Linking Strengths: Identifying and Exploring Protective Factor Clusters in Academically Resilient Low-Socioeconomic Urban Students of Color

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Based on data from qualitative interviews with 50 high-achieving low-socioeconomic students of color, two clusters of important and symbiotic protective factors are identified and explored. Each cluster consists of a series of interrelated protective factors identified by the participants as crucial to their statistically exceptional academic achievement. Using resilience theory, a detailed examination of how these groups of protective factors mitigated the potential effects of risk factors, thus contributing to the process of academic resilience, is presented. Practical uses of protective factor clusters also are presented and explored.

Keywords: academic resilience, achievement gap, education and socioeconomic status, gifted minority students, multiculturalism, protective factors, risk factors

THE ACHIEVEMENT GAP

The educational achievement gap between students of color and Whites, urban and suburban students, as well as between low- and high-socioeconomic students, remains a reprehensible reality nationwide (Harris & Herrington, 2006; Holland, 2007; Von Secker, 2004; Wille, 2001). Furthermore, a fundamental question as to whether or not educators really can overcome the influence of social class and decrease the gap has been posed (Holland). Given this context, and the corresponding stakes, increased attention is being paid to this enduring and complex concern.

Academic Resilience

Though there are a variety of ways to address the achievement gap issue, most can be classified in one of two ways: focusing on failure or focusing on success. Clearly falling into the latter category is the growing emphasis on academic resilience as an educational field of study (Gardynik & McDonald, 2005). Academic resilience can be defined as “the process and results that are part of the life story of an individual who has been academically successful, despite obstacles that prevent the majority of others with the same background from succeeding” (Morales & Trotman, 2004, p. 8). Academic resilience research is based on the premise that an effective and underutilized means of mitigating the achievement gap is through attaining a more complete and thorough understanding of success (Gardynik & McDonald; Milstein & Henry, 2000).

Academic Resilience and Giftedness

There are direct connections between resilience and giftedness and much research has been done that incorporate both concepts. For example, Dole (2000) studied the construct of resilience in relation to gifted students and those with diagnosed learning disabilities. Ford (1994) focused on gifted Black youth and the characteristics that contributed to their resilience, and Hébert (1996) looked at gifted Latino youth from urban environments. Reis, Colbert, and Hébert (2005) discovered salient factors contributing to varying academic outcomes of gifted students in an urban high school. Furthermore, Neihart (2006) identified obstacles to achievement for gifted youth based on perceptions of achievement and cultural conflict. Clearly, resilience and giftedness are closely related phenomena and the increased understanding of one can inform the other.
Resilience Research

As noted earlier, most definitions of resilience include both the outcome and process of exceptionally high academic achievement, despite risk factors that more often than not portend low achievement and/or failure (McCubbin, 2001). Therefore, in-depth studies of high achievers from “at-risk” backgrounds are conducted. The driving motivation behind such research is that by increasing our understanding of statistically unlikely high achievement, more resilient individuals can be facilitated on the way to the achievement of their academic goals (Condly, 2006; Gardynik & McDonald, 2005).

Frequently resilience studies focus on specific subgroups that represent at-risk populations and their achievements. Though definitions of what constitutes at-risk vary, from an educational perspective, at-risk usually refers to students from low-socioeconomic status (SES) and disenfranchised backgrounds statistically less likely to achieve academically (Moote & Wodarski, 1997). Examples of specific groups who have been studied related to resilience include foster children who made it to college (Merding, Hines, Osterling, & Wyatt, 2005), high-achieving African American middle-school children participating in athletics (Hawkins & Mulkey, 2005), low-socioeconomic Mexican Americans who earned terminal degrees (Gandara, 1995), Dominican Americans who excelled in college (Morales, 2000), and high-achieving East Asian immigrant students (Gibson, 1986).

Low-socioeconomic students from urban backgrounds are also often included in resilience studies (e.g., Conchas, 2006; Miller & MacIntosh, 1999; Reis & Diaz, 1999; Stanton-Salazar & Spino, 2000; Taylor & Wang, 2000). This group is particularly appropriate for resilience study for a variety of reasons. In comparing urban versus suburban schools, Kozol (1997) cited lower academic standards, lower per student funding, and more stringent tracking systems. Given this documented inequity between the quality of education provided to these groups, the high-academic achievement of low-SES urban students is especially unique. In order to help contextualize resilience theory, some common elements are presented here. Four popular resilience concepts often included as theoretical frameworks in resilience studies are risk factors, protective factors, vulnerability areas, and compensatory strategies (Kitano & Lewis, 2005). Risk factors are existing constructs that have the potential to create roadblocks or impediments to academic success. Protective factors have the ability to offset or mitigate all or aspects of these risk factors. Vulnerability areas are idiosyncratic manifestations of “risk,” whereas compensatory strategies are specific responses to such vulnerabilities.

Closely mirroring these dynamics, and specific to the effects of the urban milieu, is the urban stress model (Myers, 1982). The urban stress model purports that for students to excel within a stressful urban environment, they must endure both exogenic (external) and endogenic (internal) antecedents (risk factors), by utilizing internal and external mediators (protective factors). Myers believes that through this process the students engage in a coping and adaptation process that ultimately results in healthy outcomes.

Regardless of the specific framework utilized, comprehending the actual interplay between these factors in the specific context of resilient students’ lives is a complex and arduous task. As a result, often the most common approach to studying resilience is simply that of isolating and identifying major protective factors in the lives of resilient individuals (for examples see Bogenschneider, 1996; Gardynik & McDonald, 2005; Garmenzy, 1991; Gordan, 1995; Von Seker, 2004; Werner & Smith, 1982). Though this is often an effective and necessary endeavor, its value is limited because it provides only limited analysis of a complex phenomenon. As has been acknowledged in much of the resilience research, rarely do protective factors operate in isolation (Luthar, Doernberger, & Zigler, 1993). With the understanding that it is most often the combinations of protective factors that propel the at-risk to resilience (Morales & Trotman, 2004), the identification and analysis of specific arrangements of salient protective factors becomes paramount. Consequently, the focus here is on uncovering and exploring how key protective factors may have worked together at various stages to mitigate the negative effects of risk factors. It is through the working of these groups of protective factors that students can overcome vulnerabilities and utilize compensatory strategies that contribute to their academic success.

Though the participants in this study may or may not have been formally identified as gifted, the fact is that they have demonstrated extraordinary academic ability. Through enhanced understanding of major ingredients of this success, the hope is that potentially exceptional students can be encouraged to reach their full potentials.

Shortcomings of Protective Factor Identification Research

As briefly discussed earlier, what is often lost when simply identifying protective factors is an understanding of, and appreciation for, the process (how the protective factor results in the positive outcome) and the specific relationships between and among the various protective as well as risk factors. This shift in focus is reflected in the work of Davey, Eaker, and Walters (2003) when they wrote “it is important to note that the emphasis in resiliency research has shifted from identifying characteristics of children who are resilient to identifying processes that promote resiliency” (p. 347). This change in focus is the logical progression in the evolution of resilience research and part of the rationale behind this particular research.
RESEARCH QUESTION

This work focuses on the temporal working relationships of groups of protective factors and how these processes result in academic success for academically successful at-risk students. The specific research question driving this research was, “Were there specific protective factors and/or clusters of shared factors common to this sample population, and how might these factors have operated in concert to produce high academic achievement?”

METHOD

This research study consisted solely of qualitative interviewing of participants who met the resilience criteria identified below. The specific research approach outlined below grew out of preliminary work begun in the mid-1990s. Participants who met the established criteria were added to the research pool over the years as they became available. The result is a comprehensive look at a diverse group of students who all shared certain salient background and performance characteristics.

The research sample consisted of 50 academically resilient low-socioeconomic students of color (see Table 1 for demographic details). Eighty percent of the students spent their entire childhoods in urban environments, whereas the remaining 20% spent their early years in urban environments and then moved to suburban (16%) or rural (4%) environments. The research was done over the course of approximately 8 years (February 1997 to December 2004). Each of the participants met the following minimal resilience pre and post criteria:

1. Pre: Each student had parents with limited educational backgrounds (high-school graduates or below) and who worked in low or semiskilled jobs (low SES), and each student self-identified as an ethnic minority.
2. Post: At the time of interview each student had completed a minimum of 30 college credits and had a minimum grade point average of 3.0 (using a 4-point scale).

Based on statistical evidence indicating that individuals meeting the pre-resilience criteria would be unlikely to meet the post-resilience criteria (American Council on Education, 2006), these students are by definition academically resilient.

Population

Twenty-four percent of the students in this study (12/50) had been identified as gifted at some point during their K–12 schooling and therefore can be officially labeled gifted. Additionally, all of the students have surpassed statistical norms of achievement for their demographic group and at the very least can be identified as “academically talented.” Furthermore, given the general lack of resources in urban, predominantly African American and Hispanic schools that most of the participants attended (Kozol, 1991), many urban/minority students may not have been encouraged to take IQ tests and therefore may not have had the opportunity to participate in gifted and talented programs (Anquiano, 2003).

Given the contextual emphasis necessary to uncover salient patterns of protective factor combinations and processes and the ability of qualitative methods to get at such context (Geertz, 1973; McCracken, 1998; Rubin & Rubin, 1995; Spradley, 1979), qualitative methods were employed. Specifically, following the work of Rubin and Rubin, topical semistructured interviews were done. Each student was interviewed at least three times, and each interview was tape recorded and transcribed verbatim. The general topic was the students’ resilience processes, and structure was provided by an interview protocol (see Appendix A). Following Kirk and Miller’s (1986) inverted triangle, the initial interview gleaned background information, and the follow-up interviews explored and documented findings in detail. Finally, after the third interview, member checks were conducted to address any extant contradictions and to further establish the veracity of the researcher’s findings.

While conducting the research, completeness and data saturation were the objectives. Completeness is the principle of adding interviews until one is satisfied with the level of understanding for the given phenomenon (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). The saturation point is defined as the place in time when additional interviews add little to what has already been learned (Glaser & Strauss, 1965).

Trustworthiness

In addition to member checking, to ensure accuracy, triangulation and an external audit were utilized. Triangulation
involves securing multiple sources of corroboration for a particular point. Triangulation was employed in this study by identifying possibly salient protective factor processes and then accessing multiple participants’ narratives in order to confirm or refute their presence and/or significance. An external audit, according to Schawandt and Halpern (1988), involves using an additional experienced researcher to review the data and answer questions such as:

1. Are inferences logical?
2. Are the themes appropriate?
3. What is the degree of researcher bias?

For this research, a clinical psychologist/researcher colleague analyzed the transcript data as well. Her goal was to address the above concerns and her findings were then compared to the researcher’s, with accord ultimately being reached. Based on these rigorous procedures, a maximum amount of reliability was achieved.

**Participant Selection**

Of the 50 total participants (31 female, 19 male), 22 were referred by college faculty and staff, 17 responded to flyers posted around college campuses, and 11 were referred by friends of participants. Each was asked to provide college transcripts to document academic standing, and parental-socioeconomic status and participants’ racial identity were determined based on participant response alone.

**Data Analysis**

Adhering to the work of Lincoln and Guba (1985) and Rubin and Rubin (1995), data collection and analysis were separate processes that were closely intertwined. As initial data were gathered on each participant, analysis was done to identify noteworthy protective factors (noteworthy in this study was operationalized as something that the participants believed was absolutely crucial to their academic success). Once these important factors were identified, subsequent interview transcripts were combed to elicit their processes of operation and the possible presence of multiple factors operating together.

Two distinct clusters of protective factors arose from the data. These consisted of groups of protective factors that were identified as working in an interrelated and supplemental fashion by a minimum of 65% of the participants (see Table 2 for protective factor clusters).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cluster/protection factor</th>
<th>Percentage of sample</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cluster 1.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Willingness/desire to “class jump” (move up in social class)</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caring school personnel (K–12)</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caring school personnel (college)</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sense of obligation to one’s race/ethnicity</td>
<td>68</td>
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<tr>
<td>Strong future orientation</td>
<td>86</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cluster 2.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Strong work ethic</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Persistence</td>
<td>94</td>
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<tr>
<td>High self-esteem</td>
<td>92</td>
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<tr>
<td>Internal locus of control</td>
<td>92</td>
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<tr>
<td>Attendance at out-of-zone school</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High parental expectations supported by words and actions</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother modeling strong work ethic</td>
<td>74</td>
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The percentages in Table 2 indicate the percentages of students who identified the various protective factors. These measures provide a sense of how common certain findings were and the extent to which the sample did or did not experience a given phenomenon.

Excerpts from the transcripts are used to illuminate the clusters and place their processes in context. All excerpts are verbatim quotes.

**Cluster Findings**

In this section, the sample members are referred to at different points synonymously as either participants or students. Because they were students before participants, both terms are used throughout.

*Cluster 1. “It’s Okay to be Smart”: Skillful Mentoring for Future Success*

The protective factors are (a) willingness/desire to “class jump” (move up in social class; 94%), (b) caring school personnel (K–12 = 90%, college = 72%), (c) sense of obligation to one’s race/ethnicity (68%), and (d) strong future orientation (86%).

Sixty-six percent of the sample reported a clear interplay between these four common protective factors. Willingness and desire to class jump was characterized as the students’ explicit longing to move up in social class and their acceptance of their perception of what it might mean to change social classes. Though this may appear to be a simple conviction requiring little emotional or intellectual effort, often the contrary was the case. This is an area where the dynamics can be very different for ethnic minority versus majority students. There often exists a de facto understanding common to students of color that joining the educated middle class is a form of treason and/or

**FINDINGS**

This exploration of apparent protective factor clusters demonstrates the symbiotic, interdependent, and temporal nature of the protective factors in context and how they resulted in the process known as academic resilience for these participants.
“selling out” (Ogbu, 1994). Consequently, for these students, before a participant could fully commit to class jumping often he or she had to be coached and coaxed into doing so by a mentor, usually a caring school- or college-personnel member.

Effective caring school personnel were identified by many of the students in this study. These individuals (academic mentors) were described with words such as encouraging, empathetic, supportive, strict, and down (slang for understanding of youth culture and trustworthy). Additionally, these crucial academic mentors were in possession of cultural capital essential to these students’ success in moving from one milieu (low-income/working-class, often urban, environments of color) to another (middle-class, majority White, academic environments). In this way, the mentor often served as effective cultural translators, literally and figuratively translating the academic language into words and ideas that the students could understand readily.

A related and equally important role played by these academic mentors was that they were able to convince the participants that it was indeed acceptable to commit to moving up in class.

Though the specific approaches of persuasion differed, a common theme was that these effective academic mentors would acknowledge the participants’ ambivalence and then reassure them that moving up did not necessarily mean a complete break from everything and everyone familiar, nor did it have to mean that they necessarily became a “new person.” Nestor’s reflection on his high-school principal captures this dynamic:

Dr. Johnson grew up in Harlem and I grew up in Washington Heights, so we would always talk about the City and stuff. He grew up poor, like me, so I had a lot of respect for him. He got his doctorate and he made it . . . So we were talking one day and I found out that he still lives in Harlem. He’s got a fly Brownstone, but he didn’t leave the neighborhood. He would always say that just because he got educated and now makes money, that doesn’t mean he had to become a new person, sell out, and leave everyone behind. He made me feel like it was ok to get ahead . . . that moving up does not necessarily mean moving out. (Nestor, Hispanic, age 21)

Nestor’s words also intimate that the issue of race/ethnicity is an important part of this dynamic. These mentors often reminded those participants who felt a strong obligation to their races and communities of origin (68%), that far from selling out, their success would actually put them in a position to do more for “their people,” their families (both current and future) and their communities.

Dante’s description of his college counselor is representative of the dynamics described above and illustrates an additional value of these academic mentors:

Part of me was tied to the hood and didn’t want to let that go. To be Black, to be truly Black meant that you were part of the struggle and that you did things in a “Black way.” Whether it be how you speak, your music, or your dress or whatever, you are distinguishing yourself from the White world. It is a form of resistance. . . . I don’t mean to get too political, but when you listen to guys like Cornell West or even Tupac, you can see what I’m talking about . . . . So I was into “Hip Hop,” which isn’t just rapping, it’s a lifestyle, and the better I did in school and then going to college, more and more I felt like I would have to give that up, and that didn’t feel right. . . . But when I met Mr. Williams (college counselor), he noticed that resistance . . . He broke it down for me. He was into Cornell West too, and he asked me, “Is Cornell a sell out?” And of course he’s not, he’s The Man. And who has more letters after his name than him? You see. So he showed me being intellectual and getting degrees does not have to mean selling out. It’s about what you do when you get ahead, not just getting ahead. Cornell got his letters (academic degrees) and made change from there. (Dante, African American, age 19)

Like many of the students in the study, Dante’s reconciliation of academic success with his racial–ethnic community allegiance helped free him from resisting his achievement. These academic mentors were successful at facilitating this process and channeling the participants’ racial pride along with their desire to class jump, so that energy and effort could be put toward school and achievement.

Another benefit of this freedom from resisting academic success was that it helped the students keep from sabotaging their own success. Given the common presence of a sense of obligation to one’s race and communities of origin prevalent in students of color, self-sabotage is a disproportionately common phenomenon (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Steele & Aronson, 1998). As part of this process, students sometimes, either consciously or subconsciously, do things to thwart their success in order keep themselves from leaving their peer group and having to join the dominant majority. For the resilient students in this study, reports of conscious self-sabotage were relatively rare (38% of males and 12% of females). It can be surmised that this relative rareness is a result of the stratified set that is the group. These students are all relative high achievers. It can be assumed that students with major self-sabotage issues would not have achieved enough to be included. However, subtle or subconscious self-sabotage in the form of resisting academic culture was an issue for many of these participants. In countering this, the academic mentors played important roles. When the participants’ mentors convinced the students to be comfortable with this transition from their home community to academia, the participants’ propensities for self-sabotage decreased.

Another dispositional protective factor tied to mentorship was the participants’ possession of strong future orientations (86%). A strong future orientation is characterized by
thoughts, speech, and behavior that emphasize attainment of prospective goals and potential resources and outcomes, rather than immediate gratification and concerns. And though this dispositional attribute existed for most of the students prior to the mentors’ interactions as previously described, it became considerably more prevalent and intense once the student became comfortable with the prospect of class jumping. Consequently, often the academic mentor’s primary role was to convince the participants (either directly or indirectly) that positive ideas about the future were indeed realistic, attainable, and worthy.

Similar to the sabotage matter, it can be inferred that the students who have met the requisite criteria for this study will generally possess much higher levels of future orientation. However, as the students moved through their college careers, planning for the future became a major concern for them. They reported a great deal of anxiety over the future and expressed their gratitude for their mentors’ guidance in this area. Through interaction with caring school personnel (particularly during the college mentors’ guidance in this area. Through interaction with the students prior to the mentors’ interactions as previously described, it became considerably more prevalent and intense once the student became comfortable with the prospect of class jumping. Consequently, often the academic mentor’s primary role was to convince the participants (either directly or indirectly) that positive ideas about the future were indeed realistic, attainable, and worthy.

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Lourdes’ appreciation for her advisor’s role in bolstering her future orientation reflects much of what the other participants described:

Miss Carson was my go-to-girl! Whenever I had a problem I knew that I could go to her and get help. She understood me and always had time. Even when she was busy, she would make time. . . . I remember talking to her about how my mother was getting on me. . . . My mother thought I was going to get a good job right after college, she figured if you go to college you automatically get an easy job in an office somewhere. She didn’t understand that I was a psych major, and that there is not much you can do with an undergraduate degree in psychology. Basically, graduate school is a must. So my mom, was getting on me and I started to doubt my decision to study psych. And money was getting tight. Four years of college and I was still going to be without a paycheck! I mean I’m always telling young Latinas that school is the way to go, and I was struggling myself. I was thinking I should have been a school teacher, that way I could get paid right away and make decent money. . . . But I loved psych and didn’t really want to be a teacher. So I went to Miss Carson and we talked. She had a master’s in psych and told me that she got a job at the university and that they paid for it. I never heard of that. So then we got a plan together, I was going to find a grad psych program I wanted, then get a job at that school. That way I would have a paycheck, but also be able to go to school. I mean, how perfect is that? (Lourdes, Hispanic, age 21)

In Lourdes’ excerpt we see all of Cluster 1 in operation. It demonstrates her willingness and desire to class jump, a caring mentor, her sense of obligation to her ethnicity, and her strong future orientation. It also provides a glimpse into how these protective factors work together to contribute to continued resilience.

**Cluster 2. Pride, Debt, Effort and Success: Becoming Someone**

The protective factors are (a) strong work ethic (90%), (b) persistence (94%), (c) high self-esteem (92%), (d) internal locus of control (92%), (e) attendance at out of zone school (76%), (f) high parental expectations supported by words and actions (80%), and (g) mother modeling strong work ethic (74%).

Seventy percent of the sample reported a clear interplay between these seven protective factors. Among these, three common dispositional protective factors, strong work ethic, persistence, and internal locus of control, tended to increase in presence and significance as the participants matured, advanced, and met their academic goals along the way. These valuable dispositional protective factors were often enhanced by two key familial protective factors: their mothers’ modeling of a strong work ethic and high parental expectations supported by words and actions. Consequently, though work ethic, persistence, and internal locus of control were strong in relative isolation, when combined with the participants’ perceptions of their family members’ commitments and struggles, they became even more powerful.

High parental expectations supported by words and actions refer not to parents’ general and isolated commentary that they wanted their children to do well in school but rather to specific and explicit assertions about, and commitments to, educational goals and ambitions, as well as actions that gave weight to their words.

Perhaps the most stark and common example of the value of these parental actions in support of education were participants’ reports of both their parents’ sacrifices and their proactivity in helping them avoid their local zone schools and helping them attend out of zone specialized or Catholic schools. All of the participants who did attend nonzone schools identified attendance at these schools as a key protective factor. When the students spoke of their parents’ expectations and support, it was often in regard to facilitation of their attendance at these schools.

For these parents to send their children to specialized public schools (magnet schools, charter schools, selective academies, etc.) a certain amount of research and leg work not lost on the participants was required. Adding to the exceptional nature of the parents’ actions in this area is the fact that even though the parents were not highly educated, they still possessed the wherewithal and initiative to seek out alternative schooling environments for their children. Sean’s recollection of his mother’s efforts in this area represents this dynamic well:
It was basically known that our high school was bad. It was so bad the neighborhood used to call it "Convict High" cause so many kids who went there went to jail. . . . My moms wasn’t having that, not for “my baby” she’d say. When I was in eighth grade she called the Board of Ed., she made me take her to the library and look up their Web site . . . finally she found this small school downtown that was focused on business and corporate stuff. She didn’t know much about it, but what she did know was that it was far from home and it was not Convict High . . . going to that school made a big difference, it gave me a place apart from the neighborhood guys . . . that school wasn’t perfect, but there were not the same types of influences . . . the kids there were basically good, they all wanted to go to college. (Sean, African American, age 19)

Other students not attending their zone school reported similar experiences attending Catholic school (16%). These students consistently reported that not only were they grateful for their parents found educational alternatives but that they also made the financial commitment and sacrifice in the form of tuition payments, even during times that often were tight economically.

Richard’s recollection of his parents’ discussions about his Catholic school tuition captured the essence of what many of these students reported:

My parents never complained to me about the tuition, but I knew it was an issue for them each month. They would always be discussing ways to make ends meet, and talking about how many hours my mom should work at a given time. Again, it wasn’t complaining, they just had to figure it out. I knew they really thought that school was valuable, or they wouldn’t have worried so much about making certain to make the tuition payments. (Richard, African American, age 20)

In Richard’s words we see an emphasis on what his parents did, not so much on what they said. It was this type of action that stayed with students and helped motivate them once they got to college.

The fact that such a large portion of these resilient students attended schools that were not public neighborhood schools has several possible implications. It begs the question, what may be disadvantageous about attendance at public-zoned schools? In speaking with the students, many pointed to the value of these schools in that they exposed them to new and different cultures, peoples, values, and norms. Because many of these students had few, if any, positive academic roles models within their immediate communities, often the only place they experienced the possibility of academic pursuits and/or a college education were in areas outside of their immediate community. Whether the school was Catholic, selective, or theme based, a common result was that the school separated the students (physically, intellectually, and emotionally) from negative aspects of their immediate communities. Not only did these schools expose the students to wider ranges of social classes, the schools also helped make the students feel special, which then also facilitated their belief in themselves and their academic abilities. Jessica’s description of her high-school experience is representative of what many students reported:

Since I was like 10, I knew my mom was not sending me to Lincoln [zone public-high school]. My brother went there and she knew it kind a sucked. She would say over and over again, “there’s no way I’m gonna let my baby girl loose with those animals.” So right there, I felt like I was special, like more important than my brother . . . when I got to Tech (the out-of-zone magnet high school) I really felt special, different from my friends on the block . . . at Tech we knew we were going to college, that school advertised itself as a college prep school, so that is who went there. (Jessica, Hispanic, age 19)

Like many of the students, Jessica recognized and appreciated that it was her mother’s will and effort that placed her in the fortunate position to attend a school that prepared her for college. That recognition often motivates these students to do well academically.

Though financial sacrifices and out of zone schools were clear examples of parental commitment to education, many students expressed gratitude for the nonfinancial efforts made by their parents. These efforts came in the form of making transportation arrangements to attend schools that were at a distance (62%), staying on top of the students and making certain they did their homework (70%), encouraging them to read (80%), and constant praise (72%).

Though the value of hard work may seem obvious, it is still an important protective factor to explore. An important question to ask is what is the genesis of this hard work ethic? For many of the students, their mothers’ demonstrated work ethic served as a primary source of their own work ethic. Additionally, as mentioned above, not only does the mother’s work ethic promote hard work in their children, it also served to motivate the students through a sense of gratitude and debt. Thus, as time passed, students tended to appreciate their mothers more and feel indebted to them as well.

Many of these students reported that though they had, at times, taken their mothers (and fathers and grandmothers to a much lesser extent) for granted, as they matured they looked to their mothers as sources of inspiration and pride. LaTisha’s reflection of her mother illustrates this process well:

My mom was a quiet woman. She never complained about anything. When she got home from her job as a comfort and hospitality associate—fancy name for a hotel maid—she would start cleaning the house. Could you imagine that? Doing a sh— job all day, then doing it more when you got home? And not complaining. That’s character. . . . When I
hit a roadblock and start complaining. I just think about her, and I'm almost ashamed to be complaining. (LaTisha, African American, age 20)

LaTisha captures both the inspiration and the indebtedness that the students often garner from their mothers’ struggles.

Closely related to this parent-induced motivation through demonstrated work ethic, and unique to American students of color, is the strength that the students draw from their sense of obligation not only to their mothers but, as outlined in Cluster 1, to the sociopolitical plight of their race and/or ethnicity. Often this obligation is couched in historical incidents and themes of racism, discrimination, and bigotry, of which most students of color are now fully aware. Given that these incidents have now found themselves into most progressive schools’ social studies curricula, even students with nonpolitical parents often found themselves politicized. These students were very aware of their histories and often felt that their academic achievement somehow addressed and mitigated the racist transgressions characterizing American history by defying stereotypes and exceeding expectations.

This transgression reconciliation dynamic can be a powerful motivator for students of color. As discussed earlier, these participants often had ambivalence about achieving academically, as if in some way it may be selling out. However, when that achievement is viewed as a form of reconciliation, the guilt diminishes. This dynamic is evident in Dante’s discussion of Cornell West presented earlier. He was able to embrace academia once it was converted from selling out to political activism.

Another byproduct of this reconciliation concept is the sense of pride often evident in the resilient students upon recognition of their unique accomplishments. This pride is the basis of another key dispositional protective factor, self-esteem. The issue of self-esteem for students of color is complex, contradictory, multifaceted, and often highly emotional. Given the systematic and unilateral attempts to reduce people of color to virtual animal status in the United States, as well as the more subtle yet ubiquitous remnants of de jure racism permeating popular as well as academic culture, building and sustaining positive self-esteem is often a particular challenge for people of color.

The conflicting feelings about self-esteem for these students are reflected in paradoxical findings concerning self-esteem. Though 92% of the students did identify their high self-esteem as a major protective factor, 54% cited feelings of low self-esteem as a major psychological stressor (see Morales, 2008, for a full exploration of psychosocial stressors among resilient students). These inconsistent findings reflect the fragile and wavering nature of the students’ self-esteem. And, given that most of the participants were between 18 and 21 years old at the time of the study, the inconsistency may also reflect their still-evolving senses of self.

Particularly virile challenges for these participants were the socially prevalent variations on the belief—and associated messages—that people of color, particularly African Americans, are intellectually inferior. For someone attempting to prove themselves in an academic environment—an environment where racists often believe that they are at a genetic disadvantage—the pressure and weight of each academic contest becomes heightened. In fact, when looking at the major psychological stressors of the students in this study, in addition to feelings of low self-esteem, 74% cited academic competitiveness. Thus, when the inevitable failure does occur, no matter how temporary or minute, the interpretation of that failure becomes exaggerated. This reality makes for often contentious inner struggles within students as they attempt to convince themselves of both their intellectual and general value, as the degree to which they really do belong where they are (see Steele and Aronson’s [1988] work on stereotype threat for a discussion of how these feelings can impact academic performance). The presence of these psychological stressors adds to the difficulty and uniqueness of these students’ journeys and further emphasizes the importance and value of the protective factor clusters explored here.

Gifted and Nongifted Participant Outcomes

As stated earlier, 12 out of the 50 participants had been identified as gifted. In comparing the academic achievement of these students to those high achievers who had not been identified as gifted, few salient differences in achievement levels (i.e., grade point average) were detected. However, in looking at the type of higher-education institution attended, there were important differences. Of those identified as gifted, 5 attended highly selective private institutions, 4 attended selective private institutions and 3 attended selective public institutions. None attended community colleges (see Table 1 for relevant type of higher-education institution data). These data suggest that, for these participants at least, being identified as gifted contributed to the students’ attendance at more prestigious institutions compared to their peers. Based on the data available it appears that those who were identified as gifted were more likely to be on an earlier trajectory toward high-academic achievement. As a result of their academic skills being identified and nurtured at an earlier point, they were more likely to seek entrance to more prestigious and selective higher-education institutions right out of high school.

DISCUSSION

The two protective factor clusters presented above represent distinct groups of factors that the participants reported as being crucial to their success. Within each cluster, common trends of how the factors related to one another, and
consequently propelled the participants toward academic success, are presented.

As briefly addressed earlier, many of the individual protective factors identified above have been documented in previous research. However, their connections and processes have received much less attention. As a result, though there is minimal theoretical context in which to place the entire clusters, there is some research that illuminates portions of them.

Though P. J. Mrazek and D. A. Mrazek (1987) focused mainly on the importance of belief systems as coping mechanisms for resilient youth, they did address several elements of Cluster 1. Their belief in the importance of developing supportive relationships and the ability to visualize past current crises reflects the caring school personal and future orientation, aspects of Cluster 1. Furthermore, Gayles (2005) noted that for resilient Black youth specifically, academic success needs to be characterized as a pragmatic and utilitarian endeavor to avoid the pitfalls of being labeled a sell-out. This is exactly what the academic mentors accomplished as they convinced their protégées that academic success can be a means to bolstering and serving members of their racial and ethnic backgrounds. Without framing academic success in this manner, Ogbu’s (1994) concept of cultural inversion—the process by which subordinate groups view the dominant culture (academic culture) as inappropriate for them—could have taken hold. This phenomenon reflects Neihart’s (2006) look at gifted students who sometimes underachieve because they see certain achievement behaviors as betrayals of their racial, ethnic, or cultural affiliations.

For urban students especially, teacher mentors often play crucial roles in students’ success or failure (Rosenblum & Way, 2004). Because of often limited exposure to other academic role models, the expressed expectations of these teachers can carry disproportionate weight. As presented above, for the low-SES urban students in this study, academic mentors not only encouraged the students to excel but did so in particularly effective ways. Additionally, because these mentors often exposed participants to the academic world in ways that made that world acceptable, they successful encouraged biculturalism in the students. Essentially, they helped the students become competent in the academic culture, thus adding this cultural competency to the students’ home or native culture. This demonstrated biculturalism has been identified as a particularly valuable protective factor for resilient urban students (Miller & Maclinosh, 1999).

In regards to Cluster 2, Grotberg (1999) presented five building blocks of resilience—trust, autonomy, initiative, industry, and identity—and asserted that their presence assists youth in becoming resilient. These core dispositional protective factors are reflected in Cluster 2 where self-esteem, work ethic, and persistence operate simultaneously. Also reflecting Cluster 2 is the work of Nettles and Peck (1995), who stressed as crucial to resilience the “opening up of opportunity and processes that permit the individual to gain access to resources or to complete important life transitions” (p. 157). This is where the participants’ experiences with specialized out-of-zone schools and their internal loci of control are relevant. Through exposure to new worlds and opportunities they increased their belief in themselves and their abilities and used that confidence to successfully navigate the crucial transition to college. Another noted characteristic of resilience is the degree to which students are positively engaged in their school environments (Padron, Waxman, & Huang, 1999). Through the Cluster 2 process, these students often ended up in schools about which they had positive perceptions and with which they interacted positively.

The value of active parental input, a noted contributor to high achievement for students of color in general (Jeynes, 2003), and particularly for gifted African American students (Huff, Houskamp, Watkins, Stanton, & Tavegia, 2005) as well as gifted Latino students from urban areas (Herbert, 1996), was another crucial element in Cluster 2. The importance of parental action in the lives of resilient students has been explored in the work of Nettles, Mucherah, and Jones (2000) where both high expectations and parental involvement in the lives of resilient at-risk students proved invaluable. Additionally, what this intense parental involvement can engender, namely, the taking of preventive measures to facilitate academic success, has been identified in the work of Gardynik and McDonald (2005) as essential for at-risk gifted students. Without this parental influence, many of the other protective factors on Cluster 2 could not have been utilized and/or exploited.

Reflected in both clusters is Goleman’s (1995) concept of emotional intelligence. Emotional intelligence refers to an individual’s skillful and effective management of emotions amid stressful times; adeptness in social environments; impulse control; and effective decision making under duress. It also involves “abilities such as being able to motivate oneself and persist in the face of frustrations; to control impulse and delay gratification; to regulate one’s mood and keep distress from swamping the ability to think; to empathize and to hope” (p. 37). These valuable skills are reflected in various cluster elements, including persistence, internal locus of control, and strong future orientation.

Finally, the general concept of protective factors working in symbiotic concert in order to facilitate achievement of resilience has been stressed by multiple resilience researchers (Luthar et al., 1993; Morales & Trolman, 2004; Ungar, 2004). Additionally, there is evidence that compared to Whites, students of color are more likely to require and utilize more and varied protective factors in the process of their academic achievement (Plummer & Slane, 1996). This is consistent with Kitano’s (1995) work on resilient gifted women of color, where racism and discrimination were the primary obstacles identified. Because of these challenges, it
logically follows that additional protective factors may be necessary.

Research Implications
The study of specific educational protective factor relationships and process dynamics is truly in its infancy. Because little has been done in this area, there is a need to expand basic understandings of which groups of protective factors work well in combination with each other and how these combinations prove efficacious.

Both quantitative and qualitative methods can play parts in illuminating the processes at work when resilient students utilize multiple protective factors simultaneously. Quantitative endeavors can help statistically group particular combinations of protective factors commonly utilized together, whereas qualitative methods can unearth their specific symbiotic and temporal relationships. If one has a large enough sample population yet still has in-depth access to the participants’ inner worlds, a mixed-method approach may prove useful. This would allow for both the grouping or clustering of protective factors and a sense of how they may be related and contribute to academic resilience.

Another area to explore is how these clusters may vary for different demographic populations. For example, how might these dynamics differ for academically resilient White students from poor, rural backgrounds? How about for African American students at historically Black colleges and universities? What about for recent immigrants? These major background differences could substantially impact the specific nature of various clusters.

Finally, it should be noted that because only resilient students were included in this study, the degree to which these dynamics may or may not pertain to nonresilient individuals remains unanswered. Future studies could and should explore how these clusters may or may not be shared by individuals and groups having different origins and/or achievement levels.

Practical Implications
There is a clear need for better and “more informed” initiatives designed to assist at-risk students (Nettles et al., 2000). The practical value of knowing more about what protective factors work well, and in which specific combinations, is extensive. By knowing which types of services and assistance should be offered in which combinations and at which times, those responsible for implementing programming designed to facilitate academic achievement can more skillfully employ limited resources. For example, based on Cluster 1, it is known that not only should personal relationships with academic mentors be encouraged but that those relationships should both respect the difficulties that students may have in moving into the academic milieu and work to ease that transition. Furthermore, the relationships should work to build a strong sense of optimism about the achievement of future goals and objectives and demonstrate how the students’ successes could then be used to help members of their own backgrounds.

Another important implication comes from the students’ attendance at and appreciation for their out-of-zone/specialized schools as outlined in Cluster 2. This attendance produced several outcomes that can be encouraged whether or not students have the opportunity to attend specialized schools. Primarily, these include a general broadening of horizons through exposure to various peoples and cultures and the facilitation of an increased sense of academic self-esteem. By creating these opportunities, potentially resilient students can be provided with key resources for their academic success.

CONCLUSION
The challenges presented when attempting to identify salient groups of educational protective factors results in an area of educational research that is ripe for further study. Though by no means exhaustive or definitive, the protective factor clusters presented here do represent a beginning.

This clustering of factors is an attempt to show how they are connected from the participants’ perspectives. Therefore, though the degree to which these clusters exist beyond these particular students is unknown, what is presented here can serve as a foundation on which to build new and further reaching theories.

Finally, there has been discussion as to possible negatives attached to studying and profiling successful low-SES students. In particular, the need to guard against the use of these students as poster-children for success and the related intimation that those who have not been as successful are somehow “deficient” or “at fault” (Kozol, 1997). Given this reasonable concern, it should be stated that the focus on resilience presented here is not intended to blame those who have not been as successful but rather to better understand those who have. It is hoped that through this increased understanding, programs and initiatives designed to help the potentially resilient and/or the undocumented gifted will be more intelligently designed.

REFERENCES


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**APPENDIX A**

Interview Protocol Excerpts

Initial Interview: Examples of *General Open Ended Questions*

- Can you describe your educational journey thus far? How it began and how you ended up here?
- Is there anything or anybody significant that you would credit for getting you where you are today academically?
- What are your earliest memories related to education and schooling?
- Are they positive or negative?

Follow-up Interview(s): Examples of Specific/Targeted Inquiries

- You said that without your uncle, you don’t think you would have made it to college, what did he do exactly?
- How often did you see him?
- How was he similar or different from your father?
- Did he ever meet with your teachers?
- Can you think of a specific time where he assisted you academically?
- You said that “a positive attitude” was crucial to your success, what did you mean?
- Can you remember a specific time when a positive attitude led to doing well in school?
- Do you even find it difficult to maintain a positive attitude?
- Where do you think that positive attitude came from?
- How would your current academic status be different if you didn’t have a positive attitude?