating, I got a beating too because Mom said I had probably done something and deserved one just as she did so we got beatings.

She expressed,

Whenever I thought about the terrible whuppings we got, just the thought of her hitting me with her belt caused me to want to do right and the majority of the time I did right, just because I did not want to get another whupping.

The whuppings Ann received hurt her badly and taught her a lesson regarding her mom's expectations. They played a major factor in her resilience in choosing to do right versus doing wrong.

Ann continued:

Mom's whippings didn't stop until she thought you understood her and you would not do whatever you did wrong again. She would say, "I brought you in this world and I'll take you out of this world."

Penny agreed the whippings they received were used to correct or train a specific behavior and watching her sisters get whupped was enough to train her in behaving properly. When asked what she attributed to be the most significant factor that contributed to her resilience and success. She replied:

My mom really never whupped us but every once in a while but it wasn't anything like he (stepfather) did . . . he would beat my sisters and they were in elementary school. He would beat them like they were grown folks. And I would sit there and watch it and I wanted to do something so bad but I was scared. So again that became the norm in my house. I contribute the fear and terrible pain that I felt when he whupped me as factors I attributed to my success.

Penny concluded:

I was younger and I didn't think I could take those kinds of beatings so again I was on pins and needles and made sure that I didn't take the wrong step. I could feel how badly they were hurting and I don't know what I would have done if he hit me as badly as he hit them. So every day, I tried my best to do what was right and the majority of the time I did what was right. Those whippings stayed on my mind.

Another participant also affirmed that whippings were given to him to correct his inappropriate behavior. The whippings attributed to his resilience when it came to doing what was expected. He noted:

The one thing that is interesting is I never wanted to call him daddy or father or anything like that. I was forced to call him that more so by my grandmother than by my mother. I remember distinctly getting ready to get a whupping because I called him by his first name instead of calling him daddy like my brother had decided to do. By the time my grandmother got through whupping me, I never called him by his first name again. That whupping and all the other whuppings she gave me definitely taught me a lesson and I did not need to be taught that particular lesson again. You would get beat at church if you acted up. Her whuppings always taught us a lesson.

He concluded by saying

My grandma's whuppings were so bad that you didn't want to sit down and so I did everything I could to keep from getting her whuppings. I obeyed and listened to her because I knew what would happen if I didn't and yes, I attribute her whuppings to my resilience and success.

Larry got whuppings throughout his childhood. He felt that the whuppings he received affected him for short periods of time. As he got older, the whuppings is what kept him from committing more serious crimes that could have sent him to prison. He remarked:

My mom and dad were prominent people in the neighborhood so I couldn't get away with anything. If I got a paddling in school, I got a whupping at home. Teachers used to hate to see me coming. They later found out that I was ADD. My parents just beat me. I got my last whupping at probably 17 years old.

He continued:

I got so many of them and I hated those beatings. I probably would have done even more bad things if it wasn't for the beatings. If my dad didn't beat me, I probably would have continued doing bad things throughout high school and ended up in jail. So the whuppings did stop me from doing some bad things some of the time but not all of the time.

He concluded:

As I got older, my dad started to beat me like I was a man. He would knock me to the ground and just beat me. That's when I began to realize he meant what he said. I became more fearful of him and his wrath is what attributed to my resilience and success.

The controversy over corporal punishment has inspired a series of debates among scholars, practitioners, and parents over the appropriateness and efficaciousness of corporal punishment (Straus, 1994). Despite this controversy and the hundreds of scientific studies invoked on either side of the debate, few studies have examined the cultural contexts in which parental corporal punishment is exercised (Ispa & Halgunseth, 2004).

Supporters of corporal punishment assert that there is no adverse long-term consequences for the child and is accepted by the child as appropriate (Larzelere, 2000; Rohner, Bourque, & Eldori, 1996). Conversely, those who oppose the use of corporal punishment assert that after experiencing physical discipline, the child will possibly view the punitive act as an act of violence by a powerful adult who is trying to assert their power over the child (Holden, 2002).

In this study, corporal punishment was administered on the buttocks with the use of the hand or belt in a non-abusive manner. It was administered with the intention of causing a child to experience pain but not injury and for the purpose of correcting inappropriate behaviors. Although the effects of corporal punishment remain controversial, the study participants affirmed that corporal punishment had positive

effects on their resilience because it was consistently administered in the context of a positive, loving, and nurturing parent-child relationship.

The Federal Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997 noted that states should adhere to taking the necessary steps to safeguard abused children. The legislation also indicated that nothing contained therein should be construed as a prohibition against parents using “reasonable corporal punishment” on their children. However, no attempt was made to define “reasonable corporal punishment” (Loseke, Gelles, & Cavanaugh, 2005). However, it is a crime for parents and caretakers to use physical force with the intention of causing a child to experience pain and injury as well as administering any forms of indecent or sexual activities on a child.

In addition, research has found that strict parenting which provides clear rules and punishments for violations, combined with supervision and high levels of warmth distinguishes high achieving poor inner-city children from their low achieving poor inner city peers (Ceballo & McLoyd, 2002). Although the parents administered corporal punishment, all of the participants stated their parents were nurturing. One participant stated he enjoyed his summer vacations. He recalled swimming and bike racing with his parents at the beach. Another participant commented her mother hugged and kissed her before she left for school, played games with her, and read books together. Other participants remembered snuggling close to their parent while watching television and singing their favorite songs together. All of the participants concurred that the whippings attributed their resilience and success. In Chapter VI of this study, I will

discuss the implications of parental corporal punishment with urban African American youth.

### **Precise Parenting Practices: Parental Supervision Networks within the Community**

In regards to the parental supervision networks within the community, the participants mentioned that the presence of adult supervision from the parents in the neighborhood contributed to resilience and success. Four of the five participants noted that adults in the neighborhood kept a tight rein on their involvement in community activities (i.e., supervising activities sponsored by rec centers and being vigilant about peer relations in the neighborhood). According to four participants, a high level of adult supervision was a significant contributing factor to their resilience and success in spite of personal and socio-economic adversity.

Ann commented:

I remember in the projects we would stay outside late playing games and having fun. You know all the moms in the neighborhood looked out for each other's kid. They'd let us know if we were acting up like using bad words and picking on other kids. Then they would let our moms know what we had been doing wrong.

Ann knew that the adults in the neighborhood were always observing and listening to the kid's conversations. It is because of them that she was selective in the unkind words she chose when she wanted to say a cuss word; she was afraid one of the adults would hear her and tell her mom. Even though bad words were said to her, she couldn't respond the same way. She also did not want them to think badly of her.

Ann shared vivid memories of the moms in the neighborhood:

The kids in the neighborhood were scared of the moms . . . and the moms were highly respected by the kids. The moms were no nonsense types of moms and didn't tolerate disrespectful kids! Most of the mothers living in the projects had between two and six children. There were some moms with eight and twelve children, but their moms didn't play and their children knew it. We knew that when the adults were sitting on the porch day or night, we better be on our best behavior. As long as we were outside, there were parents close by listening and watching.

Ann continued:

I remember after school and especially during the summer time we would go to the neighborhood recreation center and have a great time at the rec center. The rec director was an African-American lady and she was a strong disciplinarian. When you came to the rec center you knew you had to be respectful to her and everyone else. When you participated in the different activities like basketball, softball, and ping pong games or read books in the library, respect was visible. Otherwise, she would kick you out the center and then tell your mom what you had done. I saw her get in the faces of some big guys and she didn't back down.

Ann concluded:

You followed the recs rules. I played on the recs basketball and softball team. We also had a community swimming pool and I swam on the swimming. Even at the pool, there were strict rules we had to follow because adults were always around looking and listening. These rules affected my behavior in a positive far beyond the rec center. Being young, living in the projects and having with so many opportunities to get in trouble, the adult supervision certainly impacted my decisions in a positive way.

Robert participated in several school sponsored fundraising (not sports) events. It was necessary for Robert to walk throughout the community after school when he participated in the school's fundraising activities. During his door to door and street to street walks, he wasn't concerned about anyone in the community bothering him. Instead, they asked him questions and made comments to him as a means of checking on

him. He realized that the presence of adult supervision as he walked the streets contributed to his resilience and success:

So I would walk and walk and walk down a lot of streets and sell stuff. I walked on this side and that side of town and I could walk all over Garysburg. They always asked who your people were, where did we live, where I was going and did I need a ride? Once they met a person that person was never a stranger to them and they would always try to connect you with your parents or grandparents. This helped me feel safe and important in my community as a whole.

The community showed they cared about his safety and their caring attributed to his resilience.

He continued:

Going around in the community I would always be selling something. So a sense of community in relationship building and talking to people was obvious and that was very important to me. The community was my neighborhood. They would always support whatever I was doing which was usually selling something for school. Their support made me feel like they cared about me.

Moreover, Larry expressed that careful monitoring of non-academic activities was just as important and attributed to his resilience and success as well. Larry's neighbor had heard about the trouble Larry had been getting in. They met with his parents and told them about some counseling services. Larry stated:

As an adolescent in middle school, I became quite angry. I was always angry. I would do a lot of vandalism. I would steal, drink alcohol and skip school. I did all those things until I got caught and was charged as being an unruly juvenile. My parents refused for me to get any type of help for my anger because I always said yes ma'am and no sir until I got mad. Then our neighbor across the field heard about me getting in trouble and talked to my parents about the trouble their son used to get in until they got him some counseling. That's when they agreed to get me some help. The help I received from counseling changed my life. I am

thankful that my neighbors cared enough to talk to my parents about their experience. I'm not sure where I would be if they had not talked to my parents.

He replied:

My parents began to visit my school and call around my friend's house after school to see if I was there. They made sure I was being supervised or I had to come home. They began paying attention to what I was doing after school and calling the school to make sure I was in school. At first I didn't like how they were checking up on me. Later, I felt they were really interested in what was going on in my life and it made me feel good. It felt better than the whuppings. When adults were around I made better choices which I attribute to my success.

Furthermore, the time he spent under the supervision of other adults contributed to his resilience.

He commented:

Once I got to that point I felt my trust was violated I was a whole different type of individual. Then they made me join boy scouts. Spending time with my scout leader helped me out a lot. That outlet also helped me.

Rick recalled playing in the park with older kids for hours and the older kids protected them even if they did not know them since they knew they were from the neighborhood. Their supervision kept them from getting in fights and possibly being arrested when they were at the park.

He remarked:

We would spend hours, hours at the playground just playing. We knew everybody and it was not just young kids but it was grown men that would come and play basketball with us teenagers. Somehow they knew if someone was not from the neighborhood. They watched over the neighborhood kids and made sure no one bothered us. I remember some other kids had come to the park trying to

start a fight with a group of us. We were scared and the big guys said, “ya’ll don’t have to be scared”, and ran them out of the park. It was generations of people so it wasn’t like grown strangers playing around little kids. It was generations of people from the community that had grown up. If the older guys were not around, we probably would have gotten in fights and did other bad stuff.

It is apparent that the participants’ viewed adult supervision in the community as protective factors against engaging in delinquent behaviors that might otherwise hinder their resilience and success.

### **Research Question 1a**

Research on resilience has consistently found that parental relationships, specifically high expectations and the “power of parental attitude” on the behavior of their children are strong contributing factors in the development of resilience as a child and adolescent (Benard, 1998). In addition, the cultural context of parenting plays a role in determining the impact various parenting practices have on children. When asked the question: “What role do African American upper level school leaders attribute to parents in their resilience and success?” one theme, recognizing parental financial hardship as a motivator, emerged.

### **Recognizing Parental Financial Hardship as a Motivator**

The participants’ recognized the financial hardships their parents experienced. Four of the five participants expressed that their parents’ financial situation encouraged and motivated them to succeed academically. They did not like seeing their parent(s) depend on family members and agencies for financial support. During the interviews, four of the five participants indicated that their parents required the financial support of family members or agencies to take care of them. The participants worked hard at school

and in college so that one day they would get a good job and be able to help support their parents financially.

Ann wanted to be able to support her mother financially. She remarked:

She [her mother] waited on the monthly welfare check and food stamps. I hated watching her depend on her boyfriend for financial support as much as I hated him beating her.

I wanted to be able to help her one day. I had to be the one to help her. Even though my mom got a monthly welfare check, she mailed me some money, bought me food to take back to school and would catch the Greyhound bus to come visit me at school then catch the bus back home. I knew she was probably spending the money needed to pay bills. I couldn't wait to be able to give her some money to spend on herself. After I graduated from college and began teaching, I started to send her money. My mom is in a nursing home, but twenty seven years later I still take her shopping or buy her something every month.

As Ann got older, she realized her mom bought "hand me down" clothes for her because she could not afford to shop in more expensive stores. She remembered having to use candles when the electricity got turned off and using the neighbor's phone when the telephone was turned off. Recognizing the financial hardship her mother experienced, made her more determined to go to college so that she could get a good job and help her mom financially.

Well my mom attributed a lot to my success. More than she knows. She always worked hard and made sure my sister and I had everything we needed and some of what we wanted. But there were many times when our electricity and phone was cut off because she had to decide if she would feed us or keep us warm. I promised my mom that after I graduated from college and got a good paying job that I was going to pay all of her utilities each month.

We didn't have a car, mom could not afford it so we would walk, ask for a ride, or catch the safe bus to go to the store. I remember mom laying away our Christmas toys at the Family Dollar and Woolworth stores. As I got older and realized that

was were poor people shopped and laid their clothes away, I knew that I would not have to shop there for my children's clothes or toys because I did not want to be poor or raise my children in poverty.

Robert affirmed that the financial hardships his family experienced and his desire to get a good job after college so that he could help his mother, attributed to his resilience. He graduated from college with honors.

My brother's father was an engineer and graduated from A & T and he would not send \$50 a month of child support. You could not ask him for anything extra because the court had to actually make him pay the \$50. I would hear my mom arguing with him on the phone about needing him to send her more money. I knew that if I worked hard, I would get a good job and be able to support her. So, in college I made sure I remained an honor student.

Robert also continues to give his mother money each month so that she does not have to depend on his stepdad. He agreed with the other participants that seeing the financial hardships he went through during his childhood contributed to his resilience and success. He explained:

Sometimes she begged him to send more money because he (her son) was on the basketball team and needed shoes that cost \$50 and he would say buy it with the \$50 I already sent you . . . And she would say, "I'm trying to feed him with that" . . . I use to get so mad at him. I remember thinking when I get married that I will always take care of my children and provide for them no matter what happened between my wife and me. And that's just what I have done.

When I came back home . . . I noticed a lot of people tapping on the door. My mom was always looking out the window, pulling back the blinds; trying to see who was tapping on the door . . . I'm like what is all of this traffic. What is up? There were a lot of people coming in and they would go in the back room. I started to figure out later that somehow in four weeks (while I was gone) my mother had started to sell drugs to make extra money to pay the bills . . . but I couldn't understand how poor people could afford to buy drugs to sell. I was so ashamed and scared for my mom. All I wanted to do was to get a job and help

pay the bills. When I got my first check teaching school, I sent her some money. I pay her each month like I pay my Tithes at church.

Robert recalled another financial hardship that attributed to his resilience and success:

I knew that we had not paid our trailer rent in months so we left school with the mindset that every morning when we walked to school that we might come back and our trailer with everything in it would be gone. Where I come from they would actually come during the day and pull the trailer away. So you could in essence leave one morning and come back and the spot where your trailer was . . . you could find the piping and water disconnected, and everything gone, literally gone. I worried about that happening to us a lot. As a young person, I had to constantly worry about not having a place to live. So experiencing the financial hardships like my mom selling drugs to pay bills, electricity turned off, and our trailer being repossessed definitely contributed to my resilience to work hard and earn enough money to pay my bills and hers. I never want my mother to experience those hard times again.

Robert concluded:

I attribute my resilience and success to my mother and grandmother. I hated seeing my mother so tired after working all day and still have trouble paying the bills. I knew we were poor and didn't have much money. I also knew that I was going to do everything I could so we would not always be poor. Watching them struggle made me more determined to be able to help financially one day.

The participants recognized that even though their parents worked it was not enough to pay all the bills and needed additional money. They saw their parents ask and even beg for money from others if it meant helping their family.

Penny commented:

There was this lady in the church that I call mom that attributed to my resilience and success. She would slip and give me money because she knew I didn't have any. I always wanted to help support her financially. I knew that I had to go to

college and make a better life for myself and my mom (play mom) motivated me to do that!

I had somebody that I looked towards that motivated me and really helped me and it wasn't my aunt and uncle that I began living. It was my play mom and I call her mom but she's not even related to me.

Rick lived with both parents. They both graduated from college and had good jobs working for the government in Washington DC. At an early age he knew he would be going to college. He was considered privileged and could not recall any financial hardships even though his parents did not get along. He had to go live with his grandmother when he was 10 years old after finding his mother shot in the head and killed by his dad. His first experience with financial struggles happened after he began living with his grandmother. He attributed his resilience and success to his grandmother because he saw her working two jobs and still struggling to make ends meet. He wanted to take care of her like she had taken care of him.

Rick explained his first encounter with financial hardships:

I did not know that I would be living differently until we pulled up to my grandma's shabby little house. That was the first time I knew anything about being poor. After living in a nice big two-story house and moving to a small shabby house, I realized my grandmother didn't have much money and that I wanted to go back to living the way I used to live. I knew I had to work hard in school and go to college so that I could earn my own money. Remember my mother was dead and my dad was in prison and my grandmother was poor. After living with her she told me that she dropped out of school.

Rick saw his grandmother working hard to provide for him. His years of observing her hard work and the financial struggles are factors that motivated him to

succeed academically. He was determined to make good grades and get in a good college so that he could help her when he became an adult.

My grandmother was really good at doing different things. There were times when she worked two jobs. She didn't have one career path. She worked as the video store manager and a waitress at a restaurant. Another time, she worked in a furniture factory and sold home décor stuff. She did so much to make extra money. I told her that one day I was going to make lots of money and take care of her. That's exactly what I did.

Rick concluded:

I went to Wake Forest University and graduated with honors. After college, my grandmother came to live with me until she got sick. Without doubt, the financial hardships I dealt with after my mother died contributed to my resilience and success.

Unlike the other participants, Larry lived with both biological parents that worked so he really did not notice any financial struggles. He never thought of his family as being poor or equated his life with poverty. His parents were always employed and gave him everything he wanted. They had a car and he had as much if not more than the other children in the neighborhood. When he turned sixteen years old, his parents bought him a car.

Larry expressed:

I didn't have to earn money early. We were fortunate that we owned our own home. My grandparents were sharecroppers so they owned part of the farm and worked for the white man. We owned a huge farm too. They also worked on another job. So I did a little bit of farming, hunting, and school. I always had hot meals, nice clothes, and went on vacations.

If a family's economic resources are insufficient to meet their economic needs, women may be motivated to enter the labor force to supplement their insufficient income (Tienda & Glass, 1985). Since financial needs are a crucial factor in employment, financial support from family members, male partners, or children's absent fathers may influence single mothers' employment. The participant's parents worked hard to provide additional financial support for their families. It was the financial hardships that attributed to the participants resilience and success. They were motivated to work hard so that one day they would be able to provide financial support to their parent's.

The majority of the participants commented that when they finished college and got a job, they all gave their mother financial assistance even though she mother did not expect money from them. Two of the participants still give their mother's money each month.

### **Research Question 1b**

#### **Support within the School Environment**

The study provides evidence that schools possess the characteristics for promoting educational resiliency in students. When the participants were asked the question, "What role do African American upper level school leaders attribute to schools in their resilience and success?," each participant was able to name at least one school-based professional as an important source of support who contributed to their resilience and success despite personal and socio-economic hardship. Three themes emerged:

- School Based Professionals as Parental Figures.
- Creating a culture of High Expectations.

- Positive Student Praise and Recognition

**School-based professionals as parental figures.** A number of school and classroom characteristics have been found to contribute to the academic performance of poor and racial minority students. The study participants often found support within the school environment. All five participants recognized the efforts of school-based professionals who developed strong relationships with them and acted as parental figures while they were in their care. The participants attributed their academic success, at least partially, to the presence of caring and supportive school-based professionals (i.e., teachers, principals, staff, coaches, counselors, etc.).

The following quotes illustrate some of the various ways educators showed their care for the study's participants, as well as the significance of that care on the participants' lives. Ann stated:

It was my school counselor that saw my potential. I was in the twelfth grade and had not taken the Scholastic Aptitude Test. She called me to the office wanting to know why I had not taken it. She came to my house on a Saturday and helped me fill out the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) papers so I would have an opportunity to take the test.

Ann concluded:

Although she worked at my school, she was like a parent figure that knew about college. My mom or any other family members never talked to me about going to college. I probably would not have gone to college if it was not for her. She made a tremendous influence on how my life turned out and I will forever be grateful to her.

Robert conveyed that even though his family was poor, his school counselor praised him which increased his self-confident and self-esteem. The positive relationship he had with the counselor attributed to his resilience and success.

There was an organization called the Future Farmers of America and I had to learn the FFA creed. My high school counselor helped me practice the creed and to speak publicly. I participated in some type of speech contests with the Elks Lodge and won scholarships and contests because of her help. She always made me compete and made sure I was equipped to compete. She cared enough to be there when I needed her.

Larry commented that his school principal was always willing to listen, encourage, and help him when he saw him getting in trouble. The talks helped him to stay focused on his academics and not the things that really did not matter. The parental figure at his school attributed to his resilience and success.

At first I was just going to school; my grades were mostly good because my principal motivated me. Then my freshmen year I began to get in a lot of trouble because of my behavior. The principal would pull me to the side or sit and talk with me in his office for the rest of the class hour. He would talk to me about basketball and college; and that kind of made me want to keep going. I felt important when he took the time to talk to me. I felt like he was really concerned and cared about me.

Basically he would talk to you (me) about the opportunities you would have once you go to college, like you can basically do anything, like education can take you anywhere and all the places that people couldn't imagine seeing; you'll be able to go anywhere and see anything. I really valued our talks; they definitely kept me out of trouble and on the honor roll the following years.

The participants reported that their close relationships with specific school-based personnel extended beyond the confines of the classroom, signifying a commitment by

educators to the students' social and personal lives, as well as their academic performance. Rick recalled:

My basketball coach pushed me on the court and off the court. He made sure I hung around the right kids. When my grandma couldn't pick me up after basketball practice, he would take me home. He was very supportive and insisted that I made good decisions.

Finally, Penny remarked, "I was always allowed to help out in the office during my study hall. The secretary would let me answer the telephone and write phone messages for teachers."

The level of caring and support within the school was strongly related to the development of educational resilience among the participants. The study provides compelling evidence to suggest that corporal punishment, adult supervision, and positive educator-student relationships can function as protective factors that buffer low-income urban youth from the effects of known environmental risk factors.

The study suggests that forming meaningful personal relationships with urban, low-income students has the potential to mitigate school failure. As previously stated, the participants reported that their close relationships with specific school-based personnel extended beyond the confines of the classroom. School-based professionals signifying a commitment to the student's social and personal lives, as well as their academic performance, were important factors that attributed to the students' resilience and success. The most powerful school characteristics for promoting resiliency were the presence of caring and supportive school-based professionals (i.e., teachers, school counselors, school social workers, principals, administrators, and staff). This study

identified distinctive qualities and characteristics of schools that enabled the student participants to overcome risk and adversity to succeed academically.

**Creating a culture of high expectations.** High expectations are defined as:

clear, positive, and youth-centered expectations. Clear expectations refer to the guidance and regulatory function that caregivers must provide young people. This means creating a sense of structure and safety through rules and disciplinary approaches that are not only perceived as fair by young people but include youth in their creation. (Benard, 2004, p. 45)

Schools that established high expectations regarding student conduct and academic performance for all students and provided the support necessary to achieve these expectations increased students' confidence, motivation, and drive to succeed. The majority of the participants agreed that the school had a major role in in their resilience and success. The participants embraced and shared those high expectations. The excerpts below illustrate this subtheme.

Ann's teachers expected her to do her work:

I was fortunate that my teachers had high expectations. I wasn't allowed to use excuses to so that I did not have to get my work done even though there were times when I had been up all night because my mom and her boyfriend fussed and fought all night. I knew my teachers did not take excuses for not having your work. So their expectations pushed me to do my work no matter what I was going through. They expected me to be prepared and I wanted to meet their expectation.

Ann continued saying her teachers did not accept excuses from any students which was important to her resilience and success. No matter what barriers she faced at

home, she was expected to successfully adapt and get her work done and that is what she did:

I remember a teacher saying to the other kids, “I never have to speak to Ann about having her work done—she’s always prepared.” She never accepted excuses and I always wanted to please them . . . so school had a major impact on my academic success.

According to Fox (1994), when students experience genuine care and support, close relationships are developed and these relationships lead to a feeling of belonging.

Robert agreed that his school had resilience promoting features:

Wow! The people that contributed to my success were the teachers and principals and I think it's important to tell their story. I had teachers and other people like James Tillery and Rev. Morris. I always participated in public speaking contests in school and they taught me how to speak in front of a group which increased my confidence that helped me be successful. School was a safe place . . . school was to me like a tabernacle is to a priest. I was intense about learning and my teachers knew it and pushed me.

The participants considered their teachers as role models which increased the bond between them.

Larry indicated having truthful teachers were important and influenced him greatly. He stated the greatest influences were people who were honest with him. They saw his faults but didn't treat him differently because of his faults. Ms. Smith and Mrs. Pedigree were the few teachers he trusted. He made a lot of mistakes and they would always forgive him and show they cared about him anyway. They told him what they expected and he always tried to please them. It was because of them that he began to meet all of his teacher's expectations. He still keeps in contact with them. Larry

attributed his resilience and success to the teachers that showed they cared and were honest with him.

Having support networks was a key factor in promoting resiliency. The increased bond between students and their teachers, made it easier for them to meet their expectations. Fox (1994) notes, "The outcome of incorporating caring and support included personal growth such as self-esteem and goal setting." Rick agreed that he also had teachers with high expectations that showed they cared. He affirmed that the manner in which his teachers treated him contributed to his resilience and success. He verbalized:

I remember the great teachers I had in Washington, DC and the caring teachers I got when I went to live with my grandmother. My grandmother told them what had happened regarding my mom and dad and they took care of me at school. They still expected me to do my work and behave properly.

Penny agreed with the statements:

School was my safe haven. School was the place that I was safe. Nobody judged me and most of the teachers were great. I remember my third grade teacher. I think she really knew something was wrong with me but she didn't know how to say it. She just made sure I had what I need and made me feel good about myself.

Research has consistently shown that a caring relationship with parental figures such as teachers, coaches and counselors who have high expectation for students increases the likelihood of academic success and resilience (Garmezy, 1985). The five study participant's affirmed that their teachers consciously maintained high expectations

and a genuine feeling of care and concern. These external factors served as protectors from the adversities of their environments and attributed to their resilience and success.

Many teachers care, but often “they are unable to make the connections that would complete caring relationships with their students” (Noddings, 1992, p. 2). It is not enough to care—as discussed above, this caring must be received by the students. Only then does the relationship between students and teacher become a caring relation (Noddings, 1984). It is very apparent that each participant wanted and received their teacher’s care.

**Positive student praise and recognition.** Teacher praise is one tool that can be a powerful motivator for students. Surprisingly, research suggests that praise is underused in both general- and special-education classrooms (Hawkins & Heflin, 2011). The student participants attributed positive praise and recognition they received from their teachers as also contributing to their resilience and success. The participants agreed that the praise they received indicated their teacher’s approval regarding their academic performance or behavioral expectations. The excerpts below illustrate this subtheme: Ann stated the praise she received from her teachers had a major impact on her school success. It motivated her to keep working hard. She expressed:

The praise, recognition, and my teacher’s telling me I’m doing a good job and keep up the good work, and that I am a model student meant a lot to me. So impact on teacher’s praising and recognizing . . . and made me feel like I had a chance in life.

She continued: The positive feedback while I was in school had a lot to do with me being resilient and wanting to keep trying and keep trying and keep trying.

Praise has the ability to improve student academic or behavioral performance—but only if the *student* finds it reinforcing (Akin-Little, Eckert, Lovett, & Little, 2004). Larry remembered the nice letter he received from his teacher. That letter and his glasses were instrumental in changing his behavior.

I can tell somebody somewhere hurt you deeply . . . she wrote me a very nice letter telling me that she believed in me and that she wanted me in her class. The breaking point with her was my grades were failing and so she gave me a vision test and she said that I needed glasses badly. Once I got my glasses I could see. She and I still keep in contact. She was one of the very first teachers that I could trust again.

Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs theory supports the importance of a safe and orderly school environment. School safety is a basic human need, and students and staff must feel intuitively that their physical need for safety is met. Robert's experiences at school validated Maslow's theory. He commented:

So they always made me feel as though you can do this. School was a safe place for me. One of my teachers would ask me, “if not you then who?” So I believed that if I didn’t do it then who else would do it. And I remember my science teacher coming to me saying congratulations because I had been nominated for the homecoming court and I was like oh okay.

Rick was not involved in the school's homecoming but he did play basketball and had a coach that cared about him. As previously stated, research has consistently shown that a caring relationship with parental figures such as teachers, coaches and counselors who have high expectation for students increases the likelihood of academic success and resilience (Garmezy, 1985).

Rick appreciated his school and his coach. He remarked:

I knew they cared about me by the way they treated me and the positive comments they would make. I played basketball and my coaches pushed me to do good on the court and off the court. I got lots of praise and attention at school.

Penny had several school personnel who contributed to her resilience and academic success by empowering her. The school based personnel empowered her through words of encouragement and support. She exclaimed:

Most of the teachers were great. They were very encouraging. They would always tell me that they saw something in me and that I was going to be very successful. One teacher took me under her wing and I just fell in love with that teacher because she always had something nice to say to me. I had great experiences in elementary, middle, and high school. Again that was my safe place. My teachers showed me they cared and so I knew what caring looked like and felt like. The way they treated me caused me to want to be the best and that contributed to my resilience and success.

The participants articulated that having support within the school environment contributed to their resilience and success. Although the participants faced significant barriers at home, their teachers had high expectations, a positive relationship, and cared about them. Children have an opportunity to experience success and resilience no matter what obstacles they face when the following happens:

A teacher can expect success in the classroom if he displays the qualities of gentleness and kindness and also possesses the skill and ingenuity to devise various means of making the studies pleasant and keeping the child from feeling any strain . . . Gradually, after first enjoying learning because of their instructor, children will come to like their teacher for the sake of learning. Just as we cherish many gifts because they were given to us by those whom we consider our dearest friends, so also children who are still too young for any intellectual appreciation take pleasure in school because of their fondness for their teacher. There is a

good deal of truth in Isocrates' saying we learn best when we have the desire to learn; and it is from those whom we like and respect that we learn most eagerly. (Erasmus of Rotterdam, as cited in Moore, 1996)

### **Research Question 1c**

The study highlights the importance of interpersonal relationships and support systems within the community. A few of the participants identified formal and informal support networks (i.e., friends, community members, churches, and youth organizations) within their community as contributing to their academic success. When I asked the participants, "What do African American upper level school leaders attribute to the community in their resilience and success?", one theme: Supportive Relational Networks within the Community emerged: Within this theme, one subtheme emerged: (a) personal relational networks.

#### **Supportive Relational Networks within the Community**

Wang and Gordon (1994) recognized the risk factors of poverty and poor neighborhoods. They suggested that strategies and structural changes are needed to enhance the chances of success for at-risk children and that the future of inner-city families and youth will be determined by the quality of their social and academic experiences.

Similar to the home and school environment, urban communities can provide an abundance of resources to support the educational resilience of urban youth. For example, healthy communities support families and schools; establish high expectations and clear norms; and encourage active participation and collaboration in the life and work of the community (Benard, 2004). Benard (1991) notes that "... communities exert not

only a direct influence on the lives of youth but, perhaps even more importantly, exert a profound influence on the lives of the families and schools within their domain and, thus, indirectly powerfully affect the outcome for children and youth" (p. 16). Thus, healthy communities can help children and youth who live in high-risk circumstances overcome adversity and facilitate academic success and youth development (Benard, 2004). These communities provide youth from disadvantaged backgrounds with the support systems and resources needed to develop resiliency (Barrow et al., 2007).

Several empirical studies have documented that neighborhoods which foster resilience among their youth tend to have: (a) safe recreational facilities; (b) supportive adults and organizations at the home, school, and community levels (Bowen & Chapman, 1996); (c) the presence of social organizations (i.e., health care facilities, child care services, job training opportunities, religious institutions, and recreational options) that provide for healthy human development; (d) well-developed and integrated networks of social organizations that contribute to low neighborhood delinquency rates, improved public safety, school-based community services, and available religious communities; (e) available community resources including community and school-based activities with expressed social and cultural norms to help youth understand what constitutes desirable behaviors and opportunities for youth to participate in the life of the community (Benard, 1991); and, (f) high expectations for good citizenship along with the opportunities for students to develop new interests and skills (Barrow et al., 2007). Because the context for childhood development extends beyond the school and the family, healthy

communities are vital for youth from a variety of ages and risk situations (Wang & Gordon, 1994).

**Personal relational networks.** Personal Relational Networks are very similar to the parental supervision networks discussed previously. In parental supervision, the focus is on supervising all of the youth in the community. In contrast, Parental Relational Networks focuses on the study's participants establishing a personal relationship with other parents in the community. All five participants mentioned the importance of interpersonal relationships and support systems within their communities and neighborhoods as contributing to their academic success in the midst of adversity. They had at least one adult in the neighborhood whom they trusted and could talk openly about personal matters. It appears these personal relational networks had positive effects on the participants' resilience and success. The excerpts below illustrate this subtheme.

In Ann's neighborhood the parents knew each other, shared the same norms for raising children, and believed their neighbors would reciprocate in enforcing these norms. In addition, Ann had conversations with a young adult who was in college. She felt comfortable sharing her secrets regarding boys, girls bothering her at school, and how she wanted to kill her mother's boyfriend. She trusted this young college-age adult because she gave her good advice. Ann recalled the time she was in high school and wanted to become intimate with her boyfriend. She said her adult friend talked to her about what could happen if she became sexually active and how it could change her life. Ann exclaimed the personal relationship she established definitely attributed to her resilience and success.

If I did not have her to talk to, I'm not sure if I would have made some of the good choices that I did. It seemed like all of the girls were sexually active but me. My sister had a baby when she was sixteen and so many other girls were getting pregnant too. My mom didn't talk to us about sex, but my adult friend did and I am so happy she did. I had a good relationship with her even though I thought she was at least ten years older than me.

Ann explained how the "Village" attributed to her resilience and success.

I remember Ms. Britt, the director at the recreation center and how successful she was as a single mom raising a son and a niece. She talked to us girls about being young ladies and going to college and making something of ourselves.

She was a role model for us. She was truly open and honest. She didn't care if you liked it or not that's just how she was. When we were around her we carried ourselves like young ladies should. She also talked to the boys about how they should behave like gentleman. She did not allow obscene language or street-like behavior to go on at the rec. Ms. Britt knew we all came from single parent homes and it did not matter to her. We confided in her and she had serious conversations about life with us. So I attribute a lot of my resilience and success to her. Even though she did not live in my neighborhood directly, she was a part of the "village of people" that took care of me.

Penny experienced several tremendous hardships during her childhood. For many years, she lived in several different foster homes. Finally, after moving in with her aunt she got to know a lady who attended her church who also lived close by her. Penny spent quality time with her discussing her aspirations. She felt her neighbor was really interested and cared about her. She confided in her neighbor instead of her aunt.

One of my distant neighbors had the skill set to help me whereas my aunt really didn't. I would see her at church and walk to her house and spend hours talking with her. I remember my senior year and the students were sitting in the auditorium and students receiving college scholarships names were being called. I had applied for a couple of scholarships and I received two scholarships. I didn't call my aunt and share the good news. Instead, I called my neighbor and

told her about my scholarships. She was the one person in my community that I attribute my resilience and success. I will always be grateful to her.

Penny concluded by saying she started calling that same lady her play mother when she went off to college. Today, she refers to her as mom and explains to her friends that she is really her play mom. Her son calls her grandma.

Robert agreed that his community also contributed to his resilience and success when they continued to support and encourage him each time he walked the streets selling his school's fundraiser items. He also considered his school to be a part of his community because of the help he received with practicing for his speaking engagements. His teachers would come to his home and work with him. He wanted to tell one of his teachers that he trusted what had happened to him but he couldn't bring himself to do it. However, there were other things he discussed that he didn't share with anyone else. This teacher did not judge him and that contributed to his success.

Rick spent time playing with the kids at the park. They taught him how to fight, use slang, and how to dress cool. Even though he attributes some of his resilience and success to the older kids in the community because they protected him, he attributed the majority of his resilience to his basketball coach. He explained that he spent hours practicing and playing basketball. As previously stated his coach pushed him on and off the court. Rick received a four-year basketball scholarship to college. He remarked that his coach and basketball team was his community.

Unlike the other participants, Larry lived in a rural neighborhood and although a distant neighbor provided his parents with counseling information that helped him, he did

not feel his community attributed to his resilience or success. However, Larry stated his involvement in the church did attribute to his resilience and success. I will expound on how the church attributed to the participants' resilience in Research Question 1d.

### **Research Question 1d**

Neighborhood youth organizations (e.g., Boys and Girls Clubs, YMCAs) were introduced within many African American communities roughly 100 years ago. The original and primary goal of these organizations was to protect youth from the dangers lurking in their communities during non-school hours (Bodilly & Beckett, 2005; Halpern, 2002). Although the goals of modern youth organizations are much more diverse (e.g., improving academic performance, skill building, preventing problem behavior), protecting youth against exposure to community violence remains an important goal, and concerns about youth safety continue to motivate calls to increase the number of neighborhood youth organizations. When asked, "What role do African American upper level school leaders attribute to participation in community organizations, churches or programs in their resilience and success?," two themes emerged: community and church involvement and their belief in God. All five participants revealed the variety of community and church activities opportunities motivated them to participate. The participants articulated their belief in God was very important to them. Three subthemes emerged: (a) believing in the power of prayer (b) positive affirmations from church members and (c) many hours committed to the church.

## Community Participation

In a study of urban African American families, Quane and Rankin (2006) found that access to a greater variety of youth organizations (e.g., organized sports, YMCA programs, etc.) was positively associated with participation in organized activities among adolescents who lived in disadvantaged census tracts.

Findings from other studies, however, suggest that the link between access to youth organizations and youth participation is tenuous. A recent review of the literature indicates that after-school programs are often underutilized; in many programs, there are more available slots than participating youth (Bodilly & Beckett, 2005). Thus, physical access to youth organizations may not always translate into youth participation. Consistent with these findings, research indicates that barriers such as poor access to transportation, costly participation fees, conflicting responsibilities (e.g., employment, caring for younger siblings), and a lack of interest often prevent youth from participating in the activities that are available to them (Bodilly & Beckett, 2005; Lauver, Little, & Weiss, 2004). Consequently, providing a greater variety of neighborhood youth organizations may not necessarily increase the odds of youth participation.

Ann recalled the different activities offered at the rec center. She participated in a variety of sports that involved competitions. She stated the community center emphasized respecting one another. She discussed a variety of activities for the boys and girls to play at the recreation center. They competed against other rec leagues in the city. The expectation regarding appropriate behavior was articulated very clearly. Ann felt

that having the opportunity to be involved in so many after school activities attributed to my resilience and success.

Ann recalled during the summer time spending two weeks at Camp Robert Von and Camp Betty Hastings. Her community provided free, fun, and exciting opportunities for the youth to participate:

I remember during the summer time we also participated in some summer camps. I guess if you lived in the projects you automatically went to summer camp free. So we would go and stay for two weeks and had a wonderful time. Opportunities like that helped to keep us out of trouble during the summer.

As previously stated, Robert's community contributed to his resilience by supporting him each time he participated in his schools fund raising activities. His neighborhood did not have a YMCA or a Boys and Girls club. All he had were the neighbors he talked to as he participated in selling fundraiser items. His neighbors talked to him and made sure he was not bothered when he walked the streets selling items for his school. His community made him feel like he was important and they cared about him. He was involved in the activities at his church.

I can't remember many things that I did that I was not successful. As I went around in the community . . . and do different things, they would ask, "What's your folks' name?" After you told them who your folks were, they would say something like "How much is it worth?" What they were trying to find out was if you were from good stock or not and I didn't know.

Robert continued:

I would say that my community played an important role in the way they interacted with me. It was obvious that relationships were important because they

always wanted to know who your people were and what you were about. They always wanted to know how I was doing in school. My neighborhood was positive and I became more positive because of my neighborhood. My neighborhood made me feel proud as I got older. The community kept pushing me and I attribute that to my resilience and success.

As previously stated, Rick spent time at the community park playing basketball and other fun activities. In addition, there was an organization that came to the park to do fun activities with the youth in the neighborhood. He felt his community provided activities that taught him important lessons about caring for people and working together. He remembered being fed and participating in arts and crafts lessons. He looked forward to their weekly visits which kept him from doing things that could have gotten him in trouble like shoplifting which some of the kids had done and got caught.

He stated:

I remember the 4-H club used to come to our community park and they would bring us snacks and we would do crafts . . . to this day one of my favorite snacks is a blueberry muffin and orange juice ‘cause I had it there all the time. They would bring us little packaged blueberry muffins and a little carton of orange juice and I loved that. This was a community help group coming to poor neighborhoods to serve poor Black children. You just thought this is what happened everywhere. And they would do crafts and take us swimming to city Lake Park. They fed us when we kids didn’t get extra snacks at home.

Unlike the other participants, Larry stated that because he lived in a rural area there were only a few things to do such as going to church, hunt, and get involved in inappropriate activities that were against the law. He commented those were the only options. He and Robert had no rec clubs or any YMCAs.

Fitzpatrick and LaGory (2000) note there are different types of disadvantaged neighborhoods in America; poor urban neighborhoods seem to be especially vulnerable to adversity and risk factors. As the study participants reflected on their community, they all agreed that it was the relationships, the community activities, and adult supervision within the community that attributed to their resilience and success.

Many African Americans receive religious teaching through the African American church, which promotes resilience through the nurturance of spirituality (Haight, 1998). Research conducted by Taylor, Mattis, and Chatters (1999), and Bridges and Moore (2002) produced findings that teen involvement in religion may steer them away from early sexual activity or from delinquent behavior.

In African American communities, individual spirituality is recognized whether it is within or outside of formalized religious institutions (Dunn & Dawes, 1999). Although the practice of spirituality is found outside of the church, the greatest influence and deepest expression in the African American family can be found in church activity (Dunn & Dawes, 1999).

### **Belief in God and their Church Involvement**

**Believing in the power of prayer.** Spirituality, faith, and sense of meaning are personal strengths synonymous with creating a meaning for life (Benard, 2004). The concept of spirituality has permeated nearly every aspect of the African American experience. Spirituality has been identified as strength for African Americans and has helped to shaped individuals, families, and community relationships while promoting unity, concern, and welfare for others. Deep within the roots of African Americans,

spirituality has influenced their creative expression through music, art and literature (Newlin, Knafl, & Melkus, 2002).

All of the study participants reported their belief in the existence of God and Jesus. They spoke of God or Jesus as being a spirit with a higher power.

Ann was taught that it was important to believe in God at a very early age. She was expected to say a blessing over her food before eating and to say her prayers to God each night before bed.

I believed in God and prayed almost every night even as a child. I prayed that my mom's boyfriend would not kill her when they fought. Mom taught and expected us to pray every night. She would yell in our room, "Did ya'll say your prayers before ya'll got in bed?" Although it was difficult growing up, there were certain things we were taught at an early age, praying and believing in God. It seemed that most of the things I prayed for were answered sooner or later. So I always prayed and believed and still do. Without any doubt, I know God and praying attributed to my resilience and success.

According to Coles (1990), African American children attempt to understand the reason things happen to them. Therefore, they called upon the experiences and teachings of their religious life, the spiritual values they have received, as well as other sources of potential explanations. Also, when children are exposed to Biblical teachings, it provides a sense of hope to some children. Children receive hope as they listen to the mistakes that others made in their lives and how they were able to triumph in their countless situations. Children were able to gain a sense of hope for the future.

Duncan-Andrade (2009) discussed the concept of hope as vital for nurturing urban youth. In his essay, he begins by identifying three forms of "false hope" that are found in many urban schools. He called them: hokey hope, mythical hope, and hope

deferred. In addition, he described “critical hope,” and a description of the three necessary elements for producing and sustaining hope in schools. He identified material hope, Socratic hope, and audacious hope.

Robert believed in God and that people had different spiritual levels with God. He believed in God and that some people had a way of connecting with God spiritually and those people helped him grow spiritually. He stated:

Maybe some people were not on the same spiritual level and . . . the pastor of the first church I attended was poor and uneducated but he was still a man of God. He knew how to hear from God and how to speak into my life at certain times when I felt as though I couldn’t go on. He knew how to speak and say something to me to let me know that this is a comma and not a period.

He felt that his belief in God helped other people. He continued:

I would talk to God and hear his voice or feel his impressions to do certain things. So I would say that the spiritual piece helped me with the academic piece . . . and my moral upbringing side kept me on the right road so that the academics could get me there. The spiritual side helped me build relationships with all sorts of people and be an influence so other people would be successful.

Larry believed in prayer. When his brother was seriously injured in an accident, he said:

I prayed for hours that my brother would not die. He stayed in a coma for two weeks and I cried and prayed for him until he came out of the coma. I promised God that if He healed my brother, I would become a better person. God healed him and I had to keep my promise and become a better person. I think that’s what God wanted me to do and I became a better person. I stopped hurting people. I believe God and prayer changed my life and I attributed them to my success.

Penny and Rick agreed that their belief in God contributed to the resilience and success. Penny prayed every night that her stepdad would never get out of prison. Although he did, she was placed with an aunt that took care of her. She thanked God for giving her a new home. Rick shared that when his mom died, he prayed that God would let her come back. His grandmother explained to him that his mother was with God and that she was watching over him. He wanted to make her proud and worked hard to please his mother and grandmother.

In this study, resilience addresses the strengths that people used that “enabled them to rise above adversity” (Wang et al., 1994, p. 46). With this in mind, study participants had the ability to internalize the religious teachings and to use these teachings to survive a crisis or an undesirable situation. The participant’s verbalized ways they used religious teachings such as prayer in different situations that would give them and their families a better life in the future.

**Positive affirmations from church members.** All children want to receive affirmation for the good things they do. The affirmation can come from home, school, church, and other places. The participants acknowledged they received affirmation from many people in the church including the pastor. They discussed how proud they felt when they were recognized. Rick discussed that his church wanted the kids to learn about God and learn in school.

I remember all the kids that made A's had to bring their report card to church and let the preacher look at it. On the following Sunday, he would call your name and you had to come to the front of the church so everyone could see you. There were only a few of us that made straight A's especially when we went to middle and high school. Somehow, I made “A” honor roll all the time. I was proud standing

up in front of the congregation. My preacher, grandma and other people in the church always complimented me and encouraged me to keep up the good work. I am sure the affirmations I received attributed to my resilience and success.

Penny was involved in different church activities. She was considered a role model for the other children. As she got older she was allowed to hold different church positions. The people in her church praised her for church involvement. She verbalized:

I was considered a role model at church. I was very involved the Young People's Department called YPD. I held positions like secretary, treasurer, vice president, and president. Those positions and experiences trained me and I took that training to school and college. I knew how to get up in front of people and speak . . . My church was my community and the church had a huge impact on my resilience and success. I felt good at church. They trusted me and depended on me. I was able to put my bad experiences out of my head for a little while.

Ann concurred with Penny and Rick regarding the affirmations she received and they attributed to her resilience and success. She remarked:

My church definitely attributed to my resilience and success. I led songs in the children's choir and was in Girl Scouts held at the church. People loved to hear me sing and I felt proud and confident when I sang. It seemed like every time the children had to sing during church service, the choir director chose me to lead a song. I enjoyed going to church and listening to the compliments from the people in church. It wasn't just the old people that complimented me but so did the young people. At church, I felt important.

Although Larry did not participate in any community activities, he took part in the activities in his church. He remembered getting in trouble at school but he did not get in trouble at church. He stated his church members loved to hear him play the piano because he played as good as the older men. He loved seeing the smiles on their faces when he played and getting complimented. He expressed:

My senior year, I was actually the church musician. I played the piano for my church and got so many compliments about how well I played. They would say, "Lil' Larry, play boy play and let God use you." My participation in church kept me out of trouble on Sundays because I spent most of the day in church. Also, I didn't want the church folks to know that I got in trouble at school. I wanted them to think I behaved in school just like I behaved in church.

**Many hours spent in church.** Religion is viewed as a driving force in the lives of people of color, women, and special population groups all who are targeted in the social work curriculum. Research reports that these special populations have a higher percentage of church or synagogue attendance than do others (Netting, Thibault, & Ellor, 1990). African Americans promote spiritual and religious growth in their children's lives by encouraging the practice of religious and spiritual teachings (Haight, 1998, 2002).

Robert spent hours at church. His grandmother packed their lunch and took it with them. He remarked:

My grandmother was really into the church. I remember walking with my grandma to church on Sundays mornings. We attended Bible School from 9:00 until 10:00. We would eat the lunch she had packed for us before the 11:00 service began. After the 11:00 service, we went home, ate dinner, and went back to the evening service. I would say going to church was something that was instilled in me. We learned so much about God and love because of the hours we spent in there and I am thankful for it now. I know those hours of teaching and learning about God contributed to my resilience and success.

The study participant's Biblical knowledge came from spending hours in church and their long hours of listening to the preacher taught them positive lessons. Rick became involved in the church after he began living with his grandmother. He said:

I was very involved in my church when I lived with my grandma. She believed in going to Sunday School, 11:00 church service and evening services if we had one

and Wednesday night prayer meeting. I had to join the children's choir, the youth Usher Board and attend vacation Bible school each summer. I was always chosen to participate in the Christmas and Easter programs. The preacher was an old man and it seemed like his sermons were always about going to Hell if you didn't live right. My resilience came from being afraid that I would go to Hell and be tormented forever if I was a bad boy. Otherwise, I liked church because I was always involved in different activities that took up a lot of time.

Penny identified her church with being her influencer and motivator.

So my church was my community. It was my influencer and the motivator. The church was where I learned how to speak clearly and do presentations with confidence in front of people. By being actively involved in the church I learned how to get up in front of the congregation and reading the scripture, say a prayer, read the church announcements, and other presentations. Yes, it was scary at first. But after spending hours in those roles, I looked forward to the opportunity and I thank God that my church gave me those experiences. Those experiences made me feel valued and increased my confidence tremendously. The hours I spent in church absolutely are attributed to my resilience and success.

Ann remembered having to get up really early to catch the church van. She agreed with all of the participants about having to spend a lot of time in church. Ann stated she had to go even if her mother did not go.

We have to catch the church van and go to Sunday School and stay for the 11:00 preaching. Tuesday night the church van picked us up for Tuesday night Teaching and Wednesday we went back for Prayer and Praise night. I spent a lot of time in church. While I was in church, I learned a lot about people in the Bible and their struggles and how God delivered them. I would not trade the lessons I learned because of the hours I spent in church for anything.

The collaborative relationship between spirituality and education for African Americans is evident. Researchers have acknowledged that African American churches recognize educational outreach programs as a top priority (Douglas & Peck, 2013).

It is quite clear that the participants attributed their resilience and success to their belief in God and prayer, affirmations from church members, and the long hours they spent in church. All of these factors helped to change their lives in a positive manner.

### **Summary**

Chapter V presented the narratives and findings that were derived from the transcripts and analysis of data obtained from the five African Americans who are in upper-level school leadership positions who faced significant barriers as children. Their perspectives provided insights into the research questions. The Chapter illustrated and explained linkages between study participants' comments, the literature, and emergent themes. All participants reported similar perspectives on factors that contributed to their resilience and success despite adversity.

## **CHAPTER VI**

### **FINDINGS, IMPLICATIONS, AND CONCLUSION**

The purpose of this study was to identify what African Americans serving in upper-level school leadership positions who faced significant barriers as children attribute to their resilience and success. In using qualitative inquiry as my form of research design, I was able to conduct interviews with five African American school leaders. The participants provided detailed accounts of their youth and the challenges they faced from their perspectives and thus, provided a better understanding of what contributed to their resilience and success.

Furthermore, a narrative for each participant was written based on the participant's interview data and allowed me to share my narrative as an African American school leader who faced significant barriers during my youth. Several themes emerged from the data analysis and were embedded in the composition of the narratives.

#### **Emergent Themes**

During data analysis, several themes emerged. Some of these themes initially became evident during the interview process. Most of the African American school leaders attributed precise parenting practices, resilience supportive school features, supportive relational networks within the community, and their belief in God and church involvement to their resilience and success. An overarching theme was that all

participants felt that conversing and contributing to this research was of utmost importance. They provided several reasons for its importance:

- being able to tell their stories in a manner that might benefit the larger African American community,
- being able to honor those who helped them along the way and fostered the resilience that has become a part of their innate beings,
- being able to talk about their experiences was therapeutic for them.

Resiliency is a social science concept that has gained popularity over the last three decades as a byproduct of the strengths-based movement in the fields of psychology, counseling, and psychiatry (Padrón, Waxman, & Huang, 1999). There is no generally accepted definition, yet in almost all definitions, three basic terms are incorporated. These terms are: (a) risk or adversity, (b) positive adaptation or competence, and (c) protective factors.

This study specifically focused on individual resilience, using the definition summarized by VanBreda (2001): “[R]esilience theory addresses the strengths that people and systems demonstrate that enable them to rise above adversity” (p. 1), combined with the definition of educational resiliency by Wang et al. (1994), “the heightened likelihood of success in school and other life accomplishments despite environmental adversities brought about by early traits, conditions, and experiences” (p. 46).

As previously stated, throughout the United States there are African American children growing up in single parent homes, in impoverished neighborhoods, with limited

resources and financial hardships. In addition, many African American children will become involved in the juvenile justice system, abusive relationships, and drop out of high school (Edelman & Jones, 2004). However, some African American children will defy the stereotype and learn at the highest levels and provide hope to others caught in similar circumstances (Wang, 1997). They will pursue an education despite these obstacles and become successful professionals and contributing members of their communities.

The following section discusses how each of the research questions set forth in the study was answered in relationship to these overarching themes. In addition, recommendations and future research based on the study findings are discussed. The chapter will conclude with my personal reflections and conclusion about this research study.

The research question and sub questions guiding this study were:

1. What do African American upper level school leaders perceive as being the most significant factors or events that have contributed to their resilience and success?
  - a. What role do African American upper level school leaders attribute to their parents in their resilience and success?
  - b. What role do African American upper level school leaders attribute to school in their resilience and success?
  - c. What role do African American upper level school leaders attribute to the community in their resilience and success?

- d. What role do African American upper level school leaders attribute to participation in community organizations, churches or programs in their resilience and success?

### **Research Question 1**

*What do African American upper level school leaders perceive as being the most significant factors or events that have contributed to their resilience and success?*

Data for this qualitative study were gathered through face to face interviews over a three month period. The findings from this research study yielded a strong sense of resiliency despite varying degrees of hardship the participants encountered growing up. The following themes were revealed during the research process to answer the first research question:

- A. Precise Parenting Practices contributed to the resilience in African American school leaders. Subthemes are:
1. parental corporal punishment was used as extrinsic motivation and attributed to the participants resilience and success.
  2. parental supervision within the community attributed to the participants' resilience and success.

The five participants first identified the people and parenting practices that made a difference in their lives and attributed to their resilience and success. The participants vividly described the merits of their parents, adults in the neighborhood, and school personnel who not only expressed genuine interest and care, but also empowered and inspired them to succeed. The five participants agreed that precise parenting practices

and supportive school relations were the most significant factors that contributed to their resilience and success.

Results from the study revealed that all of the participants' parents' used corporal punishment *as extrinsic motivation* (i.e., whippings or spankings), for the purposes of correction or control of the child's behavior. For instance, participants reported that the consequences of parental corporal punishment for not doing what was expected (i.e., not following rules, misbehaving and demonstrating appropriate behaviors) served as a source of motivation for doing the right thing.

Currently, there are a few studies showing impartial or possibly positive outcomes of corporal punishment for low income and African American children. As demonstrated by this study and many others, there are reasons to believe that some proportion of corporal punishment is more stress-driven and thus likely to be more spontaneous and reactive.

Researchers who support parents using spanking or other physical disciplinary methods clearly state that the success of these techniques in controlling a child's misbehavior is contingent upon certain parental and situational factors. Some researchers have viewed the Cultural Spillover Theory in relation to parental stress; when parents have increased stress at work and increased economic problems, they tend to use corporal punishment more often (Stolley & Szinovacz, 1997). Research supporting the Cultural Spillover Theory found mothers who were stressed due to recent marital separation used physical punishment more than those mothers who were in intact marriages (Forgatch, Patterson, & Skinner, 1988). In addition, Baumrind (1972) reported that it was actually

permissive parents who were most likely to use corporal punishment “explosively,” presumably the result of pent-up frustration with the power imbalance in the parent-child relationship. The parental factors expressed by the participants for receiving whippings were: after their parents argued, money arrived late, and intoxication. Furthermore, the majority of the participants recalled their whippings stemmed from their disobedience, breaking school rules, inappropriate behavior. Although the behaviors were inappropriate, the majority of the participants did not feel the whippings were justifiable. One participant commented that the criminal behaviors he exhibited such as vandalism, stealing, and setting a building on fire warranted the whippings he received but he felt it was close to child abuse.

In the study, the parents had a high demand for compliance and punitive consequences for misbehaving. It served as a protective factor, teaching their children to be attentive of societal rules, to be vigilant and knowledgeable regarding risks within their neighborhoods, and to avoid engaging in disruptive activities. In other words, the participants’ parents viewed corporal punishment as a means to teaching their children to respect authority and the importance of self-control.

This was apparent with three of the participants that stated their parents often whupped them because they were angry about another situation. Ann stated her mother whupped her more frequently when her mother and her mother’s boyfriend would break up. Larry recalled his father whupping him after his dad and mother fought about how many days his father had been gone. Penny stated her stepdad whupped her after he would spend up all of the money. The participants and I agree with the Cultural Spillover

Theory in relation to youth receiving corporal punishment due to parental stress regarding their economic problems, work, and other family problems

It is important to recognize that the distinction between punishment and corporal punishment vary in different parts of the world (Vesterdal, 1983). Previous research has also demonstrated that parents with lower socioeconomic status (SES), younger parents, and less educated parents are more likely to use corporal punishment (Giles-Sims, Strauss, & Sugarman, 1995). Specifically, as SES declines, the use of corporal punishment increases (Pinderhughes Dodge, Bates, Pettit, & Zelli, 2000). Related to the previous finding, Heffer and Kelley (1987) found that parents with low incomes were more likely to approve of spanking than were parents with higher incomes.

The study participants clearly stated that the use of corporal punishment as a valuable tool in controlling their externalizing behaviors. The participants viewed the pain and fear of corporal punishment as factors that attributed to their resilience and success. They did not agree with getting whippings due to their parents being angry, frustrated, or dealing with other parental situations. Furthermore, they did not feel the severe beatings that some of them received were necessary.

The participants also viewed parental supervision within the community as contributing to their resilience and success. The majority of the participants noted that adults in the neighborhood kept a tight rein on their involvement in community activities (i.e., observing neighborhood activities, supervising activities at rec centers). According to four participants, a high level of adult supervision was a significant contributing factor to their resilience and success in spite of personal and socio-economic adversity.

One participant commented that while they played at night parents were observing their behavior. Another participant recalled the adults closely supervising their activities and behavior at the recreation center.

In addition, the five participants acknowledged that supportive school relations enhanced their resilience and success. They attribute at least partially, their academic success to the presence of caring and supportive school-based professionals (i.e., teachers, principals, staff, coaches, counselors, etc.). The participants reported that their close relationships with specific school based personnel who acted as parental figures extended beyond the boundaries of the classroom, signifying a commitment from the educators to the participants' social and personal lives as well as their academic performance. The participants believed the teachers and administrators cared about them and that level of interest attributed to their resilience and success. The study provides evidence that schools possess some potential for promoting educational resiliency in African American youth who faced barriers during their youth. The study suggests that forming meaningful personal relationships with urban, low-income African American students has the potential to mitigate school failure.

The findings are consistent with other research which found that if students from high-risk environments feel a personal connection to a school-based professional, then the student is likely to improve their performance both behaviorally and academically. For instance, students who have positive relationships with school-based professionals tend to put forth more effort in class and school (Stipek, 2006); display higher levels of engagement in school (Ferguson, 2002); exhibit higher motivation and positive attitudes

towards learning motivation (Pinata, Stuhlman, & Hamre, 2002); avoid problem behaviors; and make better grades (Rosenfeld, Richman, & Bowen, 2000) than students who do not develop meaningful relationships with school-based professionals.

In summary, the findings from this study shows that the five African American school leaders attributed the most significant factors that contributed to their resilience and success as being parenting practices such as corporal punishment and adult supervision of community and school sponsored events, and the presence of caring and supportive school-based professionals such as teachers, principals, or other staff.

### **Research Question 1a**

*What role do African American upper level school leaders attribute to their parents in their resilience and success?*

The study revealed that the majority of the participants attribute the personal financial hardships their parents experienced, their desire to provide financial assistance for them, and wanting to have enough money for themselves to their resilience and success. The narratives consistently showed that their parents had strong work ethics, but still struggled financially and needed additional financial support from others and welfare agencies in order to purchase clothing and pay bills. Single mothers' employment has been a primary focus of recent social welfare policies and programs in the United States. A number of researchers have viewed social networks and social support, such as Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), as important support resources.

One participant recalled their family waiting on their monthly welfare check and food stamps. Another participant commented that her mother depended on money her abusive boyfriend gave her each week to help bills and buy things for the house. All of the participants' parents worked full time jobs and one of the participants' parents worked more than one job. This finding differs from some societal assumptions that indicate that single mothers are lazy and do not work outside the home.

The consistent narrative that derived from the participants was their ability to recognize their family's personal financial hardship as attributes in their resilience and success. Four of the five participants' narratives described them as having the desire to provide financial assistance to their parents after completing college and getting a job.

The narratives of the five participants indicate a belief that academic success forms the foundation for life success. Their stories indicated the realization that education and academic success is one way to have a more secure future. Whether talking about the financial hardships they experienced that attributed to their resilience and success, or how they planned to help, it is clear that each participant understood the value of education.

### **Research Question 1b**

*What role do African American upper level school leaders attribute to school in their resilience and success?*

The present study provides evidence that schools possess the potential s for promoting educational resiliency in students. Three major themes were identified as resilience-promoting factors within the school environment: school-based professionals

as parental figures; creating a culture of high expectations; and positive student praise and recognition. The most powerful school characteristics for promoting resiliency were the presence of caring and supportive school-based professionals (i.e., teachers, school counselors, school social workers, principals, administrators, and staff). In fact, each participant was able to name at least one school-based professional as an important source of support. The participants cited meaningful relationships (that extended beyond the boundaries of the classroom or school building) with school-based professionals as major contributors to their academic success. For instance, the participants reported the positive effects of schools such as (a) listening and addressing both academic and non-academic concerns through personal conversations; (b) encouraging students to challenge themselves academically; (c) parental figures at school; (d) giving positive feedback that is specific and genuine.

The present findings seem to be consistent with other research which found that if students from high-risk environments feel a personal connection to a school-based professional, then the student is likely to improve their performance both behaviorally and academically. Downey (2008) states, “Teachers possess the tools to introduce at-risk students of all ages to the life-changing experience of educational resilience” (p. 63). Students spend so much time at school with teachers, the attachments are very important. Masten (2009) noted, “[S]chools, along with families, play a central role in nurturing all the tools of resilience” (p. 30). Hence, teachers and schools assist students in developing resilience (Masten, 2009).

The increased bond between students and school personnel, made it easier for the participants to meet the school personnel expectations. Fox (1994) notes, “The outcome of incorporating caring and support included personal growth such as self-esteem and goal setting.” This study suggests that forming meaningful personal relationships with urban, low-income students has the potential to mitigate school failure.

### **Research Question 1c**

*What role do African American upper level school leaders attribute to the community in their resilience and success?*

The study revealed implications for communities and community-based organizations. Specifically, this study found that extracurricular engagement not only allowed the participants to identify and nurture positive support networks, but helped them to develop positive alternatives to the streets. In regards to their experiences within their neighborhood communities, three participants mentioned the presence of positive interpersonal relationships and support networks (i.e., peers, community organizations, community members, and business). Instead, the remaining two participants deemed their local churches as a part of their community support network and attributed the church to their resilience and success. I will discuss the role of the church attributing to their resilience and success in question 1d.

### **Supportive Relational Networks: Parental Networks within the Community**

The parental relational networks in the community were important to the participants. The participants valued the relationships they established with the adults in the neighborhood. They had at least one adult in the neighborhood that they trusted and spent quality time discussing personal matters and experiences they were encountering. It appears that the parents in the neighborhood had a vested interest in all of the youth in the neighborhood; therefore, the participant's parents focused on supervising all of the youth in the community. These personal relational networks had positive effects on the participants' resilience and success.

#### **Research Question 1d**

*What role do African American upper level school leaders attribute to participation in community organizations, churches, or programs in their resilience and success?*

Despite the harsh environments in which the participants grew up, two participants were able to identify community-based organizations such as community recreation centers, YMCAs and other academic and non-academic clubs, as contributing factors to their academic success. These community resources provided the participants with constructive after-school activities and programs, safe recreational facilities, and student-based religious activities and events. These findings corroborate the ideas of Bowen and Chapman (2005), Wang et al. (1997), and Winfield (1991) who suggested that it is important to consider participation in out-of-school activities as supporting the achievement of African American youth in urban environments. It appears that community-based programs and activities could provide some additional structure and

safety that may further enhance outcomes. One participant stated there were a lot of activities for the boys and girls to play at the recreation center. Another participant discussed how her community provided competitive teams such as basketball, baseball, and swimming, and they competed against other rec leagues. Another participant shared the community center provided summer camp opportunities. It appears the participants attribute their involvement in community-based programs and activities as contributing to their resilience and success.

### **Believing in the Power of Prayer**

African Americans promote spiritual and religious growth in their children's lives by encouraging the practice of religious and spiritual teachings (Haight, 1998). These teachings occur in homes, churches, schools, and area community centers. The context of the religious and spiritual teachings includes various Biblical stories about inspirational and controversial characters that present practical applications to life events (Coles, 1990; Haight, 1998).

Human beings are innately spiritual, but influences inside and outside the home can affect a child's spiritual growth. All the participants talked about their belief in something greater than themselves, a "Spirit," God, and Higher Being. Larry prayed that God would heal his brother and Ann was expected to pray over her food before eating and pray each night before bed. Rick prayed that God would bring his mother back after she died. Robert stated his moral upbringing side kept him on the right road so that the academics could get him there.

### Affirmation and Recognition

The participants believed in prayer and did so privately and publicly. They attended church regularly and revealed the positive affirmations and effects of their participation contributed to their resilience and success. The participants commented how proud they felt when they were recognized and praised for singing in the choir, being a model for the young people in the church, and making good grades at school. One participant recalled that the positive comments regarding his participation in the church kept him out of trouble at church and he wanted his church members to believe that the positive behavior they saw in church was mimicked at school.

### Hours Spent in Church

The participants had several opportunities to receive praise and affirmations because they spent many hours in church. All of the participants reported attending church services at least three times a week (Sunday – Sunday School, Tuesday – Tuesday Night Teaching, Wednesday – Bible Study and Thursday – Choir Rehearsal). Although the participants spent many hours in church, they acknowledged their enjoyment and the recognition that the time they spent in church kept them off the streets.

Resilient people are able to manage well with life in the everyday ways even in the midst of feeling deeply dispirited and emotionally dismayed. They are not superhuman or out of the ordinary. Masten (2001) captures the essence of resiliency in these words:

What began as a quest to understand the extraordinary has revealed the power of the ordinary. Resilience does not come from rare and special qualities, but from the everyday magic of ordinary normative human resources in the minds, brains,

and bodies of children, in their families and relationships, and in their communities. (p. 235)

What differentiates resilient people from others is their ability to get on with their lives in unique and contributory ways that suggest the very best in human behavior.

### **Implications and Recommendations for Parents**

Based on the findings of this study, the following implications and recommendations are made for parents using precise parenting practices:

1. Although corporal punishment attributed to the participants' resilience, parents need to consider alternative forms of disciplinary consequences.
2. Parents need to consider the age of the child.
3. Parents need to consider how often corporal punishment is being administered.
4. Parents need to consider the severity of the corporal punishment.
5. Parents need to ensure that spanking is not excessive, inappropriate, or abusive. Therefore, they need to be cautious of administering corporal punishment when they are extremely angry or upset.
6. Parents need to consider identifying role models in the community and provide opportunities for them to supervise youth in the neighborhood.
7. Parents need to consider if their child's inappropriate behavior is corrected because of the fear and pain felt from the corporal punishment or because they understand that what was done was inappropriate.

### **Implications and Recommendations for Schools**

The participants expressed the most powerful school characteristics for promoting resiliency were the presence of encouraging, caring and supportive school-based professionals that maintained high expectations. Based on the findings of this study, the following implications and recommendations are made for schools:

1. Schools need to work with parents to ensure that they are aware of how positive parenting practices and a commitment to their child's education bring about changes that improve the child's chance for academic success.
2. Schools need to possess resiliency promoting features such as creating a culture of high expectations and positive student praise and recognition in schools by providing specific staff trainings regarding factors that may influence resilience and success.
3. School social workers can be instrumental in identifying positive parenting practices that can be taught and modeled to encourage their child's academic success.
4. Schools need to have systems in place for recognizing youth that are facing significant barriers at home.

### **Implications and Recommendations for Community-Based**

#### **Organizations and Churches**

Religion is viewed as a motivating power in the lives of African American people, women, and special population groups all who are targeted in the social work curriculum. Tolliver (1997) recognized that religious beliefs have long played essential roles for

African Americans. The church provides activities for society that provides its members with a source of dignity, heightened self-esteem, various aids for society, and a focal point for activism for social change. Research reports that these special populations have a higher percentage of church or synagogue attendance than do others (Netting et al., 1990). In addition, Netting et al. (1990) note, African Americans are more active churchgoers than whites. The participants agreed that their active participation and long hours spent in church attributed to their resilience and success. Based on the findings of this study, participation in extracurricular activities in the community and church helped the participants develop positive alternatives to the streets.

The following implications and recommendations are made for community and church organizations:

1. Community members should mobilize and engage in political action at the local, state and national levels to acquire resources to develop high-quality community organization and church-based programs for youth.
2. Community organizations and church activities should place a strong value on education.
3. Church and the community organizations should operate in a manner that establishes positive relationships with young people and where respect and trust are apparent.
4. Community organizations and churches should teach youth to give back to their communities.

5. Home-school-community partnerships should be established that work to increase academic achievement and character.
6. Organizations need to provide recreational and academic activities for youth..
7. Centers need to provide activities that will attract and retain urban youth.
8. Community organizations need to partner with parents, schools, churches and other neighborhood associations.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

While this study's findings identify factors within home, school, and community environments that contribute to resilience and success for African American disadvantaged youth, these findings are based on the experiences of a small number of participants. The following recommendations are being made for future research:

1. Conduct research utilizing a larger number of participants. A larger study would produce more information and might yield greater generalizability.
2. Conduct research interviewing the African American parents of youth to gain more insights from the parent's perspective.
3. Conduct research focusing on the relationships between perceptions of spanking (reasons, experiences, and beliefs) and how that affects attitudes towards its utilization (how, why).
4. Given the prevalence of spanking in some countries (Gershoff 2002), but the absence of a well-known validation for its use, it is worth exploring in further research.

5. Conduct a cross-national study involving resilient African American participants from other urban areas. This would help establish a better degree of accuracy.
6. Conduct research focusing on school counselors' roles, responsibilities, and functions in urban, suburban, and rural schools in promoting resiliency.
7. Conduct longitudinal research examining the relationship between participation in community and church activities and achievement, various other academic indicators, and other outcomes.

### **Conclusion**

In the past decade, the academic underachievement of African American students has been well documented. However, little research has been provided on African American students who excel academically despite adversity. To help address this gap in the literature, the present study explored the internal and external factors that promoted their resilience and success of African-American school leaders who experienced various significant risk factors during their youth. The school leaders told powerful stories that had been concealed within their families and shared the protective factors from the school, church, and community environments which contributed to their academic success, despite adversity. The results of this study indicate a strong connection exists between family practices, school, church, and community support and positive academic outcomes for African American youth.

### **Reflection on My Research Experience**

On March 10, 2014, I completed my final interview. The data collected consisted of more than 15 hours of interviews and approximately 50 hours of coding and analyzing transcripts. The data collection process was tedious and required an organized process. After each interview, I spent time thinking about my questions and whether my participants were giving me the information I needed. By the time I interviewed the third participant, I began to hear common themes. At the end of the data collection process, I began to think about what I learned and how I felt.

During this research study, I felt many different emotions. There were times when I laughed with my participants and other times when I felt sadness as they discussed the struggles they faced during their youth. There also were times when I left the interview, sat in my car, and cried. I wondered what the participants' lives would look like if the protective factors were not in place to support them. I wondered if the participants in the study would have finished high school and gone to college, if the female school leaders would escape the teen mom pregnancy trend, and if the boys in the study would escape prison time. Sadly, the reality that all of them would not be successful came to my mind. This reality made me realize how important it is for African American youth facing significant barriers to have resilience features of support in their homes, schools, community, and churches.

As a young African American growing up in poverty, I grew up living in fear for the life of my mother. I spent years contemplating an escape route for her. I dreamed about strategies of how to kill my mother's boyfriend and not get caught. Anytime I was

not with her I wondered if she was safe. In the midst of carrying a massive amount of fear that I could hear, see, feel, touch, smell and taste, I found myself praying and believing that there was a better life for me. My strong desire and motivation I had to achieve was immense. This desire was coupled with the continuous affirmation and recognition I received reassured me that there was a better life for me. In order to find out what life had to offer me in the midst of my barriers resilience and success became my friends while I was at home, school, church, and in the community.

As an African American school administrator who faced significant challenges during my youth, I know firsthand the value of educating teachers and school leaders in understanding factors that contribute to the resilience and success of African American students who face significant barriers. The more we know in this area, the more we can help those we are called to serve by preparing them for the future.

This experience inspired me to begin thinking of ways to ensure that my school has school characteristics for promoting resiliency and that there is a presence of caring and supportive school-based professionals throughout the facility. I became more motivated to identify and connect each African American student in my school building who is facing significant barriers with at least one school-based professional as an important source of support.

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