

BLACK

A Model for

DEAF

Educational

STUDENTS

Success

CAROLYN E. WILLIAMSON

Black Deaf Students

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A Model for Educational Success

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Preface

THIS STUDY is a retrospective view of the protective factors that are critical to African American deaf and hard of hearing students' successful transition through postsecondary programs. The data come from a qualitative study of nine African American men and women who were each interviewed twice. During the interviews, some participants used American Sign Language (ASL) only, and some used a combination of voice and ASL to communicate their responses to the questions. Since ASL is a visual language and not a written language, I translated the data from ASL to English. The transcripts from the interviews were reviewed by each of the participants to ensure that my translation accurately represented what the participant communicated.

There were some limitations to the study. All of the participants agreed the first time that they were asked to participate in the study and were enthusiastic about telling their stories. By definition, these were highly motivated people who recognized the implications of a study of the successful transition of African American deaf and hard of hearing individuals. They may not view obstacles in the same manner as persons who did not overcome the obstacles in their lives and did not graduate from colleges or universities. However, they faced obstacles and challenges. I was able to develop themes from their stories that identified factors that helped them reduce and eliminate disruptions in their lives, become resilient, and successfully transition into postsecondary programs and graduate.

Another limitation was the small group of individuals available to the investigator to ask to participate in the study. The size of the sample required several changes in how the data would have to be presented to protect the confidentiality of the participants.

The fact that this was a retrospective study presented another limitation. This meant that individuals had to rely on their memory. The population selected for this study had graduated from both high school and college,

which means the participants' perspective was based on memory of what occurred during those periods in their lives. Maxwell (1996) states that people have selective perceptions. In this case, I relied on the participants to remember events as they were and not as they wished that they had been. Reviewing documents from the participants' past could have helped with recall of experiences. However, a review of their yearbooks had to be eliminated from the document review because the participants did not have them available.

I was acquainted with some of the participants because (a) the African American Deaf community is small, (b) the investigator has worked in the Deaf community for over 20 years, and (c) the investigator is an active participant in the African American Deaf community. Already being familiar with the participants in other contexts required extra caution on my part in interviewing and presenting an unbiased picture of those individuals. I utilized feedback from my peer debriefer to focus on areas that could result in the bias of the investigator in interpreting the data. Also, as an African American female who has encountered some of the situations described by the participants, I had to be careful not to permit my own experiences to influence how I perceived the experiences of the participants.

Another limitation is that the findings cannot be generalized to all African Americans since this was a heterogeneous group living in different parts of the country, confronted by different obstacles. Finally, limitations were inherent in self-reporting about experiences. Each participant based the information on his or her interpretation of each question.

The African American Deaf and Hard of Hearing community is very small, and it becomes even smaller when focusing on African American deaf and hard of hearing professionals. Due to the small number of professionals, most of them know each other and are known in the Deaf community. Special care was taken to conceal the identities of the participants because they could easily be identified through the types of schools they attended, occupations, and their community affiliations. Initially, I decided to use fictitious names in the study. However, I decided to eliminate the fictitious names and use a composite of the case data instead of presenting individual cases to protect the confidentiality of the participants.

A criterion for participation in this study was that all participants would be of African descent and identify themselves as African American.

“African American” was defined as those individuals born to parents who are American born, Black, of African descent, and those of mixed relationships in which one partner is Black of African descent and who identify themselves as African American.

This distinction was made since I have found that some researchers place all Black individuals into the category of African American, when many individuals do not identify themselves that way and come from other countries. They do not have the same cultural backgrounds as African Americans and may not have experienced many of the ethnic and social obstacles that have confronted African American students. Some Black students are from other countries where they represent the majority culture and their cultures are celebrated.

The participants in this study viewed themselves as African American first and deaf and hard of hearing second. This finding is consistent with other literature on how African American deaf and hard of hearing individuals perceive themselves (Aramburo, 1989; Cohen, 1991; Hall, 1998). Though they viewed themselves as African Americans first, they recognize and accept their deafness and hard of hearing status.

Acknowledgments

This book is dedicated to my mother, Ida Minerva Williams; my grandmother, Mamie Estelle Washington; and my uncle, John C. Cabot. They taught me the importance of God, love, positive family and other relationships, open communication, academic excellence, high expectations, discipline, cultural pride, a strong work ethic, societal contributions, and perseverance.

God has blessed me with people in my life who support my vision to disseminate information to students, parents, educators, and community stakeholders that enhances the education of African American and other students and helps them become successful, productive, and contributing members of society.

First, I thank the Lord for the participants in this study. I am extremely grateful for your contributions and ongoing support. This book could not have been completed without your willingness to share information with me about your families, schools, and communities. Each of your legacies will provide a model to inspire other African American deaf and hard of hearing students to prevail beyond the obstacles in life to obtain one or more degrees from a four-year postsecondary program.

To my husband, Alvin, I thank you for your continuous prayers, love, and ongoing support. I appreciate the many hours you have given to reviewing my manuscript, your many sacrifices to ensure that I could focus on my vision and goals, and the wisdom that only a husband who loves me could give. You are truly a blessing. I love you.

To my son, Alvin Cabot Williamson, and my daughter-in-law, Renee, who provide me with love and devotion, I am grateful. I am proud of you as loving and caring parents of my wonderful grandchildren, Julian and Alvin, Jr., and that you recognize the importance of providing them with nurturing, open and ongoing communication, high expectations, academic resources, cultural pride, structure, and abundant experiences

that enable them to flourish in their spiritual, social, emotional, and intellectual development.

To my sister, Laura Brice-Foster; my brother, David Williams; my sister and brother in Christ, Maggie and Dennis Green; other family members; and friends whose lives are living testimonies of how resilience can help you prevail, succeed, and enjoy life, I love you dearly.

I thank all of the pastors and their wives who have provided me with the spiritual substance and empowerment that helped me persevere to complete this book. I am especially grateful for the spiritual inspiration provided by Bishop T. D. and Mrs. Serita Jakes, Revs. Drs. Grainger and Jo Ann Browning, Revs. Brian and Felica Thompson, and Rev. Eddie and Mrs. Brenda Thomas.

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I thank Darcel McClain for listening to my ideas, looking at my sketches, and helping me develop illustrations.

Finally, I thank all of you who read this book and will make a difference in the lives of all children by helping them become resilient and able to succeed in school and postsecondary programs.

Introduction

RESILIENCE IS the ability to rebound and achieve healthy development and successful learning despite obstacles and adversities. It is the ability to persevere through the challenges and stress that occur in today's world (Benard, Amsden, & Diaz, 2002; Henderson & Milstein, 1996; Masten, 1994). Resilience is the foundation that prepares and sustains us to triumph over hardships and to succeed in our goals.

All people innately have the capacity for resilience “that naturally motivates individuals to meet their human needs for love, belonging, respect, identity, power, mastery, challenge, and meaning” (Benard, Amsden, & Diaz, 2002, p. 1). Resilience is an outcome of innate and external protective factors. Protective factors are the buffers, insulators, and modifiers that reduce the impact of risk on healthy development and academic achievement. Protective factors include both individual characteristics (innate assets) and environmental supports (external assets). Internal assets are known as positive developmental outcomes that include cooperation, communication, empathy, self-efficacy, self-awareness, faith in a supreme being, intelligence, problem-solving skills, decision-making skills, motivation, self-confidence, self-determination, leadership skills, positive work ethic, cultural identity, care for others, a sense of humor, self-discipline, assertiveness, and a vision and plan for the future (Benard, Amsden, & Diaz, 2002; Masten, 1994; Masten & Coatsworth, 1998). Environmental protective factors are the external assets which are found within families, schools, and communities. These external assets have been identified as caring relationships, high expectations, and opportunities for meaningful participation (Benard, Amsden, & Diaz, 2002). In a caring and supportive environment, a student has relationships with positive, competent, and supportive adults. These adults are not limited to the student's parents. They include extended family, guardians, ministers, school personnel, and other significant adults in the student's life. In their relationships with the student, these adults maintain open and ongoing communication, set high

expectations, give positive reinforcement, provide challenging educational experiences, provide meaningful participation in activities, establish discipline and structure, and provide spiritual training (Benard, 1991; Masten, Best, & Garmezy, 1990; Werner & Smith, 1982).

The positive outcomes of individual resilience can occur in many forms—high academic achievement, graduation from high school, vocational training, or postsecondary programs; a healthy emotional well-being; appropriate social behavior; and positive interpersonal relationships. In other words, resilience is an ongoing process that helps us transition effectively through each stage of our lives. It does not mean that we will not have problems or face crisis situations. However, possessing resilience means we will be better prepared and have the courage, confidence, stamina, resourcefulness, skills, and supports in our environment to persevere despite hardships. Resilient people are not perfect; they make mistakes. However, they learn from their mistakes, let go of them, and move on with their lives in a positive and productive manner.

The Significance of This Book

The increasing body of knowledge about resilience, protective factors, and school success points to individual characteristics and environmental factors that can be developed, reinforced, and altered to increase a student's potential for educational achievement. I am particularly interested in how these factors can be applied to African American deaf and hard of hearing students. Though data clearly show a link between students' resilience and academic achievement, my review of the literature revealed that the underachievement of African American deaf and hard of hearing students has received considerable attention while comparatively little notice has gone to those who have succeeded in high school and postsecondary programs. Most of the research data I found focused on high-achieving African American hearing students. To rectify this situation, I interviewed nine African American deaf and hard of hearing postsecondary graduates on the factors that contributed to their graduation from postsecondary programs, what they viewed as obstacles, how they overcame them, and their recommendations for facilitating graduation from postsecondary programs. For this study, postsecondary programs were defined as four-year colleges and universities.

This book provides insights by giving “voice” to a group that is rarely heard in research. The perspectives of the participants in my study enable readers to view them as a heterogeneous rather than as a homogeneous group. Their stories provide vital information for parents, other caretakers, school personnel, community stakeholders, and those enrolled in education and mental health preparation programs. In addition, the insights gained from them about how they succeeded can be useful in facilitating positive outcomes for students who are going into two-year colleges, vocational training, and work settings.

The low graduation rates of African American deaf and hard of hearing students from postsecondary programs strongly suggest that there is a need for immediate interventions; otherwise, a large group of the next generation will be lost to dependency and other dire situations. There is a need to redirect research and develop programs to perpetuate success among African American deaf and hard of hearing students. To enhance school academic achievement and postsecondary program completion, I propose that parents, educators, researchers, and community stakeholders develop a collaborative partnership-based program to build and enhance resilience in African American deaf and hard of hearing students. I believe that African American deaf and hard of hearing students can achieve on the same level as their White peers if they have the appropriate protective factors in their homes, schools, postsecondary programs, and communities to help develop and reinforce individual characteristics that build resilience.

At-Risk Factors and Resilience

1

A COMPREHENSIVE and collaborative educational approach needs to be taken to improve the educational achievement of African American students. Large achievement gaps in educational outcomes still persist between diverse groups, and by some measurements, these gaps have widened in recent years (Edelman, 2002, citing Tidwell, 2000). The National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) test, referred to as “the Nation’s Report Card,” measures what America’s students know and how they perform in various subject areas. Assessments are conducted in reading, mathematics, science, writing, U.S. history, civics, geography, and the arts. The reading assessment shows that as early as the fourth grade, there is a difference between the reading scores of African American, White, and Hispanic students. Although 75 percent of White students’ test scores are at the basic level or above, only 44 percent of Hispanic and 40 percent of African American students are reading at the basic level or above (Legler, 2004).

When compared to their percentages in the student population, African Americans are underrepresented in Advanced Placement (AP) courses. For example, African Americans represent 17 percent of the student population and 5 percent of AP calculus tests, and White students represent 60 percent of the student population and 72 percent of AP calculus tests. Furthermore, African American students have lower high school and college graduation rates than White students. Only 51 percent of African American students who began high school in 1997 graduated in 2001, whereas 72 percent of White students graduated. Of those students who entered college in the fall of 1998, 40 percent of African American students graduated in four years, and 59 percent of White students graduated (Legler, 2004).

There have been school reform programs, innovative strategies, and discussions by school administrators, researchers, politicians, the media, parents, and community stakeholders about how to improve the school achievement of African American students; however, the gaps in academic

achievement between African American and White students continue. The African American students who are failing to achieve at grade level are from all income levels, one- and two- parent homes, stable and dysfunctional families, and suburban and inner-city schools.

However, some African American students from these same backgrounds have overcome the odds and have succeeded in school. They have graduated from colleges and some elite universities. Some hold prestigious positions and earn high incomes. This obviously dispels the myth that African American students do not have the innate abilities to succeed in school and attend colleges and universities. What protected this group of African American students from succumbing to the challenges and adversities that confronted them and allowed them to pursue successful educational and life goals? How have these students obtained the strength to overcome problems and obstacles and succeed while others from the same backgrounds have not been able to do so? Instead of focusing on a deficit model of African American students, research is beginning to focus more on successful African American students who are resilient, can overcome obstacles, and have successfully achieved in and transitioned through high school, colleges, and universities. Also, research is focusing on schools that have been successful in increasing African American students' standardized test scores and graduation rates and preparing them for college, as well as college programs that provide protective factors that result in graduation.

Like their hearing peers, too many deaf and hard of hearing African American youth and young adults are functioning below academic grade level, have low standardized test scores, are overrepresented in low-level and special education classes, have lower graduation rates, and are less prepared to enter and graduate from college. Too many of them are ending up dependent on public financial aid, in low-paying and dead-end jobs, unemployed, loitering on the streets, and increasingly in penal institutions.

The transition of African American deaf and hard of hearing students from high school to four-year colleges and universities is one of the more important but least researched issues in the field of Deaf education. Little is known about what contributes to their success in school and postsecondary programs. The majority of the educational research on deaf and hard of hearing students has been done on White students and their families. Research data indicate that the positive effects on students'

school achievement based on samples of White students may not apply to African American students (Steinberg, Dornbusch, & Brown, 1992). It is also important for studies to focus on African American deaf and hard of hearing students as a heterogeneous group. There are differences within the African American race as in other ethnic groups. Like other minority groups, African Americans are not a homogeneous group.

The small amount of research that has been done on African American deaf and hard of hearing students has been mostly from a deficit perspective. Most of this research focuses on three factors: (a) the characteristics of the population, (b) factors that contribute to failure, and (c) low academic outcomes. Based on deficit research, recommendations have been made for additional research, a change in educational policies, innovative program planning, creative instructional methods, school and parent partnerships, interagency alliances with community organizations, and national school reforms to improve educational outcomes for this group of students (Allen, Lam, Rawlings, Rose, & Schildroth, 1994; Allen, Rawlings, & Schildroth, 1989; Cohen, Fischgrund, & Redding, 1990; Moores & Oden, 1977). However, this author could find no evidence of improved educational achievement of African American deaf and hard of hearing students based on recommendations from deficit research.

There was little research found that focused on successful African American deaf and hard of hearing high school and postsecondary program graduates and the factors that contributed to their graduations. The lack of data leaves a large gap in information that could be useful to parents, educators, and other stakeholders in providing effective programs and resources to upgrade the academic achievement of African American deaf and hard of hearing students. In addition, there was no study found that focused on protective factors that contribute to the resilience of African American deaf and hard of hearing students.

The last comprehensive study of the school-to-work transition of African American deaf students, which showed a comparison to their White peers' achievement, was completed by Allen et al. (1989). That study focused on enrollment and exiting patterns, academic achievement, vocational training and coursework, employment while in school, and assessment of these groups of students. The study showed that African American deaf students' academic achievement level was low.