It Takes a Village to Raise a Child: How Bronfenbrenner’s microsystem promotes youth resilience in black communities

by Victoria J. Payne
Howard University

In the United States, everyday a number of African American youth are faced with lugubrious circumstances, including poverty, violence, poor health, stress, abuse, and single-parent homes. In spite of these inopportune situations, certain youth are able to overcome obstacles, thrive, and become resilient. Identifying effective strategies for promoting resilience in youth will help the nation steer its youth down paths of success, increase the number of resilient youth, and aid in the creation of school and public policies that will help the youth with dire needs. In Urie Bronfenbrenner’ Ecological Systems Theory of human development, the Microsystem, which consists of the family, school, peers, church affiliations, and the neighborhood, provides some of the earliest and most immediate influences on the child. With this in mind, the Microsystem can be used to increase resiliency through the use of mentoring programs, whereby adults are paired with youth to form long-lasting relationships through activities, phone conversations, and exposure to various aspects of another’s life. In this research paper, the researcher investigated several studies on youth resilience in black and African American communities using the online databases: ERIC, JSTOR, and EBSCOhost. The results confirmed that mentoring and other involvement from members of the Microsystem helped youth overcome calamitous realities and become resilient. Relevant role models that youth could identify with were also attributed to promoting youth resilience. Concern for a child’s wellbeing and participation in that child’s life are not the sole responsibility of the parent, school, or church. Rather, all institutions, structures, establishments, and community members must take on the responsibility of providing the child with the best possible outcomes for it truly takes a village to raise a child.
**KEY STATISTICS**

- 2008 National Poverty Rate: 13.2%
  - African Americans: 24.7%
  - Female Householders: 28.7%
  - Almost 50% of all teen parents are below the poverty line before they get pregnant.
- 2008 National Uninsured (Healthcare) Rate: 15.4%
  - African Americans: 19.1%
  - Households under $25,000: Almost 25%
- 2008 National Real Median Income: $50,303
  - Asians: $65,637
  - Caucasians: $55,530
  - Latinos: $37,913
  - African Americans: $34,218
  - HS Dropouts (2007): $24,000
  - HS Diploma Holders (2007): $40,000
- 2004 Children Living in 2-Parent Homes: 70%
  - Asians: 87%
  - Caucasians: 77.8%
  - African Americans: 37.6%
- 2004 Children Living in One-Parent Homes:
  - African Americans: 54%
  - Caucasians: 19.7%
  - 1 in 3 children today are born to unmarried mothers and may grow up in a single parent home for the majority of their youth.
- 2007 National Event Dropout Rate (number of students who dropped out in a year): 3.5%
  - Low-income families: 8.8%
  - Middle-class families: 3.5%
  - Higher-income families: 0.9%
- 2007 National Status Dropout Rate (percentage of individuals that are not enrolled in HS and do not have HS diploma or equivalent): 8.7%
  - African Americans: 8.4%
  - Caucasians: 5.3%
- 2000 College Enrollment:
  - Caucasians: almost 75%
  - African Americans: slightly over 50%
- 2008 Incarceration Rate Per 100,000 US residents:
  - African Americans: 831
  - Latinos: 274
  - Caucasians: 167
- 2005 Rates of Juvenile Arrests per 1,000 Persons:
  - African Americans: 101
  - Caucasians and Latinos: 49.1

**RESILIENCY**

In spite of these situations, there are countless youth that make it through these realities everyday and succeed in life. The result of such accomplishment is called **resilience**, which is a multifaceted phenomenon that produces the ability to thrive despite adversity.

**Select Quotes from Bronfenbrenner**

“Child rearing requires public policies and practices that provide opportunity, status, resources, encouragement, example, stability, and above all, time for parenthood, primarily by parents but also by other adults in the child’s life, both within and outside the home.”

“A child needs the enduring, irrational involvement of one or more adults in care of and in joint activity with that child. In short, somebody has to be crazy about that kid... Society needs to provide time, resources, and contexts sufficient for this relationship to develop.”

“How can we judge the worth of a society?... the concern of one generation for the next.”

**THE BENEFITS OF MENTORING**

2004 Delaware study found benefits of mentors
- 52% less likely than their peers to skip school
- 46% less likely to start using illegal drugs
- 27% were less likely to start drinking alcohol
- 60% of teachers saw improvements in grades

*Diagram from http://faculty.weber.edu/tlday/1500/systems.jpg*
It Takes a Village to Raise a Child: *How Bronfenbrenner's Microsystem Promotes Youth Resilience in Black Communities*

**Victoria J. Payne**
@02013960
Howard University
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Abstract:

In the United States, everyday a number of African American youth are faced with lugubrious circumstances, including poverty, violence, poor health, stress, abuse, and single-parent homes. In spite of these inopportune situations, certain youth are able to overcome obstacles, thrive, and become resilient. Identifying effective strategies for promoting resilience in youth will help the nation steer its youth down paths of success, increase the number of resilient youth, and aid in the creation of school and public policies that will help the youth with dire needs. In Urie Bronfenbrenner’ Ecological Systems Theory of human development, the Microsystem, which consists of the family, school, peers, church affiliations, and the neighborhood, provides some of the earliest and most immediate influences on the child. With this in mind, the Microsystem can be used to increase resiliency through the use of mentoring programs, whereby adults are paired with youth to form long-lasting relationships through activities, phone conversations, and exposure to various aspects of another’s life. In this research paper, the researcher investigated several studies on youth resilience in black and African American communities using the online databases: ERIC, JSTOR, and EBSCOhost. The results confirmed that mentoring and other involvement from members of the Microsystem helped youth overcome calamitous realities and become resilient. Relevant role models that youth could identify with were also attributed to promoting youth resilience. Concern for a child’s wellbeing and participation in that child’s life are not the sole responsibility of the parent, school, or church. Rather, all institutions, structures, establishments, and community members must take on the responsibility of providing the child with the best possible outcomes for it truly takes a village to raise a child.
It Takes a Village to Raise a Child: How Bronfenbrenner’s Microsystem Promotes Youth Resilience in Black Communities

In the United States today, not everyone starts out with equal footing. There are numerous children that are raised in two-parent homes with adequate income. In these homes, meals are never missed, clothes are purchased for each new school year, and they are constantly surrounded by adults that have advanced in their own professional ranks. For these children, the possibilities that exist in their own lives seem endless. In the same city, there may be a number of children living in single-parent homes where their mothers, who work two jobs to support her kids, rely on the free-lunch program at school to ensure that the children get enough food each day. These children may not see the same type of professional adults, and surely not on a regular basis. They may see their potential futures as a basketball player, rapper, or a secretary as a result of what they have been exposed to (Dortch, 2000).

The co-existence of these two polar realities in the United States is real, and in each racial/ethnic group, there may be a prevalence of one situation over the other. In the black community, many families battle with poverty and low incomes. The national poverty rate for 2008 was 13.2%, but among African Americans, this rate was 24.7% (DeNavas-Walt, Proctor, & Smith, 2009). The poverty rate for female householders (no husband) was 28.7%, while the poverty rate for related children under the age of 18 in a female household home was 43.5%. Nearly a quarter of the households making less than $25,000 are uninsured, and amongst African Americans at all income levels, 19.1% are uninsured, which is just above the national average of 15.4%. In looking at real median household income by race, Asians and Caucasians lead the pack with $65,637 and $55,530 respectively, while Latinos and African Americans are considerably lower at $37,913 and $34,218, respectively (DeNavas-Walt et al, 2009). Not only
are African Americans making almost half the amount of money that Asians are making, they are over $15,000 below the national average of all American incomes, which is $50,303. These figures affect a parent’s ability to provide healthcare, food, a safe environment, and educational resources for their children. In fact poor families are noted as being more likely to experience violence, hunger, poor health, stress, and abuse (Seccombe, 2002).

In 2006, the birth rate for African-American teens was 63.7 (out of 1,000 girls), which was up from 60.9 in 2005, but considerably lower than the 1991 rate of 105 (Child Trends, 2008). Professor Kristen Luker argues that there is no epidemic of teen pregnancy, as most of the cases being studied involve legal adults that are 18 and 19 (Luker, 1999). She goes on to say that poverty has a more powerful effect in predicting teen pregnancy as about half of all teen parents are below the poverty line before they get pregnant. Still, having to care for and provide for a child can add more stress to the already stressful situation of living in poverty in terms of finding childcare, getting the financial resources to purchase food and diapers for the child, completing school, and possibly continuing to postsecondary education.

In 2004, 70% of children under the age of 18 lived in a two-parent home, and among African American families, only 37.6% children were living in a two-parent home. This is compared to 77.8% for Caucasian children and 87% for Asian children. In the United States, one in three children today are born to unmarried mothers and may grow up in a single parent home for the majority of their youth (Kreider, 2008). Fifty-four percent of African American children are raised in one parent homes, and 8.8% are raised by grandparents, relatives, and other non-parents. Among Caucasians, 19.7% of children are raised in a one parent home, while 2.4% of children are raised by grandparents, relatives, or other non-parents (Kreider, 2008). These
numbers highlight the difference in relatedness, age of parents, and number of parents that
African American children are being raised by compared to children of other racial backgrounds.

In looking at educational attainment, there was a time when a high school diploma was
more than enough to find a “good” job, but with globalization and more skill requirements for
the labor force as a result of technological advances, postsecondary education is a must
(Wimberly, 2002). However, African American students are not enrolling in colleges and
universities at the same rate as their Caucasian peers (Wimberly, 2002). Slightly over 50% of
African American students were enrolled in college after graduation, compared to almost 75% of
Caucasian students. This occurrence has been linked to high schools, as they play a key role in
both ensuring that students can obtain postsecondary educational information and in preparing
students for success in the workplace and in college.

Even though more students of all racial backgrounds are enrolling in college and other
postsecondary education programs than in times past, the United States still has not reached a
100% high school completion/graduation rate. In fact, the National event dropout rate, which
measures how many students dropped out in a single year, was 3.5% in 2007 and 3.8% in 2006.
Though that rate is not too far from 0%, among low-income families, there is a more significant
difference as the rate is 8.8%, which was 2.5 times greater than for students of middle-income
families (3.5%), and 10 times greater than for students of high income families (.9%). When
looking at the national status dropout rates, which measure the percentage of individuals that are
not enrolled in high school and do not have a high school diploma or equivalent, by race, African
Americans (8.4%) were more likely than Caucasians (5.3%) to dropout, while Latinos (21.4%)
far super ceded the other races (Cataldi, Laird, & KewalRamani, 2009). The reason that dropout
rates matter is because dropping out of high school has been linked to negative outcomes
including lower incomes, unemployment, decreased health, and higher rates of prison incarceration (Cataldi et al, 2009). In comparing incomes, the median income of high school dropouts between 18 and 65 in 2007 was about $24,000, while the median income for those with a high school diploma or equivalent was $40,000 (Cataldi et al, 2009). Incomes matter because they affect a person’s ability to provide for their family and themselves. Dropping out of high school can easily become a perpetuating cycle whereby people without high school diplomas may not be able to find work, end up in poverty, have children, and then increase their children’s odds for dropping out of school.

Other areas where African Americans are disproportionally represented in is in the justice system where this group is incarcerated at a higher rate than all other races. Specifically, per 100,000 US residents of each race in 2008, the rate for incarceration among African Americans was 831, compared to 167 for Caucasians and 274 among Latinos (West & Sabol, 2009). In 2005, the rates of juvenile arrests per 1,000 persons in the population were 101 for African American youth and 49.1 for Caucasian and Latino youth. There are about 3.5 times more Caucasian juveniles between 10 and 17 than there are African American youth, yet only about 2 times more juvenile arrests for Caucasians than African Americans, and 1.3 times more detained cases (Puzzanchera & Adams, 2008). The racial disparities were further seen when looking at age-specific person offense rates where African Americans averaged 3 times the rate of Caucasian and American Indian juveniles in 2005. The overrepresentation of black juveniles appeared most in cases involving drug offense, where on average from 1985 to 2005, African Americans were involved in 31% of the drug offense violation cases, and represented 49% of the related cases that were detained (National Center for Juvenile Justice, 2008).
The national statistics make it clear that a notable number of black youth have to deal with many lugubrious circumstances, including poverty, exposure to violence, high rates of incarceration, fewer African American fathers in the home, and in some cases low expectations of academic achievement. In spite of these situations, there are countless youth that make it through these realities everyday and succeed in life, whether as a poet, like Maya Angelou or a musician, like Louis Armstrong. The result of such accomplishment is called resilience, which is a multifaceted phenomenon that produces the ability to thrive despite adversity (Seccombe, 2002).

**Urie Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Theory**

Among the many human development theorists in the twentieth century, Urie Bronfenbrenner, a co-founder of Head Start, emerged with his Ecological Systems Theory in 1979. Unlike many other human development theorists that looked at influences flatly, Bronfenbrenner saw a 4-tiered system of influences (this was later expanded to five tiers). Closest to the child is the **Microsystem**, which consists of the family, school, peers, church affiliations, and the neighborhood. At this level, there are bi-directional influences on the child where the child is influenced or affected by the actions of others in the Microsystem, and the child is also able to influence or affect others by his or her actions. This layer has the earliest and most immediate influences on the child (Huitt, 2003).

The next layer is the **Mesosystem**, which connects individual components of the microsystem, like a teacher to a parent. The **Exosystem** is the third layer, which may not directly impact the child, but it interacts with components of the microsystem to indirectly affect the child. The fourth layer is the **Macrosystem**, which contains overarching beliefs, ideals, and
values that in turn are pushed down to the other layers. The final layer is the **Chronosystem**, which encompasses the events in a child’s life, both externally and internally, that affect the child significantly.

According to Bronfenbrenner’s theory, people that participate in face-to-face interactions with the youth can make a tangible difference in their course of development; these individuals are primarily in the child’s Microsystem. It is this focus on the nurture side of the nature vs. nurture argument that empowers the community to make positive changes in the lives of youth and themselves. Bronfenbrenner’s theory necessitates the involvement of the family, school, local church and community to ensure that the children in their scope receive the contact that they need to develop. Unlike other animals on the earth, according to Bronfenbrenner, humans survive and develop as a result of “care and close association with older members of the species (Henderson, 1995).”

In looking at the current state of the American family, Bronfenbrenner observed that “our social fabric is unraveling, and families, particularly children, are paying the price.” The needs that he saw in the family structure were the direct result of more women and mothers in the workforce, the decrease of fathers in the home as a result of divorce and single-parenting, and the decrease in the involvement of extended family members to watch the children when parents are unable to (Henderson, 1995). Bronfenbrenner highlighted the many perils of divorce and their effects on the children, specifically on their social-emotional development. He found that children of divorced parents were likely to experience difficulties in sex role identification, lack self control, have anti-social behavior, and perform poorly academically and intellectually. Girls were likely to have difficulty in establishing meaningful relationships with men, while boys were impulsive, inconsiderate, delinquent, and aggressive (Bronfenbrenner, 1984).
He felt that a female/mother head of household was in a vicious cycle where the father’s absence created more demand on her by the children, but her present financial situation made it imperative that she work as many hours as necessary to provide, in addition to taking care of her house, her children, and herself. (Bronfenbrenner, 1984). With this understanding in mind, Bronfenbrenner was interested in both the restoration of the family structure and its increased support as it plays such a vital role in the child’s development. To this end, he urged for the creation of public policies and practices that would “provide opportunity, status, resources, encouragement, example, stability, and above all, time for parenthood, primarily by parents, but also by other adults in the child’s life, both within and outside of the home (Henderson, 1995).”

Though he saw the significant impact on children that maternal employment and single-parenthood had, these paled in comparison to the grievous impacts of poverty on children’s development, which include illness, family strife, and child abuse, among other outcomes (Bronfenbrenner, 1984). Yet and still, poverty is not a death sentence for children, as adults and other members of society can extend a hand to those youth in need. For the truest need of a child, according to Bronfenbrenner, is “the enduring, irrational involvement of one or more adults in care of and in joint activity with that child.” He urges for society to allocate the time, resources and contexts for the development of these relationships to occur (Weisner, 2008).

**The Benefits of Mentoring**

A way to provide the necessary familial structure supports that Bronfenbrenner advocated and a means of increasing the effectiveness of the microsystem is through the employment of mentoring programs, which pair adults with youth and nurture long-lasting relationships through activities, phone conversations, and exposure to various aspects of
another’s life. Mentoring has documented success when executed properly. A 2004 Delaware study found that among young people with mentors, 52% were less likely than their peers to skip a day of school, 46% were less likely to start using illegal drugs, and 27% were less likely to start drinking alcohol. Additionally, sixty percent of teachers saw improvements in the mentored students’ grades (Delaware Mentoring Council, 2004).

Many children that come from deplorable backgrounds, like single-parent homes, poverty, teenage parenthood, exposure to the court system, and poor academic performance can benefit from the presence of a mentor in their lives. These mentors will be able to counterbalance the negative experiences already at work with the positive experiences that the mentor will bring to the child’s life (Brown, 2004). As the mentor continues to shift the focus from the negative events to the positive events in the youth’s life, they will in turn bring out the child’s strengths, self-confidence, and a more optimistic viewpoint on life (Brown, 2004). Even as Bronfenbrenner’s model illustrates, a single mentor or individual will very seldom be the sole promoter of resiliency in an individual, but the experiences that can come out of the relationship can influence and inspire the youth to a more positive future (Brown, 2004).

Purpose of Research

The purpose of this study is to examine the effects that members of the Microsystem have on the resilience of black youths. It is hypothesized that family relationships can have a large impact on the black youth resilience, but where there may be gaps in the familial support, mentors in the community and school can help black youths from adverse situations become resilient.
Methods

Data Collection

Case studies and research articles were obtained and reviewed to identify the factors that led to resilience in the lives of black youth in an effort to determine how the Microsystem was able to promote resilience. The following databases were used for the research: ERIC, JSTOR, and EBSCOhost. Keyword searches were performed for: African American, Black Youth, Youth, Resilience, Overcoming Adversity, Mentoring, and Academic Achievement.

Results

The results of the research conducted showed that mentors did help black youth become resilient. Of the initial findings, there is the notion that the life courses of at-risk youth can be redirected by telling them the stories of African-Americans who succeeded in spite of inopportune beginnings, like Louis Armstrong, who was in a juvenile detention center before he was a recording musician, and Maya Angelou, who was an unmarried teenage mother many years before she spoke at President Clinton’s Inauguration (Brown, 2006).

Investigation of Characteristics of Mentoring Relationships and Positive Youth Outcomes

In a study conducted in a major Mid-Atlantic city with 42 girls between the ages of 11 and 16, findings highlighted the importance of regular and consistent patterns of contact between youth and mentors. Those youth with older mentors had higher GPA’s during the course of the study than those with younger mentors. Additionally, it was noted that the youth grew cognitively and intellectually from the frequent interactions with their mentors in which they were exposed to new opportunities and stretched beyond what they were accustomed to. Specifically, as mentors provided opportunities for the youth to explore career interests and
goals, the promotion of positive identity development occurred in the mind’s of the youth (King, 2009).

Enhancing School Engagement in At-Risk, Urban Minority Adolescents through a School-Based, Adult Mentoring Intervention

A study in a mid-Atlantic urban public high school examined the effects of a 5-month school-based mentoring program on 40 at-risk ninth grade students’ cognitions, behaviors, and academic performance. Using teachers and staff as mentors for twenty students, this mentoring intervention was based on Badura’s social cognitive theory. These low socio-economic participants that were nominated by faculty and deemed at risk for academic failure were made up of 47% Latino and 38% African American. All of the participants received the peer led class, Peer Group Connection, while only the experimental group received one-on-one training. During the eight-week intervention, mentors and mentees met weekly for 20-30 minutes; the mentors learned of their mentees’ long term goals, as well as educational and vocational aspirations.

At the conclusion of the experiment, the non-mentored group’s perception of teacher support declined by the post-test. Decision making ability remained the same for the mentored group, while the control group’s decision making declined from the first semester to the second. Three students from the control group received a discipline referral for the first time during the intervention, compared to none of the mentees. In the follow-up period (sophomore year), it appeared that there was no statistically significant improvement for either group as three mentees and two non-mentored participants entered the discipline system for the first time. The mentored students had an increased sense of belonging to the school; the control group had a decline in the
same measure. Mentored students that reported more support experienced a decline in discipline referrals in the second semester of their $9^{th}$ grade year. The mentored students felt more connected to various aspects of the school setting, namely teachers, because they spent adequate time with a mentor. For future reference, the researchers recommended longer-term and more intensive interventions to prevent future discipline referrals, as well as a longer period of follow-up to really measure results. (Holt, Bry, & Johnson, 2008)

**Effects of an Integrated Prevention Program on Urban Youth Transitioning into High School**

In an extension to the previously referenced study, 157 high school freshmen, forty percent of whom were black, were provided an integrated program that consisted of both a peer-led prevention program and a selective adult-mentoring program with the goals of improving the students’ school bonding experience and confidence in social and competence skills, while lowering the number of absences, academic failure and problem behaviors in a low-income urban Central New Jersey high school. The control group did not receive any intervention, while the experimental group received peer led sessions and twenty of the students received mentoring. The intervention lasted for five months.

As a result of the study, high academic risk students that received the intervention increased their ability to resist peer pressure to get into trouble over the course of their freshman year, while high-risk control students’ abilities decreased substantially (Johnson, Holt, Bry, & Powell, 2008). Additionally, students in the program group who were at low academic risk increased in their ability to make friends during their freshman year, while both low-risk and high-risk control students’ abilities to make friends declined. School-related misconduct for high-risk students in the control group increased greatly, but the high risk group with the
intervention only increased their school-related misconduct by less than a third of the control group’s amount. Similar findings were seen amongst the low-risk students in both groups. The intervention program had a dampening effect on tolerance for friends’ substance use among the high-risk students, though this was not the case with similar students in the control group. According to the researchers, “When provided with intensive peer interaction and some adult mentoring, students can begin to turn away from what might typically be a declining trajectory toward problem outcomes (Johnson et al, 2008).”

An Examination of Resilience Processes in Context: The Case of Tasha

In a qualitative study, a researcher conducted a seven-year resilience profile on Tasha, a 21-year old (at the completion of the study) African American woman, who grew up in poverty in a mid-sized Southeastern city. Over the course of her middle school and high school years, she struggled with truancy and low grades. Her high school counselor believed that she had a learning disability, but tests did not confirm this opinion. Tasha did not hold jobs very long, and in the tenth grade, she became pregnant. Following her pregnancy, she suffered from depression and at some point she was treated for a pre-cancerous condition, which was contributed to a sexually transmitted disease. In spite of these obstacles, at the completion of the study, Tasha had successfully graduated on time from high school, had 2 boys aged 5 and 2, was working as a certified nursing assistant, and was enrolled in a community college part-time to get a medical technician’s degree.

Over the course of the study, three significant relationships were discussed. The first was the negative relationship with her mother, who was an alcoholic that did not encourage her daughter. Tasha moved out of her mother’s home at 16 while still in high school, but she later
reconnected with her mother when she took a job in another city and needed someone to walk with her young son to and from the bus stop, though this arrangement did not last long. Even earlier in Tasha’s life, there was a time when Tasha needed to apply for Medicaid for herself and her baby, and after going to the hospital and waiting for two hours, she was finally seen, but could not be assisted because she did not have her social security card. She found out later that her mom had taken her social security card from her purse in retaliation following an argument they had the day before. According to Tasha, her mother’s response to anything that she wanted to do was “Oh, you ain’t going to do it, you not going to stick with it, I don’t know why you trying it.”

The second significant relationship in Tasha’s life was with Jerry, who was the program leader of Project Effort and a university professor. Project Effort began as an elementary sports club teaching Hellison’s responsibility goals, and it also included mentoring, teacher workshops, and family nights. Participation in this program was one of the constants in Tasha’s life, and it deepened her relationship with Jerry. In addition to providing encouragement and helping her reach her goals, Jerry was a mentor, friend, and resource to Tasha. He would call her and find out how she was doing. Also, there were times that she could not get to doctor’s appointments because the public transportation in her city was not reliable, so she would call Jerry, and he would take her where she needed to go.

The third significant relationship in her life was with Dr. Sellers, her high school counselor. Ninth grade was especially difficult for Tasha. Thankfully, two months into the school year, she connected with Dr. Sellers. According to Tasha, every time that she said she was quitting, Dr. Seller’s responded with “No, you’re not. Go get your test and we’ll work… I’m not going to do it, but I will work with you on it.” As a result, she did all of her tests in Dr.
Sellers’ office. In spite of all of her truancies, she finished high school, a feat in which Dr. Sellers played a significant role.

Tasha’s story was not the picture perfect story of success and resilience in the broadest sense, but in looking contextually at her story, resilience does shine through. One obstacle that she overcame was that in spite of her two pregnancies, Tasha completed high school and was enrolled in a program at a community college. Another obstacle that she overcame centered around her rocky relationship with her mother. At the end of the study, she was still going to her mother’s house, and she made adjustments in her own life so that she was more positive with her own children. She was doing sufficiently financially in that she was able to pay for her living expenses, support her children, and occasionally give her mother some money when she came over. The success and resilience that Tasha experienced would not have been possible without the positive experiences from Jerry and Dr. Sellers, to counteract the negative ones she received from her closest relationship with her mother. These adult mentors showed Tasha another form of support and genuine concern for her well-being. They took the time to work with her and provide as much assistance as they could, and now she is bettering herself and her future career prospects (Schilling, 2007).

*Staying the Course: Narratives of African American Males who have Completed a Baccalaureate Degree*

In a phenomenological study of eleven African American males who had completed their Baccalaureate Degree and were now pursuing a graduate degree, four key themes were identified as contributing to their success. Of these key factors, at least half of the participants had a mentor in the form or a person or a group of people. For one participant, his mentor was one of
his high school teachers, who purchased books and made him study in preparation for a scholarship interview, which he later received. Another participant was mentored by his brothers in the Alpha Phi Alpha fraternity, who dissuaded him from dropping out of college in his junior year to pursue his career in music; this participant also described the void he felt from years of not having a father. For another participant, he found mentorship from a financial aid office employee that encouraged him to get on welfare so that he would qualify for financial aid, and then be able to finish his degree.

The other themes that led to the success of these participants were having an epiphany about the importance of higher education, having the resources needed to attend and persist in an institution of higher education, and resilience when faced with obstacles. Several of these themes were largely influenced by aspects of the Microsystem in the participant’s lives. For example, several of the participants noted that they saw friends in high school or people in their neighborhoods get involved in drugs and crime, and as a result, they wanted to steer clear of those decisions and felt that college would help them achieve that. In regards to having the resources needed to attend college, many of the participants came from low and moderate income households. As this study did not use a random selection method for the sample, the findings are suggestive (Warde, 2007).

*Exploring Resiliency: Academic achievement among disadvantaged black youth in South Africa*

In an article that explored the resilience of South African black youth’s academic achievement in spite of their economic disadvantages, among other factors, role models and a supportive community were considered protective factors that led to the students’ success. The poverty, which has been correlated to poor academic performance, in South Africa is so
pronounced that 10% of the population control 80% of the economy. Academic achievement in South African is often seen as a measure of resiliency and a way to make a better life for one’s self. This qualitative study used ethnographic interviewing, case studies, and observation, and it took place in the outskirts of Durban, South Africa in a neighborhood that was previously racially segregated from apartheid and currently economically disadvantaged. The sample included sixteen university students, who had completed their mid-year examinations and were at the top of their class. Though the results are not generalizable, the study does provide insight into how these individuals from adverse environments were able to succeed academically (Dass-Brailsford, 2005).

The role of older siblings and the qualities of the family were seen as contributing elements to the participant’s success. For several of the participants, they were the “hope” of their families, and their parents made sacrifices to ensure that their child had what was needed to successfully complete school. Extended families also provided financial assistance, as well as tangible necessities, like food and clothing. Many of the role models noted came from both the participant’s families and schools, like one teacher that taught a student how to “overcome the odds of life.” Teachers were admired, viewed as role models, and perceived as a source of encouragement by the participants. From a principal’s comment to his students that “we are the architects of our own lives and we can choose to build our futures as a strong brick house or a [shack],” it became clear that a lot of the belief that the participants could direct their own futures stemmed from the statements of those who they looked up to. Teachers “[instilled] the important qualities of self-esteem and self-confidence among students, and [provided] a positive school experience that can potentially temper the negative effects of a difficult home life (Dass-Brailsford, 2005).”
In their communities, the participants had varying experiences with support; some experienced it; others experienced envy, jealousy, and low expectations. In terms of individual resiliency factors, many of the participants were documented as high achieving, goal-oriented, motivated, and believers that the self could possess a measure of agency and the ability to select a different path at any time. They had a conviction that their futures could be directed by themselves with self-confidence and self-determination and that they could structure their own lives (Dass-Brailsford, 2005).

According to the researchers,

“The combined micro-variables of family support, parental availability, a positive family atmosphere and good role models appear to have outweighed the negative effects of socio-economic status. The extended family unit has been able to withstand the assault of apartheid. Typically the only option for employment for rural black men in South Africa was the migrant labor system and the development of townships though families could not accompany these men, which threatened the black South Africans’ form of family life. In these extended family units, parenting was shared, and ‘child rearing was seen as the responsibility of the whole group (Dass-Brailsford, 2005).’”

A Global Role Model

Mark Mathabane never met Arthur Ashe, yet Ashe’s life story was a testament of hope for Mathabane, who did not see how his life could prosper outside of the ghetto in which he grew up in. As a South African youth in the midst of apartheid, extreme poverty, Mathabane was a truant, a petty theft, a seller of local drugs, and a gang member. There were times when he even had suicidal thoughts. Because of his father’s crushed spirit, Mathabane could not look to him as a role model, but he heard about Arthur Ashe one day and in seeing where Ashe came from, Mathabane started to see his potential in life. Though in different parts of the world, they both
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Mathabane saw Ashe as free. He spoke English fluently and voiced his opinions and opposition of apartheid. Mathabane continued to play tennis and eventually got a scholarship to a New York school to play tennis and study Economics. Even though they never met, Ashe had a tremendous impact on the course of Mathabane’s life (Mathabane, 1991).

Discussion

From this research, it is clear that interactions with members of a child’s Microsystem play a significant role in a child’s ability to overcome adversity and become resilient. In most instances, a child’s immediate family plays a significant role in providing support, building confidence, and providing for the child, but when these familial supports are non-existent, mentors, school personnel, and extended family can fill in the gaps. The findings of this research support the existing knowledge base that mentoring can lead to improved academic performance and less undesirable behavior (Brown, 2004; Delaware Mentoring Council, 2004). Specifically, mentors can help improve the way that youth view themselves by giving them a more positive outlook and the notion that they can achieve whatever they set their mind to achieve. Mentors outside of the home were found to help counteract the negative experiences that may be experienced in the home. Mentoring and peer-led programs were shown to decrease the risk of academic failure, involvement in punishable activities, and higher grades (Holt et al, 2008; Johnson et al, 2008).

With the number of single-parent and poverty-stricken homes in which many African American youth are being raised in, these youth need more influences to provide the support and example that will lead to success in the youth’s lives. They need more teachers that will ask
them their vocational and educational aspirations and help them create a plan to achieve them, as was the case in the New Jersey high school. These young people need mentors and role models that will take them to their jobs, or help them find work. Some youth, like Tasha, need adults that can help them with their assignments, while others need help finding money to finance their education. Schools, especially low-income schools, need to implement programs like the NASSP’s recommendation for a Personal Adult Advocate for every high school student to help personalize the educational experience (Wimberly, 2002), and these programs need to be long enough to make a sustainable difference.

In spite of all that a child must traverse through, Urie Bronfenbrenner emphatically states, “To a greater extent than for any other living creatures, the capacity of human offspring to survive and develop depends on care and close association with older members of the species (Henderson, 1995)... Somebody has to be crazy about that kid (Weisner, 2008).” This is not the sole responsibility of the parent or the school or the church. All institutions, structures, and establishments must work together to provide the child with the best possible outcomes for it truly takes a village or a community to raise a child.
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