

2010

Against the odds: Academic resilience among high -ability African American adolescents living in rural poverty

Wendy Taylor Ellis

William & Mary - School of Education

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<https://dx.doi.org/doi:10.25774/w4-rbx0-g268>

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**AGAINST THE ODDS:
ACADEMIC RESILIENCE AMONG HIGH-ABILITY AFRICAN AMERICAN
ADOLESCENTS
LIVING IN RURAL POVERTY**

A Dissertation

Presented to

The Faculty of the School of Education

The College of William and Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Philosophy

by
Wendy Taylor Ellis
July, 2010

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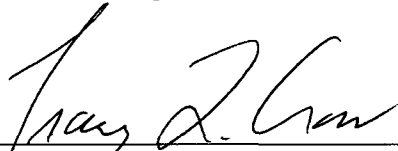
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ADOLESCENTS LIVING IN RURAL POVERTY

ABSTRACT

This qualitative study investigated the internal and external protective factors that serve to ameliorate barriers to academic achievement posed by the cultural factors of poverty, minority status, and rural residence for high-ability students, rendering them academically resilient. While there is ample research on underachievement among students who are gifted adolescents, who are African-American, who are living in poverty, and who are living in rural communities, there is a dearth of research that examines academically successful students who possess the confluence of such factors.

Resilience research has revealed both external factors and internal factors that serve to protect students who possess a single at-risk factor from underachievement; the extent to which such elements serve gifted adolescents with multiple at-risk traits has not heretofore been investigated.

The participants of the study were four gifted African-American high school students who lived in rural poverty. Data for each were collected through interviews with the participant, his or her mother, a middle school teacher, and high school teacher. Analysis was conducted by hand through theme derivation of interviews transcribed verbatim.

Findings revealed protective factors of relationships, school environments, high academic expectations and specific goals for college and career, personal traits, and coping strategies.

Implications for policy and practice include the need for early identification and

placement into gifted programs, appropriate representation of African American students in gifted programs, opportunities for gifted students to experience appropriately challenging curricula with their intellectual peers, and the need for supportive teachers and parents.

Implications for future research include issues regarding academic resilience related to affective factors, variations among rural settings, and replication with various ethnic groups and alternate settings.

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**Against the Odds:
Academic Resilience among High-Ability African American Adolescents Living in
Rural Poverty**

CHAPTER 1: THE PROBLEM

Rationale

Academic underachievement among high-ability students has been a concern among educators and researchers for decades (e.g., Myers, 1980; National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983; Rayneri, Gerber, & Wiley, 2006; Reis & McCoach, 2000; Seeley, 1993; U.S. Department of Education, 1993). Estimates of underachievement in such students have reached as high as 50% (e.g., National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983; Richert, 1991; Rimm, 1987; Seeley, 1993; U.S. Department of Education, 1993). A number of “at-risk” factors may further stack the odds against high-ability students’ attaining academic success. Poverty, minority status, and rural culture each places students at risk for underachievement (e.g., Ainsworth-Darnell & Downey, 1998; Ford, 1993; Grantham & Ford, 1998; Rural School and Community Trust, 2005; Virginia State Department of Education, 1993); a combination of these factors increases the risk exponentially. Yet, against the odds, some high-ability minority students living in rural poverty prevail academically.

While a number of studies have addressed educational resilience among children of either minority or rural status or those living in poverty, an extensive search of the literature brought forth only one study (Herbert, & Beardsley, 2001) that specifically addressed a child who prevailed academically in spite of possessing the convergence of all three risk factors. In addition, while there has been a plethora of studies regarding the general concept of resilience, there are few that have specifically addressed educational resilience in the context of the high-ability student. Third, as Winbourne & Dardaine-Raguet point out (1993, as cited in Dryden, J. et. al., 1998), the majority of studies to

date investigating educational resilience fail to directly question students themselves, leaving a void of vital information regarding academic resilience unexplored. Last, the term “educational resilience” has been utilized to encompass a variety of factors within the broad parameters of both “education,” and “resilience,” while not necessarily focusing specifically on the concept of academic success.

Given the status of the extant research on the topic, the author has narrowed the focus of this study to “academic resilience,” specifically exploring those factors that contribute to academic success among high ability students possessing the confluence of poverty, rural residence, and minority status.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to explore the elements that support academic achievement among high-ability students possessing multiple at-risk factors. Both internal and external protective factors of resilience were examined to determine commonalities among such students who have been successful academically. In identifying such academic achievement supports, the possibility for future replication of common resilience factors in similar settings may help to lead to changes in policy and practice that will increase academic achievement among high ability students sharing similar at-risk traits.

Conceptual Framework

Miles and Huberman (1994) suggested the use of a pre-existing conceptual framework to guide sampling, the framing of research questions, and developing methodology for data collection and analysis. They stated that a conceptual framework explains “the main things to be studied – the key factors, constructs, or variables – and

the presumed relationships among them” (p 18). The current study sought to explore the interrelationships among the following factors: student traits that may serve as constraints to academic achievement, specifically poor, rural, and minority standings; resilience factors that may serve as inhibitors to these constraints; and academic success for which resilience factors may function as springboards. *Figure 1* (below) illustrates these interrelationships. Serving as a guide for the conceptualization of these relationships is a review of the literature relevant to this study provided in Chapter 2.

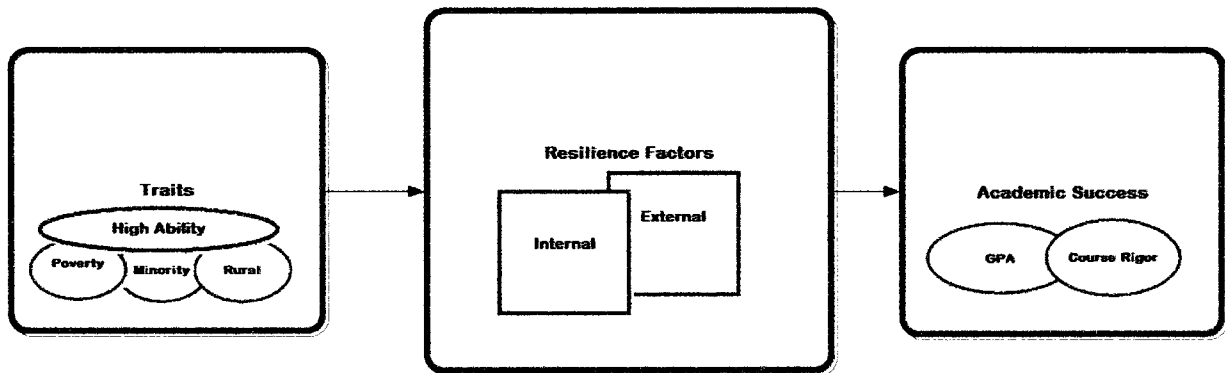


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework

Research Questions

In developing questions to guide case study research, Stake (1995) suggested using “issue questions” (p. 16) as well as “topical information questions” which “call for information needed for the description of the case” (p.25). He further pointed out that in a collective case study, “an early commitment to common topics facilitates later cross-site analysis” (p 17). With these points in mind, the primary research question investigated was: (1) what internal and external protective factors serve to ameliorate barriers to academic achievement posed by the cultural factors of poverty, minority status, and rural residence for high-ability students, rendering them academically

resilient? Additional research questions explored were: (2) to what extent do relationships serve as protective factors against underachievement for at-risk gifted students, (3) to what extent do school and community environments serve as protective factors against underachievement for at-risk gifted students, and (4) to what extent do personal traits serve as protective factors against underachievement for at-risk gifted students?

As a point of departure in addressing these questions, the literature regarding the barriers to gifted adolescents, minorities, those living in rural communities, and those living in poverty was reviewed, followed by a review of the literature regarding resilience factors that serve to remove these barriers to allow for academic success.

Definitions of Key Terms

Academic Resilience: Within the context of this study, the term “academic resilience” refers to the combination of protective factors that specifically enable otherwise at-risk students to achieve academic success.

At-risk: Herein, “at-risk” refers to a factor or combination of factors that place a child at risk for academic underachievement, specifically poverty, minority ethnicity, and rural residence.

High Ability: Herein, “high ability” refers to those students whom have been identified by the school district as gifted in either the area of general intellectual ability or the area of specific academic ability.

Academic Success: Within the context of this study, “academic success” refers to high academic achievement as evidenced by consistent participation in at least two academically rigorous courses per semester such as dual enrollment, Advanced

Placement, advanced, or honors, as well as a cumulative unweighted GPA of over 3.0.

Minority: In this study, the term “minority” refers to those students who are of African American ethnicity.

Poverty: In this context, the term “poverty” refers to a family income level that would qualify a child for free or reduced school meals.

Rural: Herein, “rural” refers to settings rated as “non-metropolitan counties...with less than 2500 urban population” (USDA, 2003).

Chapter II: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Within the literature pertaining to underachievement among gifted students, constraints to achievement of minority students, students living within rural culture, and those faced with living in poverty are revealed. In addition, the literature pertaining to resilience reveals possible factors that support academic success even under the burden of these constraints.

Gifted Underachievement

Although the issue of academic underachievement among some of our brightest young students has been a concern expressed in the research for decades (e.g., Myers, 1980; National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983; Rayneri, Gerber, & Wiley, 2006; Reis & McCoach, 2000; Seeley, 1993; U.S. Department of Education, 1993), mere acknowledgement of its existence has not ameliorated the problem. While it is not possible to know the exact percentage of gifted students who are underperforming in school, estimates have reached 50% or more (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983; Richert, 1991; Rimm, 1987; U.S. Department of Education, 1993; Seeley, 1993). This epidemic of underachievement among high ability students impacts not only the lives of the individual children involved, but ultimately the societies in which they live.

There are a number of factors that may contribute to underachievement among the gifted, especially during the adolescent years. Adolescence is itself a time of both physical and emotional turmoil for many students, gifted or not, as they undergo major changes in appearance, relationships, and reasoning (Buesher, 1991; Schultz & Delisle,

(2003). This turmoil can be exacerbated when the adolescent also happens to be gifted. In fact, even gifted students who are academically successful in the elementary years may begin exhibiting patterns of underachievement as they transition into middle school (Neihart, 2006; Peterson & Colangelo, 1996).

Environments related to home, school, and peers appear to be the primary *external* factors that determine whether gifted students, especially gifted adolescents, will or will not achieve academically (Reis & McCoach, 2000; Rimm, 1991, 1997, 2003; Seeley, 2004). Regarding the influence of the home on gifted underachievement, the literature consistently notes the lack of parental high academic expectations as a contributing factor (Neihart, 2006; Reis & McCoach, 2000; Rimm, 1991, 2003; Seeley, 2004). In addition, Rimm (2003) found that the lack of parental leadership in the home, inconsistency of parents' behavioral expectations of their children, and a lack of parental respect for the school environment were elements that inhibited gifted students' academic success. In terms of the school environment, there are a number of factors that pose potential limitations to gifted students' achievement. Lack of challenging curricula (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983; Peterson & Colangelo, 1996; Rimm, 2003; Seeley, 2004; U.S. Department of Education, 1993), lack of experiential learning (Rayneri, Gerber, & Wiley, 2006; Seeley, 1993), teaching styles and classroom settings in conflict with student learning styles (Rayneri, Gerber, & Wiley, 2006), negative relationships with teachers (Seeley, 2004), and an atmosphere that prioritizes non-academic activities such as athletics (Rimm, 1991) may be counter-productive to the academic success of gifted students.

Embedded within the school environment is another external factor noted quite

frequently in the literature as an inhibitor to achievement among gifted adolescents: peer influences (e.g., Buescher, 1991; Brown & Steinberg, 1989; Lockwood, 1989; Neihart, 2006; Reis & McCoach, 2000; U.S. Department of Education, 1993). Adolescence marks a transitional life stage in which young people strive to separate themselves from their parents while building relationships with peers (Buescher, 1991), and many times the need to be accepted by their peers “outweighs previous expectations about achievement” (p. 385). Schools in which peer cultures look unfavorably upon academic success tend to promote underachievement among able students (Brown & Steinberg, 1989; Lockwood, 1989; Neihart, 2006; U.S. Department of Education, 1993), revealing an apparent correlation between students’ achievement and that of their closest peer groups (Reis & McCoach, 2000). Some gifted students go to great lengths to hide their abilities in order to fit in socially, including intentionally underachieving (Brown & Steinberg, 1989; Rimm, 1987).

In addition to the external factors of family, school, and peers, there are a number of *internal* factors that may intensify the potential for underachievement of high-ability adolescents, most notably a lack of persistence (Myers, 1980; Rayneri, Gerber, & Wiley, 2006), an external locus of control (Rimm, 1991, 1997, 2003), and a low self-esteem (Buescher, 1991; Myers, 1980; Neihart, 2006; Rayneri, Gerber, & Wiley, 2006; Rimm, 1991, 2003). According to Rimm (1991, 2003), low self-esteem is the characteristic found most consistently among underachieving adolescents. A number of explanations have been offered for this phenomenon. Having “sailed” through the elementary years - achieving with little effort - many gifted students may find at the cusp of adolescence that that they must work harder to meet the challenges of secondary school and may begin to

question their abilities (Buescher, 1991; Myers, 1980; Rayneri, Gerber, & Wiley, 2006; Rimm, 1991, 2003). This may lead to the avoidance of academic challenges as a protective device (Buescher, 1991; Myers, 1980; Rimm, 1991, 2003; Schultz & Delisle, 2003); however, the resulting low grades serve as reinforcement of low self-esteem, starting the cycle anew (Buescher, 1991; Myers, 1980; Rimm, 1991, 2003). Further complicating the issue of low self-esteem is, as mentioned above, the need of adolescents to feel a sense of belonging among their peers (Brown & Steinberg, 1989; Buescher, 1991; Lockwood, 1989; Neihart, 2006). As teenagers tend to equate being different with being inferior (Buescher, 1991), the gifted adolescent may well purposely underachieve in order to “fit in” (Brown & Steinberg, 1989; Lockwood, 1989; Neihart, 2006), keeping his or her self-esteem in check.

Linked to the characteristic of low self-esteem is another trait that appears to increase the likelihood of underachievement: an external locus of control (Rimm, 1991, 1997, 2003). Buescher (1991) notes that gifted adolescents may not take ownership of their talents, instead attributing any success to luck (Rimm, 1991, 2003). Rimm (2003) sets forth the theoretical premise that if the student does not see a relationship between his or her effort and outcomes, he or she “will no longer make the effort to achieve” (p. 430).

In addition to a low self-esteem and an external locus of control, a lack of persistence is a third internal element that may contribute to the underachievement of gifted adolescents (Myers, 1980; Rayneri, Gerber, & Wiley, 2006). This trait may well be related to the others; i.e., a gifted student who has a low self-esteem and a belief that his efforts do not matter is unlikely to persist at a challenging academic task. Rayneri,

Gerber, and Wiley (2006) found that the difference between gifted students who did and did not achieve in school was directly related to their persistence to complete assigned tasks.

With the challenges to academic achievement that “giftedness” itself brings to adolescence, how do the additional risk factors of being a minority, living in poverty, and residing in a rural area compound the issue? Why is it that in spite of these challenges, some high ability minority adolescents living in rural poverty are quite successful academically? More specifically, what are the factors that enable these students, against the odds, to be academically resilient? A number of “at-risk” factors may further stack the odds against high-ability students’ attaining academic success.

The Minority Factor

Assimilation vs. Pluralism

The literature regarding minority giftedness reveals numerous theoretical perspectives and empirical studies that have attempted to explain why achievement among high ability African American students is the exception rather than the rule. These include topics related to the conflict between cultural assimilation and pluralism and its underlying components (e.g., Bonner, 2000, 2003; Burt & Halpin, 1998; Ford, Moore, & Milner, 2005; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Kitano, 1991; Patton & Townsend, 1997; Tannenbaum, 1990); peer, family, and community influences (e.g., Clasen, 1989; Ford, Grantham, & Whiting, 2008; Ford, Harris, & Shuerger, 1993; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Graham, Taylor, & Hundley, 1998; Grantham & Ford, 1998; Kitano, 1991; McIntosh & Greenlaw, 1990); racial biases and the related concept of stereotype threat (e.g., Aronson, Fried, & Good, 2002; Osborne, 1997; Steele, 1997; Steele & Aronson, 1995);

and a variety of affective factors related to self-concept (e.g., Fisher, 2005; Ford, 1995; Ford & Harris, 2000; Mickelson, 1990; Steele, 1997; Taylor & Graham, 2007). While these elements cover both external and internal barriers to achievement, many tend to occur simultaneously as a confluence of obstacles, rather than in isolation.

One major issue regarding underachievement among gifted African American students is the philosophical conflict between assimilation, the shedding of the minority culture's characteristics while absorbing those of the dominant culture, and pluralism, that is, retention of diverse cultures' characteristics (Kitano, 1991). Assimilation is based on the premise that in order to be successful in the dominant culture, one must exhibit characteristics that are valued by that culture (Tannenbaum, 1990); under these circumstances, gifted minorities might feel it necessary to conceal their ethnic traits or abandon their cultural mores in order to compete academically (Bonner, 2000; Kitano, 1991). On the other hand, the pluralist view, in theory, favors the retention of each diverse ethnic group's culture and the transformation of schools to accommodate each individual's experiences for maximum academic achievement (Bonner, 2000; Kitano, 1991); under these circumstances, gifted African American students would likely find it unnecessary to relinquish their "Blackness" in order to be academically competitive. As the vast majority of American schools tend toward a philosophy of assimilation, one must ask what effect this reality might have on minority achievement. Fordham and Ogbu's (1986) oft-cited work in which they investigated what they referred to as "Black students'...coping with the burden of 'acting white'" (p. 186) provides, here, a point of departure for the assimilationist/pluralist discussion.

Forming the basis of Fordham and Ogbu's (1986) argument is the notion that

African-American students may resist striving to do well academically because doing so would be tantamount to emulating Whites, their historical oppressors. Fordham and Ogbu attempted to support this notion with evidence gleaned from their ethnographic case study of “Capital High,” a predominantly Black high school in the heart of Washington, D.C. Fordham and Ogbu asserted that Black Americans are “involuntary minorities” who were “brought to America as slaves and after emancipation were relegated to menial status” (p.178). They distinguished Blacks from “voluntary minorities” who came to America “with the expectation of improving their economic, political, and social status” and argued that Black students’ “disproportionately high rate of low school performance” is an adaptation to their “limited social and economic opportunities in adult life” (p.178). They put the blame for these limited opportunities squarely on the shoulders of Whites, who they claimed provide Black students with inferior schooling and impose upon Blacks a job ceiling, “failing to adequately reward them” for educational attainment in adult life; as a result, they asserted, Blacks develop coping devices which “further limit their striving for academic success” (p. 179).

One such coping device offered by Fordham and Ogbu (1986) is that of “collective identity” (p.179). Fordham and Ogbu posited that Black Americans form a sense of “peoplehood” or “collective identity” in opposition to their treatment by White Americans (p. 181). In doing so, they maintain, Blacks utilize this collective identity as a buffer between themselves and Whites, and, in fact, begin to disparage activities and concepts that are characteristic of Whites. Thus, Black students may equate school learning as becoming “acculturated into the White American cultural frame of reference at the expense of the minorities’ ... collective welfare,” and may face ostracism or

physical assault from peers who perceive them as “acting White” (p.183). Through their interviews with several students at “Central High,” Fordham and Ogbu attempted to illustrate that Black students’ lack of academic success was due to their sense of collective identity with Blacks in opposition to White culture. They, along with others (e.g., Kitano, 1991; Ford, Moore, & Milner, 2005) further noted that there is a tendency for Black Americans to emphasize loyalty to the group and a focus on success of the community over success of the individual; this is contrary to the tendency for the dominant American culture, including its schools, to encourage and reward individual competition and achievement.

Since the publication of Fordham and Ogbu’s 1986 paper, a number of researchers have posed theories and conducted studies to explore this notion of underachievement among gifted Black students as a function of resistance to assimilation into the dominant White culture. However, many have not concurred with Fordham and Ogbu’s assertions that said resistance is a conscience effort to rebel against their oppressors, but rather note a desire to maintain characteristics that affiliate them with the subculture with which they most closely identify (Bonner, 2000, 2003; Burt & Halpin, 1998; Ford, Moore, & Milner, 2005; Frasier, 1991; Kitano & Lewis, 2005; Patton & Townsend, 1997). For example, in developing their model of invisible versus visible cultural mores, Ford, Moore, and Milner (2005) explained that:

Culture...serves the ...function of satisfying one’s need for membership affiliation and belonging... Within our own group, we experience safety, inclusion, and acceptance. We tend to speak the same language, share similar values, and are able to read the nonverbal moods and cues of others in our group. Conversely, when interacting with members from other groups, there is increased likelihood for miscommunication and misunderstanding ...we must be on the alert: we tend to ‘stand out,’ resulting in ‘us versus them’ conflicts. (p. 98)

The model they created is an adaptation of Sackmann's (1991) analogy of culture to an iceberg; i.e., while some aspects of a culture such as food, music, holidays, etc. may be visible (like the tip of an iceberg), the deeper meanings within a culture such as symbols, beliefs, values, norms, etc. lie "below the surface" (Ford, Moore, & Milner (2005, p. 98) and thus are generally not apparent to those outside the culture. Patton and Townsend (2007) further remarked that gifted African American learners are faced with the daunting task of simultaneously straddling three seemingly incompatible cultures: African American culture, the dominant culture, and the culture of giftedness, causing a potential dilemma as to with which they should identify (Ford-Harris, Shuerger, & Harris, 1991). Bonner (2000) concurred in his comment that gifted African American students must realign their cultural behavior "to fit the mold of what teachers deem acceptable conduct...Often, the realignment process means totally relinquishing the cultural nuances that would identify students as members of a racial group" (p. 647). He further asserted that this denial of racial heritage may very well lead to lower academic achievement.

Supporting this notion is Ford's study (1995) of underachievement among African American, including gifted, students, wherein the vast majority (91%) of subjects agreed or strongly agreed with the statement "Being Black is an important part of the way I see myself," 95% of subjects agreed or strongly agreed that "I have a lot of pride in my racial group and in our accomplishments" and 78% supported the statement that "Black people should see themselves as Black first and foremost" (p. 33). Furthermore, her interview subjects revealed a frustration with being faced with course content that continually highlighted the accomplishments of Whites while rarely mentioning those of Blacks (pp

31-32). Bonner's (2003) phenomenological study on African American male college students likewise revealed the frustration of a gifted Black student at a predominantly White university as he attempted to assimilate into its culture, feeling a "sense of disengagement and detachment" from the faculty (p. 27). Given these insights, it might be reasonable to expect a gifted African American student to hesitate to step outside of his cultural comfort zone to strive for individual academic achievement in an academic setting dominated by a culture that he does not embrace and in which he does not feel supported.

However, Burt and Halpin (1998) cautioned against using tunnel vision with regard to racial identity as it relates to "how much or how little an individual is immersed within the dominant or subdominant culture" (p.14) and suggested consideration of other influences including relationships and affective factors. Indeed, the literature does reveal how such factors may act as barriers to African American student achievement.

Peer Influences

A number of researchers have explored the effect of peer relationships on the academic achievement of gifted African American students (e.g., Ford, Grantham, & Whiting, 2008; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Graham, Taylor, & Hundley, 1998; Grantham & Ford, 1998). Study after study illustrates that although many Black students, including gifted Black students, support, in theory, an ideology of the need to succeed academically in order to achieve "the American dream" (e.g., Ford, 1993; Mickelson, 1990), in practice, they tend to underachieve and, in many cases, do so purposely. The literature reveals that the reason for this sometimes intentional undermining of one's own academic success is frequently due to pressure from same-ethnicity peers, whether the

pressure is overt or covert in nature. Ford, Grantham, and Whiting (2008) examined peer pressure among Black identified gifted students utilizing surveys specifically developed to illicit student perceptions of, taking from Fordham and Ogbu's (1986) work, "acting White" and "acting Black" and how these perceptions affected achievement. They found that adolescent and pre-adolescent students not only equated being intelligent with acting White, but also considered Black students who acted White to be "stuck up" and "unpopular" (p. 234). Not surprisingly, findings confirmed that negative peer pressure undermined gifted Black students' academic performance. Similarly, findings from Grantham and Ford's (1998) case study of Danisha, an underachieving African American adolescent girl, attributed said underachievement, at least in part, to the student's claims that high achieving Black students were, again, accused of "acting white" (p.98). In addition, the subject expressed frustration over having *no* same-ethnicity peers in her advanced classes (p.98) and discomfort socializing with the White students in her classes, even though they were her intellectual peers (p. 97).

More subtle, but equally as illustrative in terms of the impact of peers on minority student achievement, are the results of Graham, Taylor, and Hudley's (1998) study investigating the types of peers admired and respected by early adolescent African American students. Overwhelmingly, African American boys were least likely to nominate their high-achieving male peers as those that they most admired and wanted to be like, sending the message that doing well in school was not a quality to which they aspired.

Family and Community Influences

In addition to the effects of negative peer pressure on African American student

achievement, the literature reveals that a lack of support is sometimes found among family and/or community members for recognition of individual accomplishments among gifted Black students (e.g., Clasen, 1989; Ford, Harris, & Shuerger, 1993; Kitano, 1991; McIntosh & Greenlaw, 1990). While, as illustrated above, the gifted Black student may face rejection by peers if he or she pursues academic success, perhaps even more devastating is the potential rejection by parents, family, and community. Ford, Harris, and Schuerger (1993) pointed out that “the cultural communities in which people become socialized significantly influence their beliefs, values, personalities, and behavior” (p. 412), and the African-American lifeworld includes supporting a sense of community over the recognition of individual achievements (Kitano, 1991). This collectivist aspect of Black culture may even catalyze tension in the community over individual students receiving gifted services (p. 10). If it is perceived that the gifted African American student has, in any way, rejected his or her culture in attempting to be academically successful, the Black community may, in turn, become suspicious and reject the child (Ford, Harris, & Schuerger, 1993). Even family members may discourage exceptional academic achievement (Clasen, 1989), as it may signal to the community a break from the mores of the African American culture.

Achievement among high ability African American students may be further stifled by additional barriers related to family dynamics (Gutman & McLoyd, 2000; Hebert, 2001). Hebert’s (2001) ethnographic case study of bright underachieving males revealed families that did not consistently model an “achievement ideology,” parents who were inconsistent in their expectations and indulgent in their disciplining practices, and home climates that were dysfunctional (p. 188). Similarly, Gutman and McLoyd (2000)

found negative parental interactions with children to have a significant deleterious effect on the students' achievement in school. Interview data for their qualitative study of African American students revealed that parents of low achievers rarely visited their children's school, and when they did so, the visit was likely initiated by the school and due to poor school work or behavior (p.10). Furthermore, parents of the low achievers tended to focus their discussions on their disappointment of children's current problems in addition to their low expectations for future performance (p. 18). These parents also expressed a strained relationship with the school, and were unlikely to encourage – and in some cases they even *discouraged* – their children's involvement in community activities (p. 20). Under these unfavorable circumstances, it is not surprising that the underachievers had difficulty succeeding in school.

Stereotype Threat

Even further exacerbating the problem of underachievement among high ability Black students is the potential for “stereotype threat,” a concept spawned by Steele and Aronson (1995) in a report of their series of four studies regarding the effects of this concept on the test performance of African Americans. The authors defined stereotype threat as “being at the risk of confirming, as a self-characteristic, a negative stereotype about one's group”(p. 797). More specifically with regard to African Americans is the stereotype related to intellectual ability, thus the threat when faced with academic tasks is that of confirming this stereotype by underperforming. Steele and Aronson's study found that Black students who were told that a test they were given was one measuring ability underperformed significantly below Black students who were told that the test was for another purpose, confirming that academic performance was negatively impacted by the

mere threat of facing an intellectual task (p. 808). A more profound concern beyond test-taking is the risk that over time, students will “disidentify” with intellectual pursuits altogether as protection from self-evaluative threats (Aronson, Fried, & Good, 2001; Osborne, 1997; Steele & Aronson, 1995; Steele, 1997), potentially leading to poor academic performance. This disidentification with academics is closely related to self-concept, the many threads of one’s experiences that, combined, create the tapestry of each individual’s identity.

As has been illustrated above, there is a constellation of environmental factors that may have a negative impact on the achievement of gifted African American learners. Embedded within a number of these are additional factors that are internal in nature, i.e., traits related to values, beliefs, and self-concept that may further impede the success of gifted Black students in school. A number of authors (Fisher, 2005; Ford, 1995; Ford & Harris, 2000; Mickelson, 1990; Rimm, 2003; Steele, 1997; Taylor & Graham, 2007) have explored, more specifically, the effects of self-esteem, self-concept and locus of control; the lack persistence; and the lack of goals and low expectations on academic achievement among gifted minority students.

Self-esteem, Self-concept and Locus of Control

Low self-esteem has been identified in the literature as the characteristic found most consistently among underachieving gifted students, regardless of race (Rimm, 2003). Gifted Black students have the added confusion about just “who they are” and may feel “guilty, alienated, and unsure of how – and if – they fit in” (Ford-Harris, Shuerger, & Harris, 1991, p. 577), potentially diminishing their self-esteem even further. They may suffer internal conflicts regarding the perceived need to reject racial identity in

order to be academically successful, and, to maintain racial identity, they may purposely underachieve, thus avoiding two “penalties”: rejection of the Black community and psychological, emotional, and social suffering (p. 577). To complicate matters further, African American students have been shown to “disidentify” with academics – i.e., their self-esteem is *not* positively linked with academic achievement- putting them at a higher risk for underachievement (Osborne, 1997).

Closely related to this issue is the notion of self-concept, i.e., the way in which an individual perceives himself or herself. One’s cultural reference point helps to shape self-concept, and, as noted above, provides a sense of comfort and belonging (Ford, Moore, and Milner, 2005). In her study of group images’ effects on self perception, Kao (2000) found that expectations of individuals were shaped by images of the ethnic group with which they were most closely affiliated. She asserted that for ethnic minorities, particularly in adolescence, “establishing their racial and/or ethnic identities becomes a central concern” (p. 429). She further noted that Black students’ conception of academic success focused on negating the group stereotype of low achievement. Ironically, however, focusing on “avoiding failure” rather than on “achieving the highest possible grade” promoted low academic outcomes for individual students (p. 409).

Another aspect of self-concept contributing to the underachievement of bright African American students is the possession of an external locus of control (Rimm, 1991, 1997, 2003). Buescher (1991) noted that gifted students, particularly gifted adolescents, may not take ownership of their talents, instead attributing any success to luck. Rimm (2003) asserted that if the student does not see a relationship between his or her effort and outcomes, he or she “will no longer make the effort to achieve” (p.430). For gifted

African American students, this is particularly problematic in light of Mickelson's (1990) findings in her study of the "attitude-achievement paradox." Mickelson found that Black students possessed both abstract and concrete attitudes about education; in other words, while they held strong positive attitudes, in theory, toward education, their "real-world experiences challenge[d] the myth that education equals opportunity for all" (p.59). So, in light of a disconnect between effort and results, their external locus of control – a belief that forces beyond their power rather than their own efforts would determine their fate - resulted in low achievement in school.

Lack of Persistence

In addition to matters related to self-concept and locus of control, a lack of persistence has also been shown to contribute to the underachievement of gifted students (Dunn, 1993; Kuriloff and Reichart, 2003; Myers, 1980; Rayneri, Gerber, & Wiley, 2006; Reis, Hebert, Diaz, Maxfield, & Ratley, 1995), including gifted African Americans. Rayneri, Gerber, and Wiley (2006) found that the difference between gifted middle school students who did and did not achieve in school was directly related to their persistence to complete assigned tasks. Similarly, Dunn's (1993) synthesis of findings from multicultural research on learning styles revealed that underachievers rarely completed assigned tasks without direct supervision, and Reis et al. (1995) found in their multiple case studies of urban youth that underachieving talented students "had difficulty persevering" (p. xxxvii). Lastly, in their case study of boys from diverse backgrounds attending an elite prep school, Kuriloff and Reichart (2003) distinguished achievers from underachievers by the degree to which they committed to "the drill" of hard work and a drive to succeed (p. 756). This trait of a lack of persistence that underachievers

apparently share may well be related to the others previously mentioned; i.e., a gifted student who has a low self-esteem and a belief that his efforts do not matter is unlikely to persist at a challenging academic task.

Lack of Goals and Expectations

A final set of personal traits commonly found among underachieving gifted African Americans students is the lack of clear goals and expectations for self (Myers, 1980; Peterson & Colangelo, 1996; Reis, et al., 1995; Rimm, 1997). Rimm (1997) points out that because gifted underachievers tend to have an external locus of control, they have missed the connection between effort and outcome. She asserts that they define smart as “easy,” and “anything that is difficult threatens their sense of being smart” (p. 18-19). Hence, they may avoid setting high expectations or goals for themselves for fear of being labeled a “loser” (p.19) if they fail to live up to these expectations. Along these same lines, Peterson and Colangelo (1996) found in their investigation of school files of gifted students that underachievers took significantly fewer demanding courses in grades 7-12 than did gifted achievers. They suggested that shying away from these demanding courses could be due to “poor self-concept, avoidance of challenge and competition, or fear of failure” (p. 404). Reis, et al. (1995) further noted in their multiple case study of talented students at an urban high school that those who underachieved tended to have “confused” or “unrealistic” aspirations (p. xxxvii), again illustrating a disconnect in their perceptions of the relationship between effort and outcome.

The Poverty Factor

While it has been made evident that a number of factors place high ability African American students at risk for underachievement, the additional barrier of poverty further

exacerbates the situation. Within the limited literature available on achievement among high-ability students living in poverty – little of which is empirically based - there are, indeed, factors revealed unique to an impoverished lifestyle that either directly or indirectly affect the probability of a student’s academic success. As was the case with barriers related to giftedness and minority status, those related to poverty are both eternal and internal in nature, and include a “culture of poverty” and its various components (Bergoray & Slovinsky; McIntosh & Greenlaw, 1990; Payne, 2005; Slocumb, 2001; Slocumb & Payne, 2000; Stormont, Stubbins, & Holliday, 2001), relationships with peers, family, teachers, and community (Callahan, 2007; Ford, 2007; Gutman & McLloyd, 2000; Horn, 2002; Worrell, 2007), and affective factors (Van Tassel-Baska & Olszewski-Kubilius, 1994; Worrell, 2007).

A Culture of Poverty

Abraham Maslow (1943) had perhaps the most direct explanation as to the impact of poverty on achievement in his work *The Theory of Human Motivation*, wherein he stated that if one is “dominated by physiological needs, all other needs may be...pushed into the background” (p. 378). As Slocumb (2001) explains:

Poverty is a world based on concreteness and not abstraction. When survival is the driving force, dealing with abstract ideas does not generally have concrete pay-offs. For example, doing well in school so one can go to college appears very abstract to someone in poverty because it is the future and does not help one survive daily life. (p. 11)

This focus on survival is part of a “culture of poverty,” a mindset that is entrenched within families who struggle to fulfill their simplest needs from day to day. Slocumb and Payne (2000) indicate that, as such, those living in poverty have a world view that “sees the world in terms of the local setting” and in which “decisions are made for the moment”

(p. 42); i.e., the emphasis is on the here and now. Inherent in a culture of poverty are “hidden rules” shared by those in the lower class (Payne, 2005). These are analogous to the cultural mores found “below the surface” in Ford, Moore, and Milner’s (2005) iceberg model in that these “hidden rules” are known and shared only by those in the particular culture, in this case, a culture of poverty. Payne (2005) shares that in addition to a focus on the here and now, some other hidden rules among the poor include: a belief in fate, hence a sense of helplessness to change; driving forces of survival, relationships, and entertainment; the importance of quantity with regard to food; a matriarchal family structure; language that is casual in register; a reverence for education in the abstract but not as a reality; and love and acceptance that are conditional (p. 42). Some of these “rules” have negative implications for achievement in general and achievement of gifted students in particular. For example, with a focus on directing resources toward survival, gifted students from impoverished backgrounds rarely have access to resources within the home with which to develop their talents (Burney & Beilke, 2008; Ford, 2007; Kitano, 2007; Stormont, Stebbins, and Holliday, 2001). In addition, as education is not seen as a benefit in concrete terms, “going beyond the high school diploma is generally seen as a waste of time and money” (McIntosh & Greenlaw, 1990, para. 7); this lack of goal-orientation minimizes the incentive to do well in school. Also embedded in this culture of poverty are relationships that may further contribute to the underachievement of poor, gifted students.

Relationships

In a culture of poverty, relationships are important, because they are needed for survival (Slocumb & Payne, 2001); in fact, they are one of the driving forces of the

culture (Payne, 2005). The nature of relationships of poor gifted students can, however, negatively impact their academic success. The effects of negative peer pressure – especially regarding low academic expectations – can be devastating, especially among gifted adolescents (Ford, 2007). Because of the value placed on relationships in a culture of poverty, poor gifted students are vulnerable to such pressure and may fear isolation from friends if they focus on school (Horn, 2002). Furthermore, the necessity to trade off relationships for academic achievement (Payne, 2005), may be a sacrifice that students are unlikely to see and unwilling to make.

As the primary agents of instruction in the school setting (Begoray & Slovinsky, 1997), teachers have an opportunity to help make – or break – a poor student's achievement trajectory. Because teachers do not always recognize the strengths of students from poverty (Slocumb & Payne, 2005), they may project low expectations for them (Horn, 2002; Worrell, 2007). Ford (2007) explains that “teachers from high-poverty schools often settle for a curriculum that aims at the most basic elements of content to be learned, under the assumption that no more can be managed and that mastery of the basics is an important accomplishment” (Section IV). Additionally, Reis, Colbert, and Herbert (2005) found in their case study that the lack of teacher support for poor, diverse, talented students resulted in underachievement.

The relationship that has the greatest impact on student achievement among poor high-ability students is that with family (Olszewski-Kubilius, 2007). Payne (2005) noted that in a culture of poverty, people are considered possessions; therefore there is a negative connotation among family and community regarding the possibility of someone “getting above [his or her] risings” (p.52) and leaving. Furthermore, due to an emphasis

on survival and on the present, poor children may receive the message from parents that getting a keeping a job (rather than aspiring to have a career) should be their focus (McIntosh & Greenlaw, 1990). Therefore, education is not perceived as a requirement for “making it,” and, in fact, any aspirations to further one’s education beyond high school may be “suppressed by family pressure” (para. 7). The transmission of such parental low expectations to their poor, gifted children is likely internalized, stifling the motivation to make the most out of their talents to achieve academically (Begoray & Slovinsky, 1997; Ford, 2007). Gutman and McLoyd (2000) found in their study of African American families living in poverty that parents’ management (or lack thereof) of their children’s education had a direct impact on their achievement. For example, low achieving students were more likely to have parents who had negative interactions with the school, who offered excuses for not assisting their children with homework or searching out activities, and who demonstrated negativity to their children through criticism, disappointment, and low expectations. The fallout from relationships spawned in poverty at times becomes manifest in a student’s low self-esteem or other concerning affective factors, potentially exacerbating underachievement further.

Affective Factors

In addition to some of the elements inherent in a culture of poverty and relationships with peers, family, and teachers, there exist affective factors that may serve as barriers to gifted students living in poverty. As noted above, students living in poverty tend to have an external locus of control (Payne, 2005), which has been associated with underachievement (Rimm, 1991, 1997, 2003). In addition, Worrell (2007) noted another variable related to achievement among poor gifted students as academic self-efficacy;

such students must *believe* that they can work at high levels if they are to be successful (Horn, 2002). However, VanTassel-Baska and Olszewski-Kubilius (1994) found in their study that among gifted middle school students, those who were economically disadvantaged showed significantly lower academic self-efficacy than their more advantaged peers. This appeared to be related to their findings that these underachieving students also perceived less support from those with whom they had close relationships, another indication that barriers to achievement among poor gifted adolescents do not occur in isolation, but rather in conjunction with other barriers.

The Rural Factor

A review of the literature thus far has revealed a number of barriers to academic achievement for gifted, minority, and poor students. In what ways does the element of rurality further inhibit success for such students? Unlike the areas of giftedness within impoverished and minority populations, the literature pertaining to rural giftedness places very little emphasis on academic achievement. Save Howard Spicker's Project Spring I (1993) and Project Spring II (1996), empirical studies specifically measuring academic achievement among the rural gifted are virtually nonexistent; even Spicker's work focused primarily on the *identification* of underserved students for gifted programs rather than on their academic achievement, *per se*. While Lawrence's recent literature review (2009) on rural gifted education is quite comprehensive, she failed to identify even one study that specifically addressed academic achievement. Therefore, the following discussion of the literature on the topic will address those areas that the researcher has inferred are *likely* inhibitors of academic achievement among this population. The concept of the *rural lifeworld* serves as the axis around which these potential inhibitors

revolve.

Rural Lifeworld

Howley (1997, 2000, 2003, 2009) has devoted much of his professional life to exploring the role of gifted education in rural communities. Much of his focus is on what he refers to as the rural “lifeworld” (2000; 2003), that is, the paradigm that provides the lens through which country folk view the world. From Howley’s perspective, schooling, especially for rural students, is totally disconnected from the lifeworld and this, he asserts, is an “intellectual and cultural disaster” (2003, p. 5). Such a disconnect partially explains the apprehension - bordering on paranoia – that many rural communities have with intellectual pursuits and thus, gifted education. Without the support of the rural community, gifted children are quite likely to underachieve.

A deeper look into the components of the rural lifeworld (Howley, 2003) further illuminates this apprehension of intellectualism: a sense of connection to the land, an attachment to the extended family and to the local ways of being and knowing, and community self-reliance (p. 9). Rural culture is rooted in traditional values and stability and, similar to African American culture, has a focus on the needs of the community as opposed to the needs of the individual (Kitano, 1991; Lewis, 1999). Therefore, providing services for gifted students may be frowned upon in the rural community as showing favoritism or giving special privileges (Colangelo, Assouline, & New, 2001; Lewis, 1999). And, antithetical to the entire concept of a rural sense of “place” associated with its lifeworld is the very real possibility that students who do acquire knowledge to function in a more sophisticated environment will leave their rural roots for career opportunities not available to them in their home communities (Colangelo et al., 1999).

Howley (2000) expressed his distaste for gifted education's role in this dilemma by accusing the field of focusing on "ensuring economically successful lives for these kids...far more often than...cultivating intellect in the name of the common good" (p. 12). He asserted that the primary aim of the field regarding rural schools is to convince the most talented students that they would be better off elsewhere, depleting rural communities, over time, of their best and brightest minds.

Embedded within these epistemological considerations of the rural lifeworld are some very real pragmatic issues with regard to schooling among rural gifted students. Once again, further research reveals both internal and external elements that likely act to inhibit achievement among the rural gifted.

Relationships, Affective Factors, and Resources

The isolation of and desire for cohesion in rural communities spawns an intolerance for diversity, including divergent thinking, which undergirds a lack of acceptance for the importance of gifted education (Lewis, 1999; Savage & Werner, 1994) among community members, peers, and parents. Further complicating matters is the fact that rural school districts and the schools that they serve tend to be quite small in terms of student population; thus, there may be but a handful of gifted students in such a school (Burney & Cross, 2006; Lewis, 1999; Savage & Werner, 1994) who may be alone in their interests and aptitude (Colangelo et al., 1999) and may feel like "no one is like me here" (p. 55) or that they "don't quite fit in" (Attkisson, 1996, p. 2). While gifted students in urban or suburban schools may feel like oddities among their peers, in a rural community, the personal isolation is exponentially deeper. In some rural communities, parents are even likely to avoid allowing their children to receive gifted services for fear

it may harm them socially (Luhman & Fundis, 1989).

Fears among rural communities and families of increasing out-migration are well-founded, as many rural areas are, in fact, losing population, and most young people who leave never return (Howley, A., Rhodes, & Beall, 2009; Howley, C., 2009). Many rural parents expect their gifted children to remain in the community, which may cause internal conflicts between parent expectations and student aspirations (Howley, Rhodes, & Beall, 2009). Further stressors to gifted students in rural settings may occur due to the pressure not to stand out or excel (Lawrence, 2009).

Lastly, isolation and fiscal considerations limit the resources that rural schools have to serve their high-ability students (Colangelo, 2003; Howley, A., Rhodes, and Beall, 2009; Lewis, 1999). This lack of funding also makes it difficult to attract and retain good teachers (Howley, A., Rhodes, & Beall, 2009), not to mention teachers specifically trained to teach the gifted.

The Resilience Factor

In spite of the profusion of barriers to academic success among gifted Black students living in rural poverty outlined in the previous sections, some such students do overcome the odds to achieve academically; i.e., they are academically resilient. What are the elements that make these students resilient? Turning to the extant research - including resilience literature - a number of protective factors are revealed, including those related to supportive relationships (Grotberg, 1996; McMillan, Reed, & Bishop, 1992; Westfall & Prisapia, 1994); personal traits (Huang & Waxman, 1996; Kitano & Lewis, 2005; Reis, Colbert, & Hebert, 2005); participation in extra-curricular activities (Gordon, 1996; Gutman & Lloyd, 2000; Reis, et al., 1995); and school environment

(Ford, Grantham, & Harris, 1996; Ford, Harris, Tyson, & Trotman, 2002; Kitano, 1991; Wang, Haertel, & Walberg, 1998). As is the case with barriers to achievement, supports of academic achievement among poor gifted African American students living in rural areas include those that are both internal and external in nature, and they tend to coalesce rather than appear in isolation.

Relationships

Of all the external factors revealed as providing academic resilience to gifted minority students - including those living in rural poverty - significant, supportive relationships appear to be the most salient (e.g., Grotberg, 1996; McMillan, Reed, & Bishop, 1992), including those with parents, significant adults, and peers.

Supportive Parents. Positive parental support, in many cases, assuages the barriers to student achievement to net academic success for high ability minority students (e.g., Borland, Schnur, & Wright, 2004; Grotberg, 1996; Gutman & McLoyd, 2000; McMillan, Reed & Bishop, 1992). Parents of high achievers appear to share a number of these supportive behaviors, including articulating high expectations for their children (Borland, Schnur & Wright, 2004; Gutman, & McLoyd, 2000; McMillan & Reed, 1993; Neihart, 2006; Wang, Haertel, & Walberg, 1998); providing effective strategies for approaching school work (Gutman & McLoyd, 2000; Prisapia & Westfall, 1994); expressing praise and encouragement (Grotberg, 1996; Gutman & McLoyd, 2000), and developing a positive relationship with the school (Gutman & McLoyd, 2000; Wang, Haertel, & Walberg, 1998). In their study of the relationship between the involvement of poor African American parents and student achievement, Gutman and McLoyd (2000) also found that parents of high achievers tended to support the involvement of their

children in a number of extra-curricular activities, the benefits of which are discussed below.

Significant Adults. Throughout the literature on academic resilience, the external factor cited most frequently as having the greatest positive effect on student achievement is the student's relationship with at least one caring adult (e.g., Hebert & Beardsley, 2001; McMillan, Reed, & Bishop, 1992; Wang, Haertel, & Walberg, 1998; Westfall & Prisapia, 1994). When this close relationship is with someone inside the family unit, the adult is likely to be the student's mother (McMillan, Reed, & Bishop, 1992). However, it could be another important adult with whom the student has a *trusting* relationship characterized by a "willing[ness] to listen without criticizing or judging," (p.34), such as a teacher, extended family member, or mentor. For example, Herbert and Beardsley (2001) found in their three-year ethnographic study of a gifted Black youngster living in rural poverty that the child's uncles, his teacher, and his coach helped to provide the strong emotional support and understanding that helped him to thrive under otherwise dismal conditions. Wang, Haertel, and Walberg (1998) noted that "receiving care and affection from adults appears to be critical throughout childhood and adolescence" for fostering educational resilience (p.9). Reis et al. (1995) found in their multiple case study that *all* of the high-achieving participants indicated the "guidance of supportive adults was essential to their academic success" (p. xxix).

As critical as positive relationships with parents and other significant adults are to the academic success of gifted minority students living in rural poverty, the importance of negotiating peer relationships, particularly in the adolescent years, cannot be underestimated. In light of the aforementioned potential for negative effects of peer

relationships on academic achievement, in what ways can peer interactions act, instead, as protective factors leading to resilience?

Peer Relationships. Wang, Haertel, and Walberg (1998) asserted that positive peer networks are second only to the family in providing children and adolescents “with a sense of being cared for, valued, and loved” (p. 11). They go on to explain:

A peer group’s attitude toward school is a significant predictor of group members’ grades, achievement test scores, value placed on being a good student, and perceived competence. Students whose peers valued high achievement spent more time on homework; finished more of their homework assignments; attended school more regularly; and were less often tardy without permission. (pp.12-13)

Rather than muse over the lack of acceptance by non-gifted peers, the high achieving talented students in Reis, et al.’s (1995) multiple case study instead developed a network of like-minded high achieving friends who served as supports for each other in their academic pursuits.

Even in settings that initially may seem socially challenging, such as the largely White elite prep school that was the subject of Kuriloff and Reichart’s (2003) case study, poor, high-achieving Black students developed coping skills to help them “negotiate the social geography” (p. 751). The African-American students in the Kuriloff and Reichart study formed a “Black Student Alliance,” giving them an opportunity to openly discuss with their same-ethnicity peers the race and class dynamics of the school and ways to harness the “transformative power of the intellectual content to which they had been exposed” (p. 764). By utilizing this venue to frankly discuss these realities, they were able to reap the benefits of the environment without feeling as though they were “selling out” (p. 765).

Extra-curricular Activities

A number of authors have noted participation in multiple extra-curricular activities as a common protective factor among resilient minority gifted students (e.g., Gordon, 1996; Gutman & McLoyd, 2000; Hebert & Beardsley, 2001; Reis et al., 1995). Gutman and McLoyd (2000) found in their aforementioned study of parent involvement among high achieving African American students that said students were involved in a number of academic, art, music, and religious activities. Gutman and McLoyd suggested that parents saw their children's participation in such activities "as a way of providing a pathway to a successful life" (p. 20). Reis et al. (1995) also found in their study of talented urban high school students that *all* of those who were high achievers participated in extracurricular activities and programs; they further asserted that these activities were consistently cited by the students "as being extremely influential in the development of their ability to excel academically" (p. xxx). In addition, such programs served as opportunities for students to further bond with their peers.

School Environment

The literature provides evidence of the importance of the academic resilience factor perhaps most within the control of educators: that of the school environment. There are a number of supports that the school environment can provide to help enable high ability minority students living in rural poverty to be academically successful. Among those most frequently noted are: a culture of high expectations (Prisapia & Westfall, 1994; Reis et al., 1995; Wang, Haertel, & Walberg, 1997), accommodation of learning style preferences (Dunn, 1993; Ewing & Yong, 1993; Ford & Trotman, 2001); and cultural sensitivity (Ford, Grantham, & Harris, 1996; Ford, Harris, Tyson, & Trotman,

2002; Kitano, 1991).

Wang, Haertel, and Walberg (1997) noted that setting high expectations for students was one of the factors they found to contribute to educational resilience. Similarly, students interviewed for the Reis et al. multiple case study (1995) noted their participation in challenging honors courses as a factor that attributed to their successful academic achievement. Prisapia and Westfall (1994) further asserted that “schools which motivate students through encouragement and by setting high expectations increase the chance that their students will become resilient” (p. 4).

In addition to providing appropriately challenging curriculum and setting high academic expectations, schools can increase the likelihood of academic achievement among their able minority students with attention to their learning style preferences. Dunn’s (1993) exploration of learning styles of the multiculturally diverse revealed that when students’ learning styles were taken into account in the classroom, scores on standardized achievement tests increased dramatically (p. 25). And while she reminds us that we must be attuned to *individual* student learning styles, Dunn’s (1993) overview of preferences among specific subgroups of students can certainly provide the scaffolding to begin implementing such practices. For example, Dunn found that gifted students, regardless of race, preferred to learn tactually and kinesthetically and that most students, gifted or not, preferred to learn through active participation. She also found the gifted to be more self-motivated and non-conforming (p. 29). Ewing and Yong (1993) further found in their study of learning style preferences among minority students that gifted African American students *least* preferred the auditory modality and structure. In addition, Dunn (1993) asserted that Black students preferred to work alongside their

peers, which is consistent with Ford and Trotman's (2001) notion that culturally responsive teachers should utilize social or cooperative learning methods in classrooms in which they serve gifted minority students.

Lastly, a number of authors suggested as a support for academic achievement among gifted minority students an infusion of cultural sensitivity into the classroom (e.g., Ford, Grantham, & Harris, 1996; Kitano, 1991; Patton & Townsend, 1997). Ford has noted in a number of studies and papers both alone and in conjunction with other authors (e.g., Ford, 1995; Ford, Grantham, & Harris, 1996; Ford, Harris, Tyson, & Trotman; Grantham & Ford, 1998) the conflicts that many gifted African American students face when attempting to be academically successful in schools where there are few other Black students in gifted classes, few Black teachers to act as role models, and few attempts made to incorporate culturally sensitive practices into the classroom, resulting in a lack of motivation to succeed academically. Hence, the theoretical premise has been set forth that to reverse this lack of motivation, educators must provide for their gifted students of color a cultural awareness and understanding (Ford, Grantham, & Harris, 1996; Patton & Townsend, 1997); multicultural curricula and instructional practices (Ford, Grantham, & Harris, 1996; Kitano, 1991); and increased opportunities to be taught by a culturally diverse faculty (Ford, Grantham, & Harris, 1996). Absent from the literature, however, are empirical studies that confirm increased achievement among minority students when the aforesaid culturally sensitive interventions are utilized; in fact, the literature is barren of any studies indicating that such strategies have, in fact, been implemented.

What the literature does provide, however, is evidence that certain personal traits

and specific coping strategies used by gifted minority students do, in fact, serve as protective factors against barriers to their academic achievement, ultimately yielding academic success.

Personal Traits

Academically resilient students, including high ability minority students living in rural poverty, appear to share a number of personal traits, most notably an internal locus of control (McMillan & Reed, 1993; Wang, Haertel, & Walberg, 1997; Westfall & Pisapia, 1994), high expectations for self (Huang & Waxman, 1996; Peterson & Conlangelo, 1996; Reis et al., 1995; Wang, Haertel, & Walberg, 1997), clear long-term goals (McMillan & Reed, 1993; Reis et al., 1995.), positive self-concept (Huang & Waxman, 1996; McMillan & Reed, 1993; Reis et al., 1995; Wang, Haertel, & Walberg, 1997), and persistence (McMillan & Reed, 1993; Reis et al., 1995; Westfall & Pisapia, 1994). McMillan and Reed (1993) noted that when asked to explain why they were so successful in school, student respondents indicated an internal locus of control; that is, students believed that their own efforts were directly related to their outcomes.

Additional studies utilizing direct interviews with students not only confirmed McMillan and Reed's findings, but also indicated that students' beliefs in their ability to control their own high achievement contributed to their persistence toward that end (Reis et al., 1995; Westfall and Pisapia, 1994). In addition, students' persistence toward achieving clear goals for themselves (McMillan & Reed, 1993; Reis et al., 1995) was facilitated by setting high, but realistic expectations (Huang & Waxman, 1996; Peterson & Conlangelo, 1996; Reis et al., 1995; Wang, Haertel, & Walberg, 1997).

Coping Strategies

Finally, the literature reveals that in addition to possessing personal traits that contribute to their resilience, many high ability African American students have purposely developed coping strategies that enable them to navigate the social conflicts inherent in being gifted and Black while also maintaining their academic success. Considering the ongoing discussion regarding assimilation and pluralism and the deluge of theoretical papers on the related concept of racial identity, many strategies utilized by gifted Black students ironically involve assimilating, at least in part, into the dominant culture in order to reap the ultimate benefit of academic success. Tannenbaum expressed (1990) without apology that it is only logical to expect that if one is to be successful in the culture that determines the meaning of success, one must take on the characteristics of that culture. Interestingly, Ogbu (2004), with whom our discussion began, apparently concurred to some extent. In a paper published fifteen years after his “acting white” study with Fordham (1986), Ogbu noted *not* that Black students avoid achieving, but rather that they develop protective buffers to allow them to navigate the murky waters of being a high achiever in a Black world. For example, Ogbu noted that high achievers select other Black friends who are also serious about school (p. 29). This is in keeping with Reis et al.’s findings (1995) that urban students created social networks of like-minded high achieving peers and Kuriloff and Reichert’s findings (2003) of African American students forming a “club” of high achieving Black peers. Other authors who support the maintenance of one’s racial identity, but nevertheless acknowledge the need to adapt one’s behaviors to the context, suggest “code-switching” (Neihart, 2006; Patton & Townsend, 1997), the purposeful changing of behaviors to fit in to the environment –

in this case, one of academic pursuit. Similarly, having the flexibility to adapt to the academic climate of the dominant culture is a coping strategy utilized by achieving Black students as noted by Turner (1992) and Hemmings (1996). Hemmings' study (1996) of six high achieving African Americans revealed that even though these students did have to maintain dual self-images as Black persons and as model students, they "responded *directly* to the particular cultures they encountered in their schools" (p. 45). Hemmings further asserted that these high achieving students did *not* "act upon universalized perceptions of African Americans as oppressed or in opposition to whites" but rather "acted out identities in response to their school's formal scheme of things" (p. 45). Thus, these high ability African American students overcame potential barriers to achievement to become academically successful.

Summary

Among gifted adolescents, any one of the risk factors of minority ethnicity, poverty, or rural residence may increase the likelihood for academic underachievement. Possessing all three risk factors dramatically increases the likelihood of underachievement for gifted minority students living in rural poverty. Even so, against the odds, some at-risk gifted students prevail academically due to a number of protective factors that render them resilient. The present study investigated the stories of four such students

CHAPTER 3: PROCEDURES

Research Questions

The primary research question that was investigated was: (1) what internal and external protective factors serve to ameliorate barriers to academic achievement posed by the cultural factors of poverty, minority status, and rural residence for high-ability students, rendering them academically resilient? Additional research questions that were explored were: (2) to what extent do relationships serve as protective factors against underachievement for at-risk gifted students, (3) to what extent do school and community environments serve as protective factors against underachievement for at-risk gifted students, and (4) to what extent do personal traits serve as protective factors against underachievement for at-risk gifted students?

Research Design

The current study utilized qualitative methods to investigate the phenomenon of students who possess multiple at-risk factors but are nevertheless academically successful. The phenomenological tradition of inquiry “describes the meaning of *lived experiences* for several individuals about a concept or *the phenomenon*” (Creswell, J., 1998, p. 61). The collective case study approach (Stake, 1995) was utilized herein in order to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon; the unit of study was the individual student. Stake (1995) noted that in case study research, individual cases are “similar to other persons...in many ways and unique in many ways. We are interested in them for both their uniqueness and commonality” (p. 1). Miles and Huberman (1994) also noted that the use of multiple cases strengthens “the precision, the validity, and the stability of findings” (p. 29) and allows for cross-case comparisons. However, in

determining the number of cases to best serve a particular study, Miles and Huberman (1994) cautioned against the unwieldiness of too many cases, which may well produce “thinner” data (p.28). Likewise, Creswell (1998) noted the potential for dilution of analysis and lack of depth of individual cases when the number utilized exceeds four; therefore, four separate cases were explored.

Sample

Stake (1995) asserted that, from a practical standpoint, that “if we can, we need to pick cases which are easy to get to and hospitable to our inquiry, perhaps for which a prospective informant can be identified and with actors willing to” cooperate (p. 4). Thus, as the researcher was a building administrator in school district that served a student population that allowed for selection of participants that possessed the qualities needed for the current study, convenience sampling was utilized. This allowed the researcher to serve as her own “gatekeeper” to gain access to the participants and additional data sources need for the study. In order to ensure as much objectivity as possible, however, none of the students selected as participants were attending the researcher’s school during the study. The researcher gained access to information pertinent to the study through the student information system to which she had access, as well as through her colleagues: the high school principal, the high school guidance counselor, and the district gifted coordinator.

With regard to sampling in case study research, Stake (1995) also suggested that “the researcher should have a connoisseur’s appetite for the best persons, places, occasions. ‘Best’ usually means those that best help us understand the case” (p. 56). With this in mind, sampling for the current study was also purposive to ensure that cases

reflected the inclusion of high ability students possessing the at-risk traits of minority ethnicity, rural residency, and poverty as well as academic success. Specifically, the gifted coordinator was first be contacted for a current listing of all high school students in the district who had been identified as gifted in either the category of general intellectual ability or in the category of specific academic aptitude. Second, the school district's student information system was accessed to determine which of these students were both of African American ethnicity and qualified for free or reduced meals. Because the school district served students who all resided in a rural community, this factor was inherent in the sampling. Providentially, there were exactly four students who satisfied the sampling parameters set forth; two of the students were girls and two were boys. Miles and Huberman (1994) noted that even if, as in the present study, the case units are individuals, there are additional potential within-case samples to include. Furthermore, Stake (1995) reminds us that "the qualitative researcher tries to preserve the *multiple realities*, the different... views of what is happening" (p.12). In this study, in addition to the students themselves, the mother of each student as well as one middle school teacher and one high school teacher of each student was included in the sampling matrix. The researcher personally contacted the parents of the potential student participants by email, phone, or in person to request permission for their children to participate and to request their own participation, as well. To encourage participation, the researcher offered a \$25.00 Walmart gift card to each parent and student who participated. In addition, students and parents were assured that their names would be changed to pseudonyms within the narrative of the study. Ultimately, all four of the students and their parents voluntarily granted permission for participation and were therefore used as the cases to be

investigated in the study.

After identification of the cases was made and parental permission granted, the researcher contacted a present or former high school teacher, as well as a former middle school teacher of each student by email, phone, or in person to request their participation in the study. To encourage participation, the researcher offered a \$25.00 Walmart gift card to each teacher who agreed to participate. The researcher was successful in procuring both a middle and a high school teacher of each student to participate in the study.

Setting

The setting of the study was a small rural school system in the southern Mid-Atlantic region of the United States. The district was embedded within a community that lay on a river feeding into a bay and, therefore, depended on the water for much of its economy. Farming was another major economic factor in the area, along with the local hospital and schools. The nearest metropolitan area was approximately one hour's drive from the community. The population of the town within which the school district lay was 2048 in the most recent census (United States Department of Agriculture, 2000), and the county in which the town was located had a population of 9989 (United States Department of Agriculture, 2000). The town offered one small movie theater for entertainment; a Walmart served as the primary source of groceries, clothing, and household goods. While there were a handful of fast food chain restaurants in the town, there were also a number of cafes owned and operated by local residents. The district was comprised of three schools: one elementary school serving students in grades PK-4; one intermediate school serving students in grades 5-8; and one high school serving students

in grades 9-12. There were approximately 1600 students distributed among the three schools. Sixty percent of the student population was African-American; thirty-nine percent was white; and one percent was Hispanic or Native American. About fifty-five percent of students qualified to receive free or reduced price meals at school. In addition, there was a regional governor's school in the area that served gifted high school students for a portion of the school day.

Instrumentation

The primary method of data collection took the form of semi-structured interviews with the students, parents, and teachers. This method allowed for an emphasis on internal validity inherent in pre-instrumentation (Miles & Huberman, 1994) while also allowing for probes that enhanced the richness of responses. Stake (1995) asserted that a good case study is one in which "triangulation of data is routine" (p.48). The use of interviews of multiple subjects relevant to each case (student, parents or guardians, and teachers) strengthened the study by ensuring triangulation of data.

The researcher developed and validated the semi-structured interview protocols in a pilot study carried out prior to the current study. Questions for the interview protocols were created keeping in mind the primary research question under investigation, i.e.: what internal and external protective factors serve to ameliorate barriers to academic achievement posed by the cultural factors of poverty, minority status, and rural residence for high ability students, rendering them academically resilient? Therefore, the researcher turned to the literature on academic resilience to frame the interview questions. In looking to elicit responses pertaining to both external and internal factors revealed in the literature, questions were subdivided as follows: (1) the external factors of relationships

and school were further subdivided into questions regarding peer relationships, family relationships, community relationships, and school environment; (2) the internal factor of personal traits was divided into questions regarding involvement in activities, expectations for self, personal goals, confidence, locus of control, and persistence. Two additional more general questions were created regarding perceptions of barriers and supports to achievement. As an adjunct to the pre-structured questions, probable follow-up prompts were also developed to be used as needed during the interviews. In addition, the researcher created impromptu follow-up prompts during the interviews based on responses of the participants, as was the case in the pilot. The pilot study revealed that the interview questions were successful in generating rich responses that shed light on the research questions.

As a secondary data source, in addition to semi-structured interviews, document review took place and was recorded in the form of field notes, with a focus on information gleaned from students' cumulative folders and the electronic student information system database. This allowed the researcher to gather data representing the students' educational careers over time, further enriching the pool of information available for analysis of the concepts under study. This additional data source lent strength to the study by further contributing to triangulation. Field notes were taken in a completely open format, i.e., without the use of predetermined categories.

Data Collection Methodology

All interviews utilized the aforementioned interview protocols and were tape-recorded in their entirety, followed by verbatim transcription. The use of the tape recorder allowed the researcher to listen carefully to the responses of the subjects during

the interviews while actively keeping them engaged in the interview process, to note any relevant factors such as body language of the subjects, and to develop appropriate additional probes. Verbatim transcription allowed for the provision of an accurate and rich bank of data to be mined during the analysis process. To ensure that the transcribed interviews depicted the intent of the participants, member-checking of all transcriptions took place. Each of the sixteen participants was provided with an opportunity to review the transcription of his or her interview and asked to indicate that (1) he or she read the transcript of the interview and believed that it accurately reflected what was said, (2) he or she made corrections to the transcript of the interview to reflect what was said or to better convey what he or she meant to say, or (3) he or she did not read the transcript of the interview, and willingly forfeited the opportunity to make corrections. All sixteen participants responded to the request for member-checking. Of the sixteen, one forfeited the opportunity to make corrections, three made corrections, and twelve acknowledged that the transcriptions were accurate without corrections. Field notes of relevant documents were initially written by hand in a field notebook; they were subsequently transcribed by word-processor for use in data analysis.

Data Analysis Methodology

Stake's (1995) assertion that "all research is a search for patterns, for consistencies" (p.44) provides the basis for data analysis herein. After each participant in a case was interviewed, data analysis took place for that set of data for that individual before moving on to data collection for subsequent individuals within that case.

After this process took place for each case, intra-case analysis took place before moving on to data collection for subsequent cases. Following intra-case analysis for all

cases, cross-case analysis was carried out by the researcher. Stake (1995) pointed out the need for the researcher to have “ample time and space to immediately following the interview to prepare the facsimile and interpretive commentary” (p.66). Miles and Huberman (1994) concurred, pointing out that a researcher should analyze data no more than twenty-four hours after its collection, and that no additional data should be collected until this analysis has taken place. Therefore, transcriptions of each interview took place as soon as possible after the data was collected, and analysis likewise took place as soon as feasible after transcriptions were generated and member checking was completed. Individual and intra-case analyses began with an immersion of the researcher into the interview transcriptions. In this early process, memo writing took place directly on the transcriptions as the researcher noted concepts that appeared to be important in answering the research questions. (Cross, Stewart, and Coleman, 2003). Second, chunks of data were highlighted as initial themes began to bubble to the surface. Third, a chart was created with tentative thematic units based on the highlighted chunks of data; these units were then reconfigured to determine which belonged together (p.207). Fourth, a table of theme derivations was created as themes were further collapsed to reveal the essence of the phenomenon. Within this table, categories, subcategories, and data sources were also delineated to aid the researcher in writing a narrative description of each case. Each case within this study was initially taken through all levels of analysis independent of the other cases. After each case underwent independent analysis, cross-case analysis took place. At the cross-case analysis level, themes that arose within each case were further collapsed across cases discern the patterns that emerged among them.

Identification of these patterns within and among cases allowed for interpretation

of the overall phenomenon under study. The final filtered data emphasized the emergent patterns across cases and the overall meanings were construed and a narrative description written. Finally, a determination of the extent to which the emergent themes found in the current study aligned with existing research took place and new findings were revealed.

Limitations and Delimitations

While during the course of this study care was taken to ensure accuracy and validity to the fullest extent possible, some limitations may nevertheless have been present. Stake (1995) pointed out some limitations to the interview process itself in that “interviewees will select their words with care; they may have incomplete knowledge and/or faulty memory” (p. 90). Walford (2001) and Stake (1995) also pointed out the simple reality that interviewees can lie. Walford (2001) further noted the possibility of an interviewer effect, wherein the behavior of the interviewer could influence the responses of the interviewee, and while he asserted that tape-recording interviews certainly increases accuracy, he also pointed out the reluctance of some interviewees to be tape-recorded. To counter these limitations, every effort was made to develop a sense of trust and to ensure the comfort of the interviewees before, during, and after the interviews. Interviewees were reminded of the anonymity inherent in this study and the researcher’s personal commitment and academic requirement to maintain confidentiality.

One additional potential limitation was that of researcher bias. Because the researcher was an administrator in the school district within which the present study took place, there could have been challenges to maintaining objectivity during the data analysis phase of the project. However, by selecting students currently attending the high school, the researcher ensured that she held no pre-conceived notions regarding the

subjects under study.

Although the author of the study had ready access to needed data sources, appropriate protocol was be followed regarding the use of human subjects through both the university and the school district. The research proposal herein was cleared with The College of William and Mary's Human Subjects Committee prior to the collection of any data. In addition, the proposal was outlined and presented to the district superintendent for his review and subsequent approval. Stake (1995) reminded researchers that when conducting studies in educational settings, the district, school, and teachers should be informed of "the nature of the case study, the sponsor, the activity intended, the primary issues, the time span, and burden to the parties" (p. 47). He added that plans to anonymize should be shared as well as plans to distribute the final report. Stake also cautioned that it is essential to "obtain special written permission from parents for personal attention to individual children" (p. 54). All of these suggestions were be heeded through the use of informed consent forms approved by the William and Mary Human Subjects Committee.

CHAPTER IV: FINDINGS

Introduction

The four gifted African-American adolescents selected for the present study all resided in the same rural community located approximately one hour's drive from the nearest metropolitan areas located to the west and to the north. In stark contrast to these metropolitan areas, the rural county in which the study was conducted provided a peaceful, pastoral setting. Approaching the community from the west after a rare snowfall, the seemingly endless fields glistened in the sun, providing an atmosphere of profound serenity. As winter gave way to spring, the same fields brought forth the purples, yellows, and greens of the crops on which many of the area's residents depended. The small town that functioned as the hub of the community was located directly on a river that fed into the bay; fresh fish, crabs, and oysters were abundant, making one of the local family-owned seafood restaurants a favorite among diners across the state. Due to its idyllic setting in close proximity to the water, the area attracted a good number of retirees and those who wished to own a second home on the "rivah." However, in spite of its natural beauty and pockets of affluence, over half of this rural community's student population lived in poverty.

The high school that the study participants attended was located directly across from a corn field. Three of the student participants attended the high school full-time; one attended the regional Governor's School in the morning and the local high school in the afternoon. The high school served approximately 500 students in grades 9-12, 60% of whom qualified for free or reduced meals. The four student participants in the present study either qualified for free or reduced meals at the time of data collection or did so for

a sustained period (three or more years) during their academic careers. About 60% of the students at the school were identified as Black, 35% as White, and 5% as Native American, Asian, or Hispanic. Although impossible to track due to inexact methods utilized by the school district to collect ethnicity data, a number of students in the district who were identified as members of one of the aforementioned races were actually bi-racial. Three of the participants in the present study self-identified as Black and one self-identified as bi-racial (Black and White).

Case #1: Josh

Josh was a fifteen-year-old high school sophomore ranked first in his class of 111 with a GPA of 4.2; he had received straight A's in all of his high school credit courses. He attended the region's Governor's School for gifted students in the morning each day for college-level classes in pre-calculus, biology, foundations of science, and computer technology and then traveled back to his home school for afternoon classes in Advanced English, World History II, French III, driver's education, and physical education. The half-day Governor's School program that Josh attended served gifted rural students in grades 10-12 from twelve counties at three sites. There was a competitive application process that targeted students with demonstrated ability in math and the sciences. Unlike Josh's home school, the student population of the Governor's School program was overwhelmingly White.

Josh lived in a household with his mother, step-father, two older sisters, and a step-brother. Josh's mother was White, his father, with whom he rarely had contact, was Black. His mother had attended two years of college and worked as an administrative assistant in a medical facility; his step-father was a high-school graduate who worked as a

bus driver. Josh had attended a number of schools in his educational career due to the numerous moves made by his mother in his earlier years; however, at the time the present study was conducted, the family was in their fourth year living in the community. Josh was identified as gifted in his sixth grade year in a previous school system, scoring in the 99th percentile in all areas on both tests of ability and achievement.

On the day that Josh was interviewed, he wore attire typical of a contemporary fifteen-year-old high school student: jeans, hoodie, sneakers, and backpack. However, unlike many other Black males at his school, Josh's pants were worn belted at the waist. His hair was cut very short and neatly trimmed. Josh's complexion was mocha; his demeanor, confident. During the course of the interview, he exhibited an easy manner, appearing to be quite comfortable with the process.

A number of themes arose from the analysis of transcriptions of interviews with Josh, his mother, his Governor's School biology teacher, and his seventh grade English teacher that address the question as to how a gifted minority adolescent living in rural poverty, such as Josh, can overcome the odds to be academically successful. Protective factors that were revealed as serving against Josh's confluence of at-risk barriers were: his relationships with his mother and with his peers; the school environment; specific personality traits and academic behaviors; high expectations for Josh by his mother, his teachers, and himself; and coping strategies.

Relationships: Mom

Central to Josh's academic success was his mother's role in his life. An authoritative parent, she maintained high expectations for Josh without being overly intrusive or oppressive. Josh's biological father long since out of the picture, his mom

went through a period as a single parent, then eventually married her current husband, Josh's step-father. The household was a busy one, with the step-father leaving at 3:00 AM for work and mom taking time to drive Josh to his Governor's School classes each morning on her way to work. While mom noted that "we really don't have a whole lot of structure" and that after school "the kids are pretty much on their own until I get home," she had clearly established an expected routine for her brood to follow, noting that "the kids come home, do their homework and chores..." apparently without parental prodding.

Josh clearly appreciated the time his busy mother spent ensuring that he had an education appropriate to his needs. He shared:

Mom has to do a lot of work because of me. I bring home a lot of stuff on gifted and the Governor's School. I bring in a lot of work [for her to do]. She has to write a lot of stuff, remember a lot of phone numbers, remember dates, make sure that she, like, talks to teachers every once in a while.

His seventh grade teacher remembered that the level of involvement of Josh's mother in school-related issues was appropriate. She noted that Josh's mom clearly put a "high value on education," but "as I recall, she was not *overly* communicative because she didn't have to be because he was always doing well."

Interviews with both the student and his mom revealed that she had a great deal of confidence and pride in Josh, held very high expectations for him, and exhibited her support by spending a good amount of time with him discussing his goals for the future - all while maintaining a fairly relaxed atmosphere in the home. Regarding her high expectations for him, Josh stated:

My mom knows that I can get all A's, so she expects me to get all A's. She jokingly fusses at me if she sees a B on an interim, like "I'm grounded," but I think that she just feels I should get all A's.

Mom explained her expectations regarding Josh's grades thus:

[My] expectation is an A because that's what he's always gotten. He is capable of doing really well in school, and that's what I expect. As long as he does his best, that's all I care about.

Regarding her role in shaping his goals for the future and her certainty of his success in achieving these goals, she shared:

Law is his choice...I'm trying to talk him into going into corporate law or working for the district attorney where you can make good money. The amount of money he could earn makes a big part of what [type of law] he will decide to do...He is going to do what he wants. He's very determined – like in everything he does. He will graduate with honors, he will pursue a career in law. And the end result – his goal – money!

Relationships: Peers

Another factor key to Josh's academic success was his peer relationships. Josh appeared to strategically choose those *he* wished to be in *his* peer group, rather than being concerned in any way about whether or not he would be chosen. In this way, he was in complete control of his social world. Confident, perhaps even a bit arrogant, he spoke with disdain of any student who did not take school seriously enough. When asked by the researcher of the benefits of attending the Governor's School, he noted that there was "less rabble" there. At the end of the interview the researcher indicated that Josh could go back to his P.E. class, and when he hesitated, she asked if he enjoyed P.E. He responded that he did not, although not because of the class itself but because "*those people* aren't serious about school." Along these same lines, Josh's seventh grade teacher noted: "I put him in a group with two other young ladies, and he just told them, 'I'm not working with these two dumb girls.'" The same teacher explained that Josh was only interested in associating with other intelligent students. When asked whom Josh seemed to consider

his peers, she responded:

The most intelligent person in the classroom. He gravitated toward one other person who was highly intelligent...He had to be with someone who had a similar personality as he had...

Similarly, Josh explained, in reference to his current peer group, his social comfort in associating with students who had similar academic talents:

The kids at the Governor's School, like, I've grown attached to them 'cause they're of my intelligence level. And a lot of the students that are here [at the home school] that are still talented, they just didn't get the chance to go over to the Governor's School. ... I feel that they can relate to me.

This is what I learned on the bus – our Governor's School bus – smart people are stupid [*laughs*]. I think the smartest people act the most silly, at the most unnecessary times, and that makes - it puts your guard down – it makes you feel like you can be yourself...The average student wouldn't, like, understand some of the jokes; they'd be a little more esoteric.

Interestingly, during the dialogue with the interviewer about peer relationships, Josh brought up race on his own:

Josh: A lot of them are [*long pause, then makes quotation marks in the air*] Caucasian.

Interviewer: Who?

Josh: My friends. I think I have maybe three friends that aren't.

Interviewer: How do you feel about that?

Josh: Apathetic. Like, I feel that race is unnecessary. Really, the country you were born in, that's what you are, not three generations back...

Josh's seventh grade teacher concurred, indicating that Josh did not seem to be interested in the race of his friends, but rather their intelligence level. However, his current Governor's School teacher offered a slightly different perspective when asked about who she thought Josh would consider to be his peer group:

...actually he does gravitate towards other students that are of other ethnicities. He's friendly with everybody, but there is a group of four boys in my class, one of them is Indian, and I think the other three are all Black, and they all hang out together in class. They're a very tight-knit group...he really sort of acts as the leader of that group and makes sure that they are on task...

It is apparent that Josh is a social chameleon with regard to race; while intelligence level clearly sets the standard for whom he chooses to allow into his social circle, he appears to adapt his racial preferences depending on the context. It is unclear as to whether being bi-racial affects this adaptability in any way, but it is crystal clear that Josh wishes to be perceived as fitting neatly into the "Caucasian" social world that dominates the Governor's School while still identifying with other minority students within his individual classes.

School Environment

Josh thrived in the intellectually challenging environment of the Governor's School. Although he had been in advanced classes in elementary and middle school and in his first year of high school, the Governor's School experience appeared to have been his first real challenge academically. He clearly welcomed this challenge, which placed him squarely within the zone of proximal development. Josh explained:

It's odd...it [Governor's School] was both challenging, but I could do it. It's like it was just challenging enough where it wasn't boring, but it wasn't so challenging that, like, I wanted to rip my hair out. It was at the right level.

In addition to the academic challenge of the courses, Josh derived both social and academic comfort from the opportunity to attend classes with peers on his intellectual level, perhaps for the first time. He stated:

I was a little shocked when I went over to the Governor's School and saw that other people could be intelligent as well. 'Cause, I'm used to, like, they say that the classes that gifted students are put in [in the regular school setting] are more advanced, but there are people who are in the classes that [*pauses*] aren't.

Josh's mom was aware that the Governor's School was a good intellectual fit for him. She shared: "I know that he likes the way the environment is set up at [the Governor's School]. He feels, I think, a little more comfortable because it caters to his mentality."

Specific Personality Traits

Josh's possession of certain key personality traits and academic behaviors had a profound impact on his academic success. His even temperament, internal locus of control, persistence, self-confidence and self-image worked together as shields against the at-risk factors that he possessed. Josh and his mother noted his even temperament, including his generally positive attitude as well as his ability to shake things off that otherwise might be a distraction to success. Josh reflected:

I'm a fairly level person. Like, I'm accepting of most things. I feel one should keep as open a mind as possible. Just to make sure that, if change occurs, you can flow with the change.

We do have money problems, but I don't care much...I just find that things don't bother me; if anything like, negative, arises, I just really think upon it and realize how unnecessary it is and I just move on. I think that, uh, being able to push back the little things has helped me. There's very little that can make me upset.

Josh's mother concurs that Josh's even temperament is an advantage:

He's a pleasant child; he's got a really good heart. I know his personality has a lot to do with how he is in [the] classroom. Because he has a well-balanced personality, there's no friction between classmates or teachers.

In addition to an even temperament, Josh clearly had an internal locus of control, believing that his own behaviors were what determined his outcomes. This motivated him to work hard and to take responsibility for his actions. His internal locus of control was apparent to his teachers, his mom, and Josh himself as reflected in their comments. Mom

shared:

He works everything out. I don't think he really believes in fate or luck. He's in control of everything he does.

Josh commented:

I think I'm very lucky to have landed where I am, because I get the whole Governor's School program...but I have to put forth effort to achieve.

His middle school teacher noted that Josh not only believed that he had control over the outcomes related to his academic success, but he also wanted to make sure that he received recognition for his efforts:

I think he felt he had a lot of control over his learning. Yeah, he was in control of his learning...

He was so intelligent that he just wanted credit for his own work. He didn't want anyone thinking that someone else had contributed to his work, it was his, and if he did it alone, it was obvious that it was his...

His high school teacher concurred that Josh took ownership of his actions with regard to academic outcomes:

He believes that he does have control over [his own success]. He doesn't, you know, get a poor grade and then say, oh, well, this isn't my fault. So, he does seem to take responsibility for his actions and understand that it's him that is really controlling what the outcomes of the class will be.

In addition to possessing an internal locus of control and an even temperament, Josh's persistence supported his achievement. Perhaps as an adjunct to his even temperament, Josh did not appear to get frazzled when challenged, and calmly worked through anything he initially didn't understand until he "got it." However, he was not afraid to ask questions if he needed to do so. Both of his teachers, his mom, and Josh all provided illustrations of this point. When asked how Josh dealt with things that initially seemed difficult to accomplish, his high school teacher responded:

Sometimes he'll sit there and read through it for a while to try to figure out what he's supposed to be doing. And usually, he'll just come to me and ask. Or he'll ask whoever he's working with. So he's really not afraid to, you know, ask for help. And then once he does get the help, you'll just kind of see the light bulb turning on, and he's like, "Okay, I get it" and he doesn't want your help any more, 'cause he wants to show you that he can do the rest of it on his own.

Similarly, his middle school teacher replied to the question:

He'd ask for clarification, then he'd say, "Oh, I know, I've got it" and then he would do it.

She also shared that she does not ever remember his giving up in class or just not doing a given task. As for his mother, she explained:

I know when he has problems or when he's struggled in the past, he'll go back to the beginning. If there's directions involved...if there's a stump or a pot hole, he goes back to the directions. And I think you can just about apply that anywhere.

When asked how he responds to something that initially seems difficult, Josh responded:

Laugh at it...I try to solve it like a puzzle. When I am faced with a challenge, I will try the methods I know, and then I try to adapt the methods I know to formulate a new method that might be better with the situation...and try to apply it then.

When asked what he would do if that strategy didn't work, he replied: "[Keep trying] 'til it works or realize I need help with it and get some help." He goes on:

I feel I should always try to do my best. I feel that I should not be getting Bs, and if I get a B, then I need to work harder. If I see a B on an interim, it's not that bad, but it shows me that I need to, like, work harder in order to get the A on the report card.

The last personal traits that Josh possessed are his high self-confidence and a self-image that appears to be rooted in his giftedness. Josh's self-assurance was likely related to his internal locus of control; he believed that his own actions determined his outcomes, the outcomes had thus far been very positive, and this resulted in his feeling good about himself. Each success that he had added additional evidence to his high self-regard,

making his high academic achievement self-perpetuating. Josh's mom provided some insight:

He's right even if he's wrong! That's how confident he is...He's very comfortable [with school]...He's a "Mr. know-it-all." He's very comfortable because he is very intelligent.

Josh expressed his confidence thus:

[I'm] gifted [*makes quotation marks in the air with his fingers*]...I normally pick up things fairly well...I do like to help other students with their work, and by teaching them, it reinforces what I know. Math is normally the problem among students, but I am, for some reason, good at math, I like math, it's "numbery" [*laughs*]. [But] I feel I do well about evenly in all my classes.

His middle school teacher expressed that Josh was "confident, very confident."

His high school teacher concurred, stating:

He seems very confident. If he knows the material, he's not afraid to shout out the answer and to help people sitting near him that maybe don't understand it. So he does feel confident.

Goals and High Expectations

It is clear that Josh, his mother, and his teachers all had very high expectations for him. Included in this realm were the clear goals for the future that Josh had set for himself and that his mother supported. Due to his internal locus of control, Josh perceived that his hard work was the key to fulfilling his high expectations and reaching his goals.

First, Josh talked about high academic expectations for the present:

I feel that I should try and do my best...I feel that I should not be getting Bs, and if I get a B, then I need to work harder.

And for the future:

I want to go to college. I want to go to Harvard Law...and I want to... become a lawyer...I've wanted to be a lawyer since I was nine.

His mother had high expectations for Josh as well, and shared that they spent time discussing those expectations as well as his goals for the future:

He just automatically knows he's gonna get an A. If there comes a time when he gets anything lower than an A, it will be the "end of the world"!

[My] expectation is an A because that's what he's always gotten. He is capable of doing really well in school. And that's all I expect.

He's had a couple [of goals]... He wants to go to law school. He's very good at arguing. He wants to go into [*lowers voice*] accident law. I'm trying to talk him into going into corporate law or working for the district attorney where you can make good money. The amount of money he could earn makes a big part of what he will decide to do. Law has been his choice for about four years now, so I think that's where he'll end up.

Coping Strategies

Although Josh had a school environment, relationships, personality traits, and high expectations that all supported his academic achievement, there are a number of coping strategies embedded within these factors that Josh employed, whether he did so consciously or not. First in terms of his peer relationships, although he had a number of White students with which he was friendly, Josh strategically chose three other minority students (one Native American and two Black) to spend his time with in his classes at the Governor's School. As the Governor's School was heavily White, this strategy no doubt helped him to cope with being one of the few minorities at the school. Secondly, in also choosing to "hang" with talented students at his home school and in expressing a distaste for the "other" students, he provided a psychological buffer against any potential threats to his self- image.

In addition to managing his peer relationships on his terms, Josh utilized a number of problem-solving skills. Although there are apparently no mentors in Josh's life as yet, he did not mind reaching out to teachers if he needed help with school work. Likely a

result of his positive self-image, he saw asking for assistance when needed simply as a tool to enable him to reach his goals.

Next, Josh's own high expectations for himself and clear goals for the future helped him to see beyond any current discomforts (e.g., he mentioned money problems a number of times during the course of his interview). His sincere belief that he would attain his goals by his own power allowed him to continue with "the drill" of hard work for the eventual pay-off of college and a rewarding career.

Table 1

Data Matrix of Theme Derivation across CSI Data Sources

Theme	Category	Subcategory	Source
Relationships	Mom	Authoritative	CS1S/CS1P/CS1M
		Support	CS1S/CS1P/CS1M/CS1C
		High expectations	CS1S/CS1P/CS1M
	Peers	Intellectual equals	CS1S/CS1P/CS1M/CS1H
School environment	Academic challenge	Zone of proximal development	CS1S/CS1P/CS1H
	Choice of peers	Academic/social comfort	CS1S/CS1P/CS1M/CS1H
Personality traits	Even temperament	Coping	CS1S/CS1P/CS1H
	Internal locus of control	Effort	CS1S/CS1P/CS1M/CS1H
	Self-confidence	High expectations	CS1S/CS1P/CS1M/CS1H
	Self-image	Academic identification	CS1S/CS1P/CS1M/CS1H/CS1C
	Persistence	Focus	CS1S/CS1P
High expectations/goals	Student	Self-confidence	CS1S/CS1P/CS1M/CS1H
	Mom	Support	CS1S/CS1P/CS1M
Coping strategies	Choice of peers	Academic/social comfort	CS1SCS1P/CS1M/CS1H
	Problem-solving skills	Persistence	CS1S/CS1P/CS1M/CS1H

	High expectations/goals for self	Grades/education/career	CS1S/CS1P/CS1M/CS1H
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Note. CS1S=Case 1 Student; CS1P=Case 1 Parent; CS1M=Case 1 Middle School Teacher; CS1H=Case 1 High School Teacher;CS1C=Cumulative File

Case #2: Tyrone

Tyrone was a seventeen-year-old high school junior ranked twenty-fourth in his class of 139 with a GPA of 3.4; he had received primarily A's and B's in all of his high school credit courses with an occasional C. He attended his home school all day for classes in Pre-Advanced Placement English, Advanced Placement United States History, French IV, calculus, chemistry, leadership, and a study hall.

Tyrone lived in a double-wide mobile home with his adoptive mother and father, as well as his younger brother. His mother was a high school graduate and a stay-at-home mom; his father was a high-school graduate who worked for a gas company. Other than his first four months of life prior to his adoption, Tyrone had lived in this rural community all of his life and had attended the public schools during his entire educational career. Tyrone was identified as gifted in his second grade year, scoring from the 96th to the 99th percentile on the verbal sections of both tests of ability and achievement. The results on the verbal section of a recently-taken PSAT were in the 98th percentile.

On the day that Tyrone was interviewed, he was neatly dressed and his hair was cut short. He donned thick glasses to help correct problems with his vision; he had been wearing glasses since the age of three. Tyrone was stockily-built with a chocolate complexion. While he initially exhibited some shyness with the interviewer, his demeanor became more confident as the interview progressed, especially when discussing his areas of passion.

Several themes arose from the analysis of transcriptions of interviews with Tyrone, his mother, a former high school English teacher (who also coached the Academic Challenge Team of which Tyrone was a member), and his eighth grade English teacher. These themes reveal the protective factors serving to buffer against Tyrone's combination

at-risk factors, therefore enabling him to overcome the odds to be academically successful: his relationships with his mother, his peers, and his teachers; the school environment; specific personality traits; goals and high expectations, and coping strategies.

Relationships: Mom

Integral to Tyrone's academic success was the support he had from his adoptive parents, particularly his mother. Tyrone noted that both parents were "supportive, caring" and that "they've always encouraged me to do my best." He also shared that "when I was little, I guess pre-K, they taught me to read, like, really early. And that has always been a good thing..." While he characterized his relationship with his dad as "more, kinda friends," his mom was clearly the parent that was most involved in his education. In spite of financial challenges, she chose to be a stay-at-home mom, explaining:

Well, I'm the type of mother that I love to be in the school with my kids...I tried to stay at home with 'em, 'cause I want to know what's going on 24/7...I tried to stay at home because, hey, *this* is my job, until you get out of school. Then we'll try to do the best we can with you when you're out of school, but right now, I'm gonna do it all right now.

Mom revealed that in elementary school, Tyrone had been on a 504 plan for his limited vision and a handwriting disability. As Tyrone transitioned into the middle school his fifth grade year, school personnel chose to release him from the plan, which infuriated his mother. Although he had been identified as gifted and was clearly very bright, Tyrone's mother recognized that without some supports from the school to accommodate his physical disabilities, it would have been difficult for him to work to his potential. Mom provided some insight into the situation:

He was over at the middle school. So, I had got that straight – I had went through so much because I told 'em their [her sons'] education is the most important thing to me. So I cannot give that up. I don't care how much it takes me to do it, I'm there for my kids...This is the way that my mother and father brought me up. You be behind your

kids, no matter what. You're supposed to teach them right from wrong, so I feel like this is my best step – to teach him that people ain't supposed ta do you [just] any kind of way.

See, when he moved over here [to the middle school] from fourth to the fifth, they said he didn't need [these accommodations] we had been working with all this time...So when I went to sign the papers the last day of school, I told them "no." If you watch your kid at home 24/7, you know what's goin' on wit your kid. So I always keep an eye on my kids. I'm there all the time. So, they couldn't tell me I didn't know what I was talkin' about...But I told them, I say, "even though you don't give it to me, I'm still goin' to do what's right for my child."

In the end, Tyrone's mom took him to a children's hospital over an hour away for physical and occupational therapy to help with his disabilities, paying for the services "out of my pocket." After an extended battle, the school finally relented to provide Tyrone with physical and occupational therapy. This proved to be so successful that Tyrone was released from services, with his mother's blessing, when he entered high school. Clearly, mom shielded her son from the details of the drama; he mentioned the situation only briefly to the interviewer: "There was some trouble back in middle school when things didn't work out so well – nothing that affected me directly."

While Tyrone's mother heavily advocated for her son and was a frequent presence at his school during his early middle school years, she began to gradually pull back as he learned to compensate for his disabilities and become more independent. This proved to be a contributing factor to Tyrone's increasing confidence as he continued through the eighth grade, as noted by his eighth grade English teacher:

We [the eighth grade teachers] heard stories [from his fifth through seventh grade teachers] about Tyrone coming to eighth grade that "oh, the parent is really going to be on your case about things and you gotta make sure you're doing things just right with Tyrone." [But] by the time he got to eighth grade, the parent was not as involved with him, and sort of let him be more on his own, and you could tell that he was taking more responsibility for himself [and] he was doing more for himself... you could see the process from fifth to eighth grade of how he really grew up during that

time and became more confident and more aware of his abilities by the time he left here.

By the time Tyrone was a high school student, his mother had turned over the reins to Tyrone almost entirely, as noted by his high school English teacher and Academic Challenge Team coach:

She seems to be hands-off in that regard because Tyrone seems to manage himself so well. He's not having to go down to the office to use the phone because he forgot this, that, or the other, as some students are apt to do...He comes to school well-prepared for his day.

Tyrone's mother, then, was well-attuned to his needs, providing heavy support in communicating with the schools regarding his need for educational accommodations in his elementary and middle school years, and then pulling back to allow Tyrone to have more independence and to take more responsibility for self-advocacy as he transitioned from the eighth grade to high school.

Interviews with Tyrone, his mother, and his teachers revealed that the support Tyrone's mother provided him extended well beyond her monitoring of accommodations for his physical disabilities. As an authoritative parent, she provided a nurturing home environment for Tyrone while maintaining high expectations for him in terms of academic achievement. Clearly proud of both Tyrone's intellectual abilities and his respectful attitude, she noted eight times during the interview that Tyrone "is a good boy." Regarding the close relationship Tyrone had with his mother, his high school English teacher stated:

I was astonished to learn that he was an adopted child, because a lot of times adopted children kind of feel like they're outside of the family looking in instead of being very much a part of it. And I think that he feels he's very much a part of that family. The way she [Mom] talks about Tyrone and says how proud she is of Tyrone, they just seem to be really positive and close.

And while neither she nor her husband attended college, Tyrone's mother had every expectation that he would do so. She recognized that he was an exceptional young man and vowed that she and her husband would find a way to send him to college.

Regarding his parents' high expectations for him, Tyrone explained:

They've always encouraged me to do my best...my parents would like me to have a 4.0...they've always pushed me to do better – A's and B's. Still, it's good, "but you could probably do better." They're not as forceful as some parents out there, but they'll take A's definitely, they'll take B's, the occasional C – they don't like it, but they'll take it. And I'm in trouble if I get a D or F.

Mom shared that she told Tyrone, "As long as you get the grades, we're goin' to be behind you." She added, "So, I'll be behind him tryin' to keep his grades up and we goin' to send him to college." More specifically, Mom discussed her awareness of Tyrone's school assignments and her expectation that Tyrone would complete his school work in a timely manner:

I say, the point is you do it [homework] now and don't wait later to pass...I keep on 'em. You see, he had homework [over Christmas break]. See, I got him to read that book and write that three page essay before he go back to school. And see, he's not goin' to do it at the last minute, not with me.

I try to keep the dates [when homework is due] in my head, so then I'll come back and remind him. I'll say "you know you got this to do."

Mom noted that Tyrone's awareness of her expectations helped to keep him on top of his work:

I don't have to stay on him much, because I know he's goin' to do it. Because he knows if he *don't* do it, that's goin' to affect me. So he try to please me...so I said "if you don't want me bothering you about it, then do your job."

Relationships: Peers

Peer relationships appear to have had a profound effect on Tyrone's academic success. When interviewed, Tyrone, his mother, his middle school teacher, and his high

school teacher all discussed at length the positive impact that his high-ability friends had on his academic achievement over the years. After being identified as gifted in the second grade, Tyrone was clustered with other gifted students at the elementary school. At this early age, he began to forge relationships with a group of gifted boys that continued through his high school years. When asked about factors that he felt contributed to his academic success, Tyrone responded:

I think when I was younger, getting in with a really good group of friends helped. They tend to be pretty high academically, too...you always want to be similar to your friends.

Tyrone's mom acknowledged that his peers were all top academic achievers, and she supported and encouraged these friendships:

[His peers are] very good kids, straight A's... that's all he hang out with. The boys that he hang with have been with him ever since he started school, they've been friends...there's six or seven of them they hang out together. I mean, hey, they are very good together. They get together and they do their work together. And I mean, they good boys because their mother and father behind them and they want them to do good in school. And that's what I like. I don't want him hangin' with people who are goin' to bring him down.

Tyrone's teachers further acknowledged the camaraderie he and his group of peers had for each other and the support they provided to one another. His middle school teacher noted that she really almost thought of the group as more of an "entity" than individual students because the boys were always together. She further noted that in the eighth grade, a friendly competition developed among the boys in terms of academics that helped to propel Tyrone forward:

He was with the gifted cluster of kids, so he had peers who were more academically inclined and they talked about things that involved academics...they sort of challenged each other...they competed with each other. I think the competition level that they had with each other helped to challenge him...They competed academically, but they supported each other as well.

Tyrone's high school English teacher served as the coach for the Academic Challenge Team with which Tyrone participated. She noted how the same group of gifted boys mentioned by Tyrone's mother and his eighth grade teacher were also on the team and seemed to really enjoy each other's company, including the challenge of intellectual competition:

[This is an] amazing group of boys that I have watched, and they're all brilliant, and they're incredible when they're together. To see them cut up, be truly silly, laugh at each other and just enjoy each other's boyish company is refreshing, it truly is. There's about five of them...those boys are smart and they do challenge each other...

She notes that they also support each other in terms of class work:

They kind of remind each other – I've heard them kind of remind each other about deadlines. You know, just a reminder that "oh, I finished it last night, so get finished with it!" You know, if one is stuck on a certain part, then there'll be some discussion about that. Mostly they remind each other of deadlines and challenge each other to complete the assignment or product.

Interestingly, although Tyrone is the only African-American in this tight-knit group of boys, not one of those interviewed mentioned this; race appears to be an inconsequential criterion for his choice of friends. Rather, Tyrone derives both academic and social comfort in the presence of other boys who share his high intellectual ability and desire for academic competition, regardless of race. His continued friendship with them over the years has clearly perpetuated and supported the academic success that he enjoys.

Relationships: Teachers

Further supporting Tyrone's academic success was the positive relationships that he had with a number of his teachers - his English teachers, in particular. According to Tyrone, his mom, and his teachers, Tyrone's greatest academic strength was in English; he had always been an avid reader and a good writer. However, it was his relationship with a particular seventh grade English teacher that motivated and challenged Tyrone to take his writing to an even higher level of quality. Tyrone shared:

Before [the seventh grade English class], all English was just read, read, book report, and like, an occasional paper that really didn't mean anything. When we got there [to the seventh grade English class], he [the teacher], the first day, he just put us on the computers and said, "Okay, write about whatever you want." And I had never done that before. It was really fun, and I took the paper to him, and he pointed out mistake after mistake after mistake. I wasn't discouraged, though. I went back and I just edited it. And I've loved writing from there.

Tyrone's eighth grade English teacher concurred that the seventh grade English teacher had a positive influence on Tyrone, and she also shared how she helped to support his academic confidence in her class:

In the seventh grade Tyrone was very close - well, he thought a lot of a teacher that he had for English...a lot of the boys really liked him. He somehow connected with that particular group of boys and they seemed to think a lot of him.

Tyrone was really, really shy when he first came to the eighth grade, and it was very difficult to get him to participate a lot of times and be drawn into things. I always did word games as a part of my bell work. One time we were doing a word game called "Triple Threat," and it had Anglo-Saxon and Latin and Greek words...one was missing and they had to find the synonym that would fit in its place. Well, Tyrone started getting a little bit bolder about participating, and he would just kind of quietly say a word, and he would get it. And the kids started noticing in class that he was getting it a lot, and I started calling him "dictionary man." And I said, "Go to Tyrone - he's the dictionary man!" And right after that, he really started to blossom in class and he started participating in a lot of other ways. That helped him build confidence in himself.

Once in high school, Tyrone continued to benefit academically from positive relationships with teachers. In particular, the English teacher and Academic Challenge Team coach who was interviewed for this study took a deep personal interest in Tyrone and made it her charge to support him in developing his talent. Tyrone explained:

Last year I had this English teacher [who] gave me [opportunities for] contests and stuff and writing things, and she looked over my writing and really encouraged me. And after that year, I think I've become a much better writer.

As for the teacher, she clearly took pride in her contribution to Tyrone's development:

He was selected to go to the Governor's School summer program. I was invited as the outstanding teacher that he selected to be honored that one day...it was the most

interesting thing to watch the other students because it was summer time, and many teachers were traveling and could not be there to be honored. There I was with Tyrone, and several of his friends [from the summer Governor's School] would come up and say, "Oh, is this your teacher? Oh, Tyrone you're so fortunate your teacher was able to come to be recognized with you." It was as though he was also being recognized by his peers because his teacher took the time to come and be represented with him that day...

As a thank you to him for honoring me in that way I found this book at [a book store] and the title is very similar to *How to Write a Novel in Thirty Days* or *Thirty Days to a Good Novel*, something like that. I gave that book to him thinking it would challenge him to begin his first novel...

Even after Tyrone was no longer a student in her English class, this teacher continued to support his intellectual development:

Teacher: It was nothing for me to go over and find a book and give it to him. The end of the summer I gave him a couple of different books to read thinking he would get snippets of information that would prove useful for Academic [Challenge] Team. There's a book, and it was written about these people, and it was written about these people based on their headstones – the little inscriptions that were on their headstones –

Interviewer: *Spoon River Anthology?*

Teacher: *Spoon River Anthology*. Yes! And so it came up on a question. And I said, "I happen to have it over here." I pulled it off the shelf and he kind of glanced it. After I told him just that little blurb and how it was written, he wanted to take it home to read. I gave him one at the beginning of the summer. It's called *Beowulf at the Beach*. It summarizes snippets of writing – the main characters, what you need to read, what you need to focus on, what you really don't need to waste your time on, so he's enjoying that book, too.

It is evident that Tyrone's relationships with his mother, peers, and teachers provided essential support for his academic success. Another theme that arose from interviews was the school environment, which proved to serve as an additional buffer against Tyrone's risk factors.

School Environment

Tyrone's school environments provided a number of elements that supported his

academic achievement, including academic challenge, intellectual peers, opportunities for co-curricular activities, teacher support, and recognition.

Tyrone's teachers emphasized the importance of the challenging academic environments to which he was exposed and in which he clearly thrived during his middle and high school years. His middle school teacher noted that he had been clustered with the other identified gifted students on his grade level, and because of this clustering with his intellectual peers, he had the opportunity to be in classes and school-related activities with others who were similarly academically-inclined. She explained:

They challenged each other, I think, because it was sort of competitive. I think that was probably the biggest thing that helped him was being with that group of peers – it wasn't so much that they [just] challenged each other, they *competed* with each other. When they went to high school they got involved in Academic Challenge [Team], so they *still* compete with each other.

Tyrone's high school teacher concurred that challenging academic environments with his intellectual peers, whether within the local high school or the summer Governor's School, contributed to his success:

When teachers challenge him academically there is a competitive spirit that arises in him...he likes to be challenged academically.

It's a great honor for a student to be selected for the summer Governor's School. It's quite a grueling application process to be selected for that. I was invited to visit a classroom situation or two with him...it was phenomenal to watch that high intellectual conversation shared among high school students. He was really thriving in that situation...it was like he found a special niche with group.

In fact, Tyrone's experience at the Summer Governor's School with gifted students who had been selected from around the state proved to have a profound effect on him. Once there, he not only was exposed to students and experiences on levels to which he had not previously been exposed, but he also felt validated that yes, he belonged there. The impact

was so profound that Tyrone subsequently made decisions regarding his future based on his experiences that summer. He explained his experience thus:

Interviewer: Which [Summer Governor's School] did you go to?

Tyrone: The one for the humanities and the performing arts.

Interviewer: How did you like that?

Tyrone: Those people were pretty amazing. They could do things that...wow! And some of the other humanities kids had grade point averages that were out of this world. Most of them were over a 4.0. It really made you want to do better.

Interviewer: So being around kids who were really up there academically sort of gave you a positive challenge?

Tyrone: Yeah...I probably learned more in a month there than I have learned in some of my classes [at the local high school] in a year.

.....

Interviewer: What are your goals for the future?

Tyrone: I am going to go to college [and] get a psych degree, but while I'm getting it, I'm going to take a bunch of classes in film and writing and literature - over the summer, too - and then at the end of four years, I can decide whether I want to continue and get my PhD in psychology or move to L.A. or New York and try to get a job as a writer or a screen writer or director.

Interviewer: Have you had any experiences - have you played around with doing some film in any of your classes?

Tyrone: Yeah, at Summer Governor's School.

Interviewer: So that's what kind of turned you on to doing that kind of thing?

Tyrone: Yeah. Before that, I was just thinking writing, writing, writing. But when I started messing with film [during the summer program], [I] understood how much of an art form it is, the same as writing.

His high school teacher provided some insight into the impact of this experience on Tyrone:

Teacher: Summer Governor's School...worked wonders for him...I think he is

smart enough, I just don't think he believed that about himself. And then having this incredible experience this summer [I believe] was life-changing for him, I really do.

Interviewer: Do you think it was because he felt like he was on the same level as all those other really smart kids that were coming together for Governor's School?

Teacher: And the way that they interacted with him...stating the value they found in his ideas that he shared. So I think that gave him more value [to himself]. You know, it wasn't the same people who had nurtured him and known him all his life...these were total strangers who were affirming his brilliance.

Tyrone's mom affirmed the positive effect of the summer program on her son:

When he went to Governor's [School] this summer, he loved it. He didn't want to go back to high school, he wanted to start college then! He loved it, and he said, "Mama, the friends..." He loved the friends and everything; he just got right into it.

Within the realm of Tyrone's school environments, additional factors of teacher support and recognition were apparent. When asked directly what factors he felt contributed to his academic success, Tyrone spoke about the role of supportive teachers, sharing what he considered to be their ideal qualities:

Good teachers help along the way. Like, not *every* teacher can be good, but good teachers spread here and there can push you through. That helps...

[Good teachers] care about teaching and making kids learn; they're about making sure that the kids get the information. Another good quality in a teacher is wanting every student to be successful [and providing] opportunities.

Being recognized helped to validate Tyrone's belief in his own talents. When asked to describe an experience when he was aware of his academic success, Tyrone mentioned being chosen to read an essay at eighth grade promotion ceremony:

Tyrone: Eighth grade graduation, I got to speak. We all had to write essays, and the best three were chosen to speak at [the promotion ceremony], and I was chosen.

Interviewer: How'd you feel about that?

Tyrone: Really good. ‘Cause I really like writing – I want to be a writer – so my essay being picked, that was really good.

With each subsequent recognition, Tyrone’s confidence grew. Having had a positive experience writing his essay and being chosen to speak, he took additional risks that paid off in more recognition, where the cycle began anew. For example, when he entered the high school, Tyrone competed for a spot on the Academic Challenge Team and was chosen. Then, in his sophomore year, he submitted to what his high school English teacher described as a “grueling process” to be selected to attend one of the state’s summer Governor’s Schools, and was again chosen. These experiences proved to be integral to Tyrone’s continued academic development and success.

In addition to the external protective factors of relationships with his mother, peers, and teachers as well as school environments, several internal factors existed that contributed to Tyrone’s academic success: specific personality traits, goals and high expectations, and coping strategies.

Specific Personality Traits

Tyrone’s personality traits of even temperament, internal locus of control, self-confidence, self-awareness, and persistence shielded against the at-risk factors that he possessed.

All of those interviewed discussed Tyrone’s even temperament. He was portrayed as having a kind heart and a gentle manner, and although he clearly thrived in challenging, competitive environments, he seemed to take everything in stride and not allow himself to become overly-stressed. Tyrone provides some clarity regarding his philosophy of grades:

I expect to do my best and achieve well...[my expectations are] high, but not out of this world. Like, I'm not gonna try to force – like study all day and all night and sacrifice other areas of my life just to get a 4.0 I'm not gonna do that.

When the researcher followed up this comment with the question “How high *do* you raise the bar for yourself?,” he responded:

Higher than the minimum, less than the maximum. Enough not just to get by, but also to get into college with ease, but not, like, I'm not going to argue over a .1 on my GPA type thing.

Tyrone's mom perceived that while he *did* initially get upset if he didn't do well, he reassured her that he would do better the next time around. He did not, in other words, allow one minor setback to interfere with future academic success. His high school teacher explained her take:

I don't think I've ever seen the kid frustrated. We all get frustrated at some point, but I think he's able to be very logical – he has good reasoning skills...I never sense frustration in him. I see Tyrone as being fresh and relaxed about expectations for himself. He is comfortable...

Tyrone's mother shared additional perspectives regarding his temperament, pointing out that throughout his school career he had never received any discipline referrals. She also noted that he was similarly easy-going in the home environment and always saw the best in other people:

He's no trouble, he's into his [school] work, he don't get into no trouble [at school]... He's a very good boy. He respect us, he know right from wrong, so I appreciate that...the Lord blessed me with a good boy.

He's down to earth. He don't see that people do anything wrong. He think that they right all the time.

His high school teacher described Tyrone as a “happy student. It seems like life is good for him. I don't mean that things are handed to him easily; I mean he is happy with himself as a person.”

Tyrone's middle school teacher added some additional insight into Tyrone's temperament, noting a seemingly inherent maturity with which he approached life, exhibiting wisdom beyond his years:

Tyrone is that kind of person that seems like an "old soul," somebody who has been here for a long time...and actually he's almost like a grandpa in class, when you think about it – he just seemed older than the other kids. He was just a very insightful kid. He was very reserved, but when he said something, it had impact.

Tyrone also appeared to have an internal locus of control, believing that his own actions were responsible for the extent to which he was successful. He acknowledged that while it may be *easier* for people with natural abilities (such as he) to learn quickly, it is ultimately one's efforts that determine success. His mother and teachers also acknowledged that Tyrone took responsibility for his own successes (or lack thereof), putting forth the effort without blaming others for setbacks or relying on fate or other external factors to carry him through.

In spite of a rather reserved demeanor, Tyrone exhibited a high level of confidence that appeared to increase with each subsequent success. Because he attributed his outcomes to his own efforts, the positive outcomes that he enjoyed helped to reinforce the efforts that he put forth to achieve them. Without exhibiting a trace of arrogance, Tyrone expressed a self-assessment of his abilities:

Interviewer: How confident are you of your own abilities?

Tyrone: Pretty good. I think I'm a good writer for my age. I'm decent in school. I don't think I'm amazing or a genius or anything like that, but I think I'm decent, good...yeah, like definitely English, and then I am pretty confident in the sciences, and history is just facts, so that's easy.

His mother concurred that Tyrone was confident about school, especially English:

He's very confident about it [school]...He love English. And other classes, he'll make it, you know? He love English, he always did. Since he started takin' English, he love English...straight A's.

Both of Tyrone's teachers expressed that they saw a growing confidence in him over time.

His middle school teacher shared:

He didn't seem to be extremely confident in himself when he first came into the eighth grade. But by the end, because of his word prowess and other things that I would praise him for, and the other kids started going to him for these things – he was the one that everyone wanted to be his peer editor or reviewer – I think he became more and more confident by the end of eighth grade...that helped him build confidence in himself...

When asked how confident Tyrone seemed of his abilities, his high school teacher

responded:

After attending Governor's School last summer, I think extremely comfortable. I think that worked wonders for him, I do. I think he is smart and is confident and he knows he is smart, but not in a cocky sort of way. I think his attitude is "give me the tools I need, provide me with the skills I need, and then allow me to add my creativity to that and I'll make it happen." I think he has that kind of confidence.

Along with self-confidence, Tyrone exhibited an honest self-awareness regarding his strengths and weaknesses, a trait rarely found among adolescents. He was quite matter-of-fact about it, and used this self-awareness to make choices regarding where he concentrated his efforts:

I've always been slightly less good in math, but all my other subjects have pretty much been A's. In English I'm good. In history class, it's just facts; it's pretty easy. Math tends to be challenge, but a good challenge...I'll try harder in something that I care about.

Regarding his thoughts of the future, he shared:

When I was younger, I wanted to be a doctor or a lawyer like a lot of kids do, but I'm not cut out for either of those – the arts are more suited to me...I'm not the most social or charismatic person in the world, so being a lawyer wouldn't suit me well [*laughs*]. And, as for the doctor thing, I don't think I could handle someone else's life in my hands. Plus, all the training you have to go through – it's tough, really, and only certain people are made for [that]...

His high school teacher and Academic Challenge Team coach also acknowledged that

Tyrone had a mature self-awareness about his academic strengths and weaknesses:

Tyrone loves a challenge, but he also recognizes where his strengths are and where his weaknesses are. A sign of maturity, he says, “I’m just weaker in the sciences and in math” even though he’s good in math...he’s good in those areas, but they’re not his strengths.

In addition to an even temperament, an internal locus of control, self-confidence, and self-awareness, Tyrone was persistent when faced with a difficult challenge. When asked how he dealt with things that initially seemed difficult to accomplish, Tyrone replied:

I step back, look at it from all the angles I can, approach it the way I think is the best one, and just go for it. If that doesn’t work, I back up...and go again. [If I still can’t get it] I get help.

His high school teacher described her observation of Tyrone’s persistence when faced with a difficult challenge in her class:

He sits up straighter, his shoulders come forward, and his head goes down really close to the work at hand. And he is *focused*...he’s got the book open, he’s got his papers there, and if he’s challenged he will finish it – usually before others in the class. That is something I have witnessed about this student – I don’t think I’ve ever had a student like Tyrone...I’ve taught for seventeen years. Once the assignment is on the board and once he knows he’s released to work on it, he is finished with the assignment and he’s turning it in and he’s ready for the next challenge. “Give me more...feed me more.”

His middle school teacher concurred that Tyrone would methodically work at a task until it had been completed:

He tried to work it out on his own. I don’t remember him saying that he needed any particular help or anything like that...most of the time he got it – he didn’t need [help]. I think he just tried to work things out on his own, for himself...I never saw him give up on anything.

Tyrone’s mom similarly noted that he simply approached tasks head-on until they were completed:

All you have to do is give him ten or fifteen minutes, he goin' to do it. All you have to do is let him sit down and set his mind down – he got it. That's the way he doin' now – he's reading his book, he'll put it down and think about it, then he'll go right back. That's the way he do.

Goals and High Expectations

It is evident that Tyrone, his mother, and his teachers all had high expectations for him. Included in this domain were the very specific goals for college and career that Tyrone had set for himself and that his mother and teachers encouraged. Because he had an internal locus of control, Tyrone perceived that his hard work was the key to fulfilling his expectations and reaching his goals. He acknowledged, however, that he was willing to put forth more effort in those academic areas in which he had an interest and which he saw as having direct ties to his career plans. First, Tyrone discussed his academic expectations for the present:

I expect to do my best and to achieve well...enough to get into college with ease...I know I need to get good grades so I can get into a good college. [But] I'll try harder in something that I care about.

And for the future:

I am going to go to college, get a psych degree, but while I'm getting it, I'm going to take a bunch of classes in film and writing and literature – over the summer, too – and then at the end of four years I can decide whether I want to continue to get my PhD in psychology, or I can move to L.A. or New York and try to get a job as a writer or a screen writer or a director.

Tyrone had clearly been thinking about possible universities; when asked if he had thought about which college he wanted to go to, he replied:

CNU [the site of the summer Governor's School he attended] is a choice; it's really nice there. ODU is cool. There's a college in New York called Sarah Lawrence that looks really good. NYU.

Mom clearly expected that Tyrone would simply “get the job done” academically in terms of

high school. In addition, his going to college had been a topic of discussion between mother and son for quite some time:

Tyrone the type of person, he goin' to do his best. And I don't have to stay on him so much, because I know he's goin' to do it. He's goin' to do the job.

He's been talkin' about college since he was in the, I guess, the third grade – what he want to do when he go to college and all that. I keep tellin' him, I say, as long as you get the grades, we're goin' to be behind you. So I'll be behind him tryin' to keep his grades up and we goin' to send him to college.

When he went to Governor's [School] this summer [at CNU] he loved it. He didn't want to go back to high school – he wanted to start college then. He was thinkin' about [studying] makin' movies...I think he would do very good in college.

Tyrone's teachers were aware that he had high expectations for himself; in addition, they not only had high expectations for him, but were aware of his desire to attend college and some of the specifics of those plans. From his middle school teacher:

I think Tyrone was disappointed in himself if he got anything less than an A. He was concerned about his grades, and he always wanted to do well. I think he just expected – because of who he was and because of his intelligence – that he would do well. He was very successful. He always made A's in my class – but he was an excellent writer. Sometimes I would read something that he had written, and I would just be blown away by it...it was just one of those things where you'd go "wow!" – the fact that he was thinking about these things. He was above the other kids in that way...

I knew he wanted to go to college. That whole group always had it in their heads that they were going to college. Everything they were doing [in school] was in preparation for that...

And from his high school teacher:

[Tyrone's expectations for himself are] extremely high, but I also feel that he's able to keep them realistic...Tyrone has very high goals set for himself, and I think that some of that comes from home. I know his mother, and I think that she has set some good goals for him, too.

He loves to write; he loves to express himself in writing. When I was with him on the CNU campus [at Summer Governor's School], a conversation came up about college. There's a school in New York that he is looking at, and the reason he chose that is because all of the assignments and all of the end products by the students are to be expressed in written form. Here he has already gone out and researched this

incredible school that has *only* what he wants...the focus on writing is important [to him]. Could he be a doctor? Probably. Could he be a lawyer? Probably, if he wanted those things. But right now, I think he just sees writing...he definitely wants to do something with writing. [He wants] to write novels. He's looking to the future, and he's looking to a successful future... Great things are going to come from this young man in the future...I have high hopes for Tyrone!

Coping Strategies

Tyrone had a school environment, relationships, personality traits, and high expectations that all supported his academic achievement. Embedded in those factors, however, were also a number of self-coping strategies. First, Tyrone's peer relationships were exclusively with other gifted students. At school, the group of gifted boys he considered to be his peers had shared the same advanced classes since third grade and had grown up together in a relatively intellectual environment. As he progressed to high school, Tyrone chose to participate in his sole extra-curricular activity, Academic Challenge Team, in part because the "entity" that was his group of gifted friends participated. Outside of school, this group comprised Tyrone's entire social network; as children, they played with Pokemon cards together, as adolescents, video games. Happy with this social scenario, Tyrone was apparently oblivious to other students in the school; this apathy helped to serve as a psychological buffer against any potential threats to his self- image. Not entirely averse to taking social risks, however, Tyrone was willing to take the leap to attend the Summer Governor's school with a number of students he had never before met. The caveat: they were all highly gifted students; hence his ability to cope in spite of the unknowns inherent in this scenario.

Second, in addition to maintaining peer relationships exclusively with his intellectual peers, Tyrone utilized problem-solving skills to push him over difficult challenges. He tended to temporarily shut out distractions and intensely focus on the task at hand when working

through it. While he was generally able to resolve these challenges independently after a time of contemplation, he was willing to ask for assistance, either from the teacher or his friends, if needed. He saw this not as a sign of weakness, but simply another tool to complete the task at hand. He also scheduled, without apology, a study hall during school hours to provide extra time to complete his assignments.

Last, Tyrone had high expectations and clear goals for college and career. He was able to see a relationship between the need for him to do well academically in high school and achieving the college and career goals that he had set for himself. This helped him to cope with the hard work necessary to keep his grades up, even in the courses that he did not consider to be his forte.

Table 2

Data Matrix of Theme Derivation across CS2 Data Sources

Theme	Category	Subcategory	Source
Relationships	Mom	Authoritative	CS2S/CS2P/CS2M/CS2H
		Support	CS2S/CS2P/CS2M/CS2H
		High expectations	CS2S/CS2P/CS2M/CS2H
	Peers	Intellectual equals	CS2S/CS2P/CS2M/CS2H
		Support	CS2S/CS2P/CS2M/CS2H
		Competition	CS2S/CS2M/CS2H
	Teachers	Support	CS2S/CS2P/CS2M/CS2H
School environment	Academic challenge	Competition	CS2S/CS2M/CS2H
	Choice of peers	Academic/social comfort	CS2S/CS2P/CS2M/CS2H
		Competition	CS2M/CS2H
	Co-curricular activities	Academic Team	CS2S/CS2P/CS2H
		Summer Governor's School	CS2S/CS2P/CS2H
	Teachers	Support	CS2S/CS2P/CS2M/CS2H
	Recognition	Confidence	CS2S/CS2M/CS2H
Personality traits	Even temperament	Coping	CS2P/CS2M/CS2H

	Internal locus of control	Effort	CS2S/CS2P/CS2M/CS2H
	Self-confidence	High expectations	CS2S/CS2P/CS2M/CS2H
	Self-awareness	Strengths, weaknesses	CS2S /CS2P/CS2M/CS2H
	Persistence	Focus	CS2S /CS2P/CS2M/CS2H
High expectations/goals	Student	Self-confidence	CS1S/CS2P/CS2M/CS2H
	Mom	Support	CS2S/CS2P/CS2M/CS2H
	Teachers	Support	CS2S/CS2M/CS2H
Coping strategies	Choice of peers	Academic/social comfort	CS2S/CS2P/CS2M/CS2H
	Problem-solving skills	Persistence	CS2S/CS2P/CS2M
	High expectations/goals for self	Grades/education/career	CS2S/CS2P/CS2M/CS2H

Note. CS2S=Case 2 Student; CS2P=Case 2 Parent; CS2M=Case 2 Middle School Teacher; CS2H=Case 2 High School Teacher.

Case #3: Jaynelle

Jaynelle was a seventeen-year-old high school senior ranked thirteenth in her class of 144 with a GPA of 3.8; she had received primarily A's with a smattering of B's in all of her high school credit courses. She attended her home school all day for classes in Advanced English, government, calculus, environmental science, computer design, and a study hall.

Jaynelle lived with her mother, who had separated from her father the previous year. Jaynelle had, at this point, little contact with her father, and referred to her four half-siblings who lived elsewhere as "my father's children." Her father had not graduated from high school, and he worked for a local oyster company. Her mother held a master's degree and taught first grade in the town's public elementary school. Jaynelle had lived in this rural community all of her life and had attended the public schools during her entire educational career. She was identified as gifted in her second grade year.

On the day that Jaynelle was interviewed, she dressed in her basketball uniform, as she had practice following the interview. Her shoulder-length hair was pulled back in a ponytail; her complexion was caramel. Although petite, she had the compact musculature of an athlete. While she was somewhat quiet and reserved at the inception of the interview, she soon became more animated and responded with apparent candor.

A number of themes arose from the analysis of transcriptions of interviews with Jaynelle, her mother, her former Algebra II teacher, and her sixth grade science teacher that address the question as to how a gifted minority adolescent living in rural poverty, such as Jaynelle, can overcome the odds to be academically successful. Protective factors that were revealed as serving against Jaynelle's confluence of at-risk barriers were: her

relationships with her mother, peers, and teachers; the school environment; specific personality traits; goals and high expectations; and coping strategies.

Relationships: Mom

Jaynelle's mother proved to be a powerful influence on her daughter's academic success. A first grade teacher at the elementary school in the same district where her daughter attended high school, she was deeply committed to helping prepare Jaynelle for a productive future. For her, this meant pushing Jaynelle to do her best academically and not accepting mediocre grades. She also, however, was sensitive to Jaynelle's need as a natural athlete to engage in sports, and allowed her to balance her academics with participation on a number of athletic teams. An authoritative parent, she tempered her very high expectations for Jaynelle with a nurturing home environment. Jaynelle clearly valued their close, supportive relationship:

My mom and I are close. Me and her, we stick together. My mother has real high expectations for me. She wants the best for me - whatever I decide to do, as long as I'm doing something.

My mom pushes me the hardest. With her being a school teacher, she doesn't accept C's, so I crack down to get A's and B's.

Jaynelle's mom provided an honest assessment of their relationship. She shared that the separation between her and Jaynelle's father had been difficult for them, but, even so, she maintained the expectation that her daughter would put her school work first. As a Black female educator with a master's degree, Mom took pride in functioning as a role model for her daughter. She clearly adored Jaynelle, and was gratified by her talents and achievements. Mom expressed her thoughts regarding their relationship thus:

She just amazes me at things that she does or the things that she says...everybody always has good things to say about her. Always. She's been a really neat child. I'm glad I have her.

It's [just] her and I at home, and she's very protective of Mama. She doesn't want me to go too far. It's really funny...if I go away to a conference, she'll call every day... "Mama, when are you coming home?"

I have always been the support for her. The basketball games, the T-ball games, football games with cheerleading – she's been very sports-oriented – but her academics are very important to her, too. I've pushed her as far as I could with that. Being a teacher's child, of course, I think she knows that I have expectations. No, she *does* know.

Mom went on to discuss in more detail her influence on Jaynelle's academics:

I think I've been influential, of course. I feel as though she sees success as far as her mother, so she sets those high goals for herself...I think she pushes herself because she knows I want her to do it. She's always got in the back of her mind, you know, "I know what my mama expects, so I gotta do well." She does not want to go below my standards, so she is going to try to push herself...

I know what she's capable of and so does she. She always has that little voice behind her telling her "you can't get a C."

When asked if there were any repercussions for Jaynelle if she *did* receive a C, Mom responded:

Yeah, she's been grounded. Now, it depends...one of her teachers explained to me that "oh, that's just a C for the nine weeks, it doesn't matter, because what's going to go on the transcript is the final grade." You know what she ended up for the year? An A. So I'm upset for nothing. But you know, in a way it wasn't for nothing, it was just, you know, I want you to do the best that you can. If you *can't* do any better, I understand, but that's not you. And she knows it's not her.

Jaynelle's middle school teacher described her perception of the relationship between mother and daughter:

They seemed to have a very good relationship. She thought a lot of her mom. I can picture her with her mom out in the old breezeway [of the middle school]...and it was like they were best friends, you know? I think she had a close relationship with her mom, and a *good* relationship with her mom, and that has given her a lot of confidence in being able to do well.

Jaynelle's high school teacher reiterated the positive influence of Jaynelle's mom on her academics:

Her mom's there [for her], pushes her – she has a lot of push, and she gets the determination and motivation from home. I mean, she has somebody there. It's not like she goes home and no one's pushing education...I know she's had a stable environment with her mom. I mean, she can go to her mom with anything. That's a good backbone to have.

Relationships: Teachers

In addition to the positive relationship she had with her mother, Jaynelle also benefited from positive relationships with her teachers, in particular one of her high school math teachers who also happened to be interviewed for the present study. The teacher was mentioned by Jaynelle, her mom, and herself as having a close relationship with Jaynelle and having a positive impact on her academic success. Jaynelle described their special relationship for the interviewer:

I have a pretty strong relationship with my old math teacher. I go to her house sometimes and play with her kids and she'll help me with the math. That's probably the closest [relationship I have with an adult] outside the family. She's one of those teachers that actually breaks down and explains everything, makes everything clear. You leave with no questions. I really like that about her...most teachers don't do that.

The teacher talked a bit about how her relationship with Jaynelle impacted her academics:

I know she feels free coming to talk to me, and I don't know if I've influenced her, but I always try to be positive and guide her through education as being important because it *is*. I helped her, even *after* I was her teacher - she'd come back to me for help with her math. So I helped her with her calculus. [When] she struggled with chemistry, I helped her a lot with chemistry [too].

Relationships: Peers

Jaynelle's choice of friends appears to have changed as she transitioned from the elementary school to the middle school to the high school. In her elementary school years, her peer group was comprised almost exclusively of other identified gifted children. This continued into her first two years of middle school (fifth and sixth grades) when she still

considered her peers to be the other gifted students with which she was clustered for academic classes. However, as she began to maneuver the slippery slope of adolescence, her peer group expanded to include less academic students. By the time she entered high school, few of the students she considered friends outside of the classroom were high academic achievers. This appears to have been a conscious choice as Jaynelle strove to balance her personal desire to be academically successful with her need to be accepted by the broader student population, including other athletes who participated with her in sports. Her mom provided an overview of the social transformation Jaynelle undertook over the years:

In the elementary grades, that group of [gifted] children, they *really* kind of hung out together, you know what I'm saying? A lot of the things that she did as far as [gifted and talented] were done in the elementary school. Even a couple of years beginning here [at the middle school] because they were all kind of placed together. [But] she kind of weaned herself out. Even as far as meeting with [the gifted coordinator], Jaynelle would not go to the meetings [in her later middle school years]. She chose not to.

[In high school] I've noticed most of her friends may be on a medium academic level; she doesn't hang out with a lot of children [on a high academic level]. She chooses – that's just the way her realm is – most of the kids who are in her peer group as far as academics, she doesn't really hang out with them. [She considers her peers] to be equals in what she enjoys to do, but not necessarily the kids who are on her academic level. And I noticed as far as [choosing] high school [classes], she didn't take any Advanced Placement classes. Now she did take all advanced English and math, but she refused to do AP. And a lot of it is because most of her friends are not as high maintenance academically.

Jaynelle described her current peer group:

I hang out with people that, not a lot of people who are on my academic level. But they're just my friends. I mean...we get along, laugh, and joke...

Her teachers provided their perspectives of Jaynelle's social circles in middle and high school. From her sixth grade teacher:

I don't remember her being with a certain few people. It was a combination of kids. It wasn't necessarily all girls, Black, White – I don't think it mattered. They wouldn't be any lower than "C" students, but you know, average students – it didn't matter. It

was anywhere from average to high. Lower students? I don't think she paid much attention to them.

The group of kids that she picked to be around really helped to hold her up; you know, she was always very happy with them. There were never any problems, fights, arguments with any of her friends, and it was pretty much the same the whole year through.

When asked who Jaynelle seemed to consider to be her peers, her high school teacher responded:

A lot of girls that she plays on the basketball team with. Um, she has a lot of boys as friends. She seems to really work well with boys...pretty much everybody, you know, that are in her classes. She gets along with everybody.

When probed further, she provided a bit more detail:

Interviewer: So there's not really one particular group or another?

Teacher: No...I'd say she probably hangs out more with the athletes, but that's what she's involved in. She's always with those people because she's with them after school and then for games and things.

Interviewer: How does she seem to relate with other kids who are also highly intelligent or do well in school? Do you see any difference in the relationship she has with them and the other people who are her friends, or does she even hang out with them?

Teacher: When she's choosing her friends, I don't think it's an actual issue because I would say she's probably one of the smartest of her group. I guess relationship-wise, what I see is she can joke around with someone who's not as intelligent just the same as someone who is. I don't think it really is an issue. She *does* have intelligent friends, but she has a lot of friends who are just average – people who don't care about their grades and then there's a lot of people who do. She kind of mixes with those groups.

So, while Jaynelle did not shun her intellectual peers and got along well with them in her classes, she did not choose to socialize with them much outside of the classroom. And, by purposely choosing not to take Advanced Placement courses - the most rigorous offered at her school – she could have been shielding herself from being perceived by the general

student population as being too unidimensional with regard to academics. Although she had been inducted into the National Honor Society and had won numerous awards as a scholar-athlete, by spending the majority of her social time in school with other athletes, she attempted to shift the focus of others onto her role as a basketball player and track star and away from her academic achievements. In this way, she felt that she was “allowed” to be academically successful due to the “cover” that her social relationships provided for her.

School Environment

A combination of elements related to Jaynelle’s school environment provided support for her academic success, including supportive teachers, academic course choices, and peers of mixed abilities.

Jaynelle mentioned good teachers as the one element specifically related to school that helped her be academically successful. She explained:

The teachers that do help, they go above and beyond. They put out whatever you need. The ones who’ve helped me, I greatly appreciate that. Like math, where you’re learning a new subject, I like it when the teacher will come and do problems with me until I understand, instead of just, like, writing it on the board and you figure it out. Like [my Algebra II teacher]. She’s one of those teachers that actually breaks down and explains everything, makes everything clear. You leave with no questions. I really like that about her.

Jaynelle’s strategic choice of high school courses also proved to contribute to her academic success. The local high school that she attended offered no dual enrollment courses and offered very few Advanced Placement courses – only AP English 12, AP Government, and AP US History. As Jaynelle perceived her strengths to lie in mathematics and not in the humanities, she chose not to take the AP courses offered. However, she did take the advanced level (the highest offered with the exception of AP) English courses; no advanced levels were available in history. In addition, she took the advanced level in her science

courses when available. Furthermore, since middle school she had always taken the most challenging math courses available, beginning with Algebra I in the seventh grade through calculus in twelfth grade. While Jaynelle's mother might have argued that not taking the AP courses was her daughter's way of ensuring placement in classes with her less-than-academic friends, it appears as though she may have actually chosen courses based on her realistic assessment of her strengths and weaknesses. This seemed to pay dividends for her: ranked thirteenth in a class of 144, her grade point average was a 3.8. This was a true GPA, as her local school only granted weighted credit for Advanced Placement and dual enrollment courses. Jaynelle clearly saw the importance of taking the most rigorous courses she was able to handle:

Interviewer: How has being in some more challenging classes affected your experiences in school?

Jaynelle: Um, sometimes it's hard, kind of, [and] I maybe want to give it up. But I've stuck it out and do what I have to do.

Interviewer: Why?

Jaynelle: 'Cause I want to be a better person and do something with my life.

Interestingly, Jaynelle's choosing to have peers who were mostly *not* as academically inclined as she actually seemed to help her to succeed academically. By socializing with students who were generally not in her classes, she was able to maintain a dual persona: the academic Jaynelle in the classroom transformed into Jaynelle, the social butterfly in the hallways. In this way she was able to have the best of both worlds – she could exhibit her academic prowess in the confines of her advanced classes and then escape to a world of social acceptance among the popular school athletes. Jaynelle succinctly described whom she considered to be her peer group:

I hang out with people that, not a lot of people who are on my academic level. But they're just my friends.

Jaynelle's mom describes her peer group in this way:

[They are] not necessarily the kids who are on her academic level. I've noticed, most of her friends may be on a medium academic level, but she doesn't hang out with a lot of children [on a high academic level].

When asked if mom thought this was by choice, she responded:

Yeah. She chooses – that's just the way her realm is – most of the kids that are in her peer group as far as academics, she doesn't really hang out with them. There might be a few, but her basic group of friends are not academically where she is.

Jaynelle's high school teacher had a similar perception about her choice of friends:

I'd say she probably hangs out more with the athletes, but that's what she's involved in. She's always with those people because she's with them after school and then for games and things.

When asked how Jaynelle seemed to relate to other high achieving students, her high school teacher responded:

When she's choosing her friends, I don't think it's an actual issue because I would say she's probably one of the smartest of her group. I guess relationship-wise, what I see is she can joke around with someone who's not as intelligent just the same as someone who is. I don't think it really is an issue. She *does* have intelligent friends, but she has a lot of friends who are just average – people who don't care about their grades and then there's a lot of people who do. She kind of mixes with those groups.

In addition to the external protective factors of relationships with her mother, peers, and teachers as well as school environments, several internal factors existed that contributed to Janelle's academic success: specific personality traits, goals and high expectations, and coping strategies.

Specific Personality Traits

Janelle's personality traits of even temperament, internal locus of control, self-confidence, and persistence acted as barriers against the at-risk factors that she possessed.

Janelle was portrayed by those interviewed as having an even temperament, with an easy-going manner and a pleasant attitude. This does not mean that she never became frustrated – she did, occasionally – but she generally took things in stride and disallowed potential stressors to overwhelm her. Jaynelle’s middle school teacher provided some insight into her even temperament:

She just seemed to be such an adaptable kid. She was very flexible and adapted to change very easily. She was just very laid back, I think, and flexible with the way the school was carried on. She seemed to be pretty carefree. She was *always* in a good mood. Always happy...like nothing bothered her – she just let it roll off and would laugh about it.

Jaynelles’s high school teacher also spoke of her easy-going personality:

It seems to me she always felt at ease in class. She felt comfortable with everything... she gets along with everybody. I’ve never seen her upset or really angry about anything or anybody. She’s a good person.

Mom shared that Jaynelle was a “people person,” and because of her desire to make everybody laugh, she was sometimes the class clown. She proudly stated that “everyone just loves her dearly...just thinks the world of her...everybody has always had good things to say about her. Always.” So Jaynelle’s even temperament not only helped her to deal with the stressors inherent in being an at-risk gifted adolescent, but also drew people to her, providing an ever-increasing network of support.

A second characteristic that Jaynelle possessed was self-confidence, a trait that served her well in maneuvering both academic and social scenarios. Jaynelle was aware of her talents without being arrogant, was self-assured without being cocky. She explained:

I’m pretty confident. As long as I continue to do good in this math and go ahead to college, I think I’ll meet my goals. I set high expectations for myself. But I meet those expectations.

Jaynelle’s middle school teacher shared:

She was a very confident sixth-grader, which is a hard thing to be. I would say that she was one of the most confident ones that I remember that year. She was *sure* of herself – confident, for sure.

Her high school teacher agreed:

I think she has a high self-esteem and self-confidence. I think she believes in herself and she knows when she actually tries something that she's probably going to be able to figure it out or be successful at it. She knows what she can do and, you know, isn't ashamed to tell you or go ahead and just do it. And once she sets her mind to it, she usually doesn't stop.

This element of persistence implied by Jaynelle's high school teacher is a third trait that served to support her academic success. Jaynelle was determined not only to do what it took to earn good grades in her classes, but to also truly understand what she was learning, particularly in her beloved mathematics. Although she occasionally became frustrated, she eventually worked through difficulties to successfully complete the task at hand. Her middle school teacher added her perspective on Jaynelle's persistence:

She knew what she had to do and would take care of it...She kept at it. [If faced with a difficult task] she would just go back and forth until she figured it out...she always asked a lot of questions, just for her own clarification.

Both of her teachers indicated that they never knew Jaynelle to give up. Jaynelle agreed that if an academic task seemed difficult, she would face it rather than retreat from it. She was not afraid to ask questions, and sought out teachers she knew would be willing to take the time to help her understand. She acknowledged that though she may occasionally get upset at a particularly tricky task, she would always go back "to work through it. I work hard." Her advice for others faced with similar challenges was simply: "Work hard; stay focused."

A fourth personality trait possessed by Jaynelle was an internal locus of control. Jaynelle believed without hesitation that she had complete control over her outcomes and that her hard work is what would lead to her success. She expressed her thoughts thus:

I think my own effort has the biggest impact on things, more than anyone else outside. I feel like *I* have control. No one has control over what I do. I work hard...I know what to do and I get it done.

Her mom agreed with this assessment, stating “She can see that working harder has a...payoff...” Jaynelle’s teachers also perceived that she had an internal locus of control, seeing a connection between her actions and the resulting outcomes. Her high school math teacher noted that “she knows that what she puts in is gonna affect her grade, and if she doesn’t study that’s why she’s not gonna do well. She takes responsibility for her grades.”

Her middle school teacher agreed:

There was no excuse. That’s the way she handled things. [She was] like, “If I don’t get this done, nobody’s going to do it for me...I’m responsible for it.”

Jaynelle’s belief that her future was controlled by her and her alone motivated her to work hard to achieve the expectations and goals that she had set forth for herself in terms of academic achievement in high school, as well as aspirations she had for college and career; she refused to allow the at-risk factors she possessed serve as barriers to prevent her from reaching her objectives.

Goals and High Expectations

It is apparent that Jaynelle, her mom, and her teachers all had high expectations for her in terms of academic achievement. In addition, Jaynelle had set specific goals for college and career and had support from family and teachers to pursue those goals; due to her internal locus of control, she perceived that her hard work was the key to making these dreams a reality.

Jaynelles’s teachers discussed the goals and expectations that Jaynelle and her mom had for her. Her middle school teacher shared:

She definitely had high expectations; she was concerned about making sure that things were being done right. She really set herself high...her mom seemed to have high expectations.

I remember her saying that she – it wasn't that she thought she *might* go to college, she would say that she *was* going to college. Yeah, in sixth grade she *was* going to college.

Jaynelle's high school teacher discussed her perspective on Jaynelle's goals and expectations and those that her mom had for her:

She strives for her A's and B's. And she really strives for A's. I think she realizes how important it is and I think it's a priority. Her mom sees the potential that she has and doesn't want her to waste it...I know that she wants to go to college – to go to school and get a college degree.

Jaynelle provided some insight regarding her academic expectations in high school and her goals for the future, as well as the goals and expectations that her family had for her:

I set high expectations for myself. But I meet those expectations. I want to finish college and become an accountant. I want to get the highest degree [possible] so I can make some big bucks. I just really want to do that 'cause I like numbers...I am aiming for VCU. But it's between VCU and George Mason. Either one would be fine with me as long as I go to school.

My mom pushes me the hardest. She doesn't accept C's, so I crack down and get A's and B's. My mother, my grandma, and my uncle – they all have real high expectations for me. They just want me to go to college and become something so I won't be just another person out on the street. My uncle's just trying to make me go to a four year college. It's not that I don't want to, but some people feel like I should go to a community [college] and then transfer. He thinks I'm smarter than that, so that makes *me* feel like I'm smarter than that. [My mom] just wants the best for me...whatever I decide to do, as long as it's something.

Coping Strategies

Jaynelle had relationships, a school environment, personality traits, and high expectations that all supported her academic achievement. However, Jaynelle also employed several coping strategies, as well, including choice of peers, clowning, choice of classes, and

participation in sports - all centered on maintaining her social comfort while achieving academically.

First, Jaynelle strategically navigated the high school's social waters through her choice of peers. While getting along well with other academically-inclined students in her more advanced classes, Jaynelle specifically chose to socialize outside of the classroom with those students who mostly tended *not* to be academic achievers. In this way, she satisfied her desire for academic achievement in relatively challenging classes while at the same time fulfilling her need to "be seen" among the general population of her school.

Second, Jaynelle's status as a respected athlete served as an additional coping mechanism. Having been on the basketball team since sixth grade and on the track team since eighth, her reputation as an elite school athlete was well-established. So, while she was ranked in the top 10% of her class academically, her classmates were much more likely to identify her as having been ranked sixth in the state in track. Her combination of athleticism and academic achievement earned her "all-academic" awards each season; lest her peers question her social allegiance due to this distinction, Jaynelle made it a point to "hang out" primarily with other athletes, most of whom were not high academic achievers.

A third coping skill that Jaynelle employed was being a "class clown," particularly in the hallways or in those classes that served students of mixed abilities. Jaynelle's mother shared that this particular behavior began when her daughter entered high school; her "clowning around," she said, was Jaynelle's way of "being seen." Indeed, by "being seen" as an athlete who also had a reputation as a class clown, Jaynelle effectively obscured her image as a high-achieving student to all but her teachers, her family, and the students in her advanced classes. And while Jaynelle's mother stated that she never explicitly talked about

trying to avoid being thought of as a “nerd,” her behaviors indicated that this was an implicit concern.

Last, Jaynelle coped academically by making choices of classes that were the most suited to her particular abilities. While she did not choose the most demanding courses across all content areas, she did choose the most rigorous courses in her areas of strength. For example, Jaynelle had excelled in mathematics throughout her school career and chose a mathematics track that ensured she would have calculus under her belt before graduating. She also did well in the sciences, and took advanced levels of those courses when available. By choosing courses that were suited to her strengths, Jaynelle ensured that she was appropriately challenged in those, while not being overwhelmed by taking courses that she perceived to be “over her head” in her relative areas of weakness. This sense of academic comfort enabled Jaynelle to maintain an excellent GPA while taking rigorous courses that would best prepare her for her chosen college major and career.

Table 3

Data Matrix of Theme Derivation across CS3 Data Sources

Theme	Category	Subcategory	Source
Relationships	Mom	Authoritative	CS3S/CS3P/CS3M/CS3H
		Supportive	CS3S/CS3P/CS3M/CS3H
		High expectations	CS3S/CS3P/CS3P/CS3H
	Peers	Mixed intellect/interest	CS3S/CS3P/CS3M/CS3H
	Teachers	Supportive	CS3S/CS3P/CS3H
School environment	Academic choices	Coping	CS3S/CS3P/CS3H
	Choice of peers	Academic/social comfort	CS3S/CS3P/CS3M/CS3H
	Teachers	Support	CS3S/CS3P/CS3H
Personality traits	Even temperament	Coping	CS3S/CS3M/CS3H
	Internal locus of control	Effort	CS3S/CS3M/CS3H
	Self-confidence	High expectations	CS3S/CS3M/CS3H
	Persistence	Focus	CS3S/CS3P/CS3M/CS3H
High expectations/goals	Student	Self-confidence	CS3S/CS3P/CS3M/CS3H
	Mom	Support	CS3S/CS3P/CS3H
	Teachers	Support	CS3S/CS3P/CS3H

Coping strategies	Choice of peers	Social comfort	CS3S/CS3P/CS3M/CS3H
	Choice of Classes	Academic comfort	CS3P/CS3M/CS3H
	Participation in Sports	Social comfort	CS3S/CS3P/CS3M/CS3H
	Clowning	Social comfort	CS3S/CS3P/CS3M

Note. CS3=Case 3 Student; CS3P=Case 3 Parent; CS3M=Case 3 Middle School Teacher; CS3H=Case 3 High School Teacher.

Case #4: Ronnie

Ronnie was a sixteen-year-old high school junior ranked eighteenth in her class of 139 with a GPA of 3.4; she had received A's and B's in all of her high school credit courses, with the exception of one C. She attended her home school for classes in Advanced English, United States History, calculus, anatomy and physiology, personal finance, computer information systems, and Art III.

Ronnie lived in a household with her mother, disabled grandmother, aunt, a younger brother, an older sister, and her sister's newborn child; her father was incarcerated. Her mother had previously worked at one of the local chain restaurants; at the time the interviews were conducted for the present study she was unemployed.

Ronnie had attended a number of schools in her educational career due to the frequent moves made by her family. However, the family had lived all but four years in the same general rural vicinity, and her mother vowed to stay situated in their current home at least until Ronnie's high school graduation. Ronnie was identified as gifted in her fourth grade year in a previous school system, scoring in the 96th percentile on the language section of a test of achievement.

On the day that Ronnie was interviewed, she was well-dressed with her hair styled in a chin-length "wrap." She wore glasses with lightweight metal frames. Ronnie was quite petite and had a chocolate complexion. While she spoke quietly during the course of the interview, she exhibited an easy manner and appeared to be quite comfortable with the process, even thanking the researcher for asking her to participate in the study.

Several themes arose from the analysis of transcriptions of interviews with Ronnie, her mother, her current calculus teacher, and her seventh grade English teacher. These

themes reveal the protective factors serving to buffer against Ronnie's combination of at-risk factors, therefore enabling her to overcome the odds to be academically successful: her relationships with her mother, her peers, and her teachers; the school environment; specific personality traits; goals and high expectations; and coping strategies.

Relationships: Mom

The relationship that Ronnie's mother sustained with her daughter was central to Ronnie's academic success. She practiced an authoritative parenting style, maintaining high expectations for Ronnie while remaining relaxed during their personal interactions. Because of frequent difficulties finding transportation and inconsistent availability of a telephone, Ronnie's middle and high school teachers had very little knowledge of this relationship. However, interviews with Ronnie and her mother painted a picture of a supportive parent who centered her life on helping her daughter to be successful. Ronnie spoke of the closeness she and her mother shared, of her mother's commitment to her education, and of the high but reasonable expectations that she had for Ronnie:

Me and my mom have a strong relationship. She expects me to succeed, but she tells me whatever I want to do in life, I can go ahead and do it. She doesn't put anything high above me, where I have to feel like I'm nothing unless I get this. She really helps me. She's like another friend.

She's always been there for me when I needed her, like to help me with school. Like if I needed help on any homework assignments or anything, she was always there to help me. [When I was in the elementary gifted program], she was the one who took me back and forth... 'cause we had meetings like around six o'clock in the morning. And she was one of the sponsors when we had field trips; she volunteered to help us.

Ronnie's mom clearly cared deeply for her daughter, as indicated by the way she spoke of her when interviewed:

She is the sweetest child. I tell her all the time she's like a television character, you always waitin' to see, is it real, you know? It's like you have to look at her all the time and see "are you real?" *Every* little thing she does, I'm so proud. It's just about

her making me proud every day. I'm just enamored with her; I look at her, and I'm like, "Little girl..."

Me and Ronnie have a *very* good relationship...If she has a book at school, I'll read it, too. If she has a book, that's our new challenge – okay, which one of us is going to finish the book first? And then when we read the book we can talk about the book...

Mom was well aware of Ronnie's giftedness, and though she had few resources of her own, she sought out opportunities to help support Ronnie's talents. When a teacher told her about a magnet school that seemed well-suited to Ronnie's intellect, Mom *moved the family* two hours away from their home town so that Ronnie could attend.

[When she was in elementary school], they recommended her going [to a magnet middle school], and they sent her application in. [But] we have to *live* there for her to *attend* there. So I had to go through figuring out how to get to [the city]. So me and my sister, at that time, our best friend was getting ready to leave for the military, and she had a home right across the street from [the school]. So we rented her home.

In an effort to help Ronnie stay focused, she attempted to shield her from external stressors that might distract her from her pursuit of academic excellence. In addition, she had extremely high expectations for Ronnie, truly *believed* that Ronnie would succeed, and articulated this belief to her daughter. She shared:

I try very hard not to let things get in the way of [her focus], because with her – I guess with any child – once you break a child's spirit, you broke the child. If I have to sugar-coat it, I'll sugar-coat it. I'll throw in powdered sugar, icing, everything, anything I have to on top so that she doesn't see, you know, *everything*, because everything's not meant for her to see. A lot of things, she doesn't have to deal with – it's for me to deal with. That's *my* burden, *my* worry. I try to keep certain barriers out of her way.

[My expectations for her] are very high. I think it's because we know what she can do...She'd said she was gonna be a neurosurgeon since she was eight. She's now sixteen and she hasn't wavered from it. So I'm like, okay, that's what you're gonna do.

Relationships: Peers

Ronnie's choice of peers and the relationships that she maintained with them played

an integral part in her academic success. While she was pleasant to everyone she encountered, she was quite strategic in her selection of whom she considered to be her friends socially and with whom she desired to be seen in public. As Ronnie's self-image centered on her being perceived as intelligent and high-achieving, she only associated with other intelligent and high-achieving students. Ronnie's mother shared that this had been the case throughout Ronnie's educational career:

Every school she's been to, her best friend or whatever person she's with has always came along with the same grades that she had. They take the same classes, they take the advanced classes, and it's like she doesn't stray from that... To her, her peers are – she would say on her level. School-wise, if they're not even in the classes that she takes or at least get similar to the grades she gets, she feels she doesn't have anything in common, nor does she have to give it her time... With Ronnie, her peers are how you act, who you're around, what you do, and what your grades are. Her biggest thing is what someone's grades are.

Ronnie agreed that her peer group was comprised primarily of other similarly high-achieving students. She also noted that they helped to keep each other focused academically:

Well, I have a *best* friend. She's really smart, just like me... she has a 3.7 GPA, and that's my most favorite friend, ever. And my other friends, they're smart, too. The main friends that I hang out with – the ones that's more into school – they help me with that and make sure that I don't stray off track or anything...

Ronnie's calculus teacher observed that while Ronnie seemed to get along with everyone, her chosen peer group was made up of other academically-inclined students. He added that these students not only enjoyed each other from a social perspective, but challenged each other in the academic realm:

The people she seems to hang out with – her buddies – are other advanced students... they seem to be some of her best friends. So I think that she's hanging out with people who are high performers like herself... these are people that she socially connects with and has a bosom friendship with, you can tell. They are other students who are of high ability and have high expectations.

I think there's some camaraderie, I think there's a little bit of competition, which is good... It's funny, when I first came in, I thought it was sort of surprising to me how

some of the kids wanted to show off at the board... It's great – you don't just have people showing off because they dunked a basketball, let's show off because we can do a calculus problem, too. It comes out in fun ways, too, with her buddies, you know, sort of jabbing each other, "oh, you missed that!" It's funny, in calculus class, they'll have conversations and they're making jokes about stuff that 95% of the rest of the world wouldn't know what the heck they're talking about, 'cause they're using jargon in that world that most people don't know...

Relationships: Teachers

In addition to the relationships that Ronnie had with her mom and with her peers, the close relationships forged with her teachers also helped to buffer against factors that placed her at-risk academically. Ronnie's mom relayed the importance of Ronnie's relationships with teachers and how they lent support in a number of ways that helped contribute to her academic success:

She's had wonderful teachers, God bless them. Every teacher that we've come across with Ronnie who has come across her path has cared about Ronnie and Ronnie's education. And has been a teacher that has cared enough to able to talk to me on the phone if I can't get over to school. Little things like that make such a difference.

[A teacher from Ronnie's elementary school] is the first teacher who said, "You've got a very smart little girl." And [she], to this day, remembers her. And [she] was the one who pushed [the magnet middle school]. She's the one who filled out the applications and everything. And every little program there was then, she would let me know. Or, if there was something that Ronnie could participate in, she would pull her out and put her there.

This connection with teachers also proved to be one of a number of important components of Ronnie's support system of the school environment.

School Environment

Academic challenge, intellectual peers, teachers, and guidance staff were elements within Ronnie's school environments that provided supports for her academic excellence in spite of the at-risk factors she possessed.

Throughout her school career, Ronnie participated in academic programs that

provided the stimulating, intellectually challenging contexts in which she thrived. As this was a way of life for her from an early age, she grew up expecting nothing less. As she met each subsequent challenge, she was further motivated to face the next. Ronnie discussed being placed into a gifted program in elementary school called “Problem Solvers” that she credited with setting the stage for her pursuit of academic excellence:

Interviewer: What particular factors can you think of related to the school environment that have helped you to be academically successful?

Ronnie: I think the biggest one was “Problem Solvers” when I was young, ‘cause it started me at such a young age to get used to all that...to be very good in school. It was just a group of academically talented kids, and they taught us more about what we learned in school – more in depth – and then we did community service. It gave you like, a start to make sure that this is what you want to do – you want to good academically...

If I didn’t start early at trying to do good in school, then I probably wouldn’t be where I am at now, with as smart as I am in school and the advantages that I’ve had already. If I didn’t start earlier, then I probably wouldn’t be like this...

She then proudly described her experience being chosen as a student at an academically competitive magnet school for gifted students in the middle grades:

When I was in [the city], my mom signed me up to go to [the magnet school], which was a high advanced school. And you have to beat out – they only let 200 kids in there – you have to beat out the other 1000 that wanted to get in. And seeing their hard academic rate and what you have to accomplish school-wise, I think that got me more focused ‘cause it was something that I really wanted to do and I really wanted to go there – that was my motivation.

Ronnie’s middle school teacher also described the magnet school she attended as one that offered a high level of challenge appropriate for the gifted students it served:

That’s what’s great about this environment is that they get a challenge. They’re taking eight courses; they take four classes a day. Some students are taking two languages. So it’s definitely a challenging school. It’s very good for gifted students because it *is* challenging. And most of the classes are high school credit-bearing when you get to

eighth grade. The courses that aren't high school credit-bearing are taught as honors courses. So either way, they are getting that rigor.

As for high school, Ronnie's calculus teacher described the level of challenge that she received in his class:

In calculus she's one of many bright students, and so I think she's challenged there, but she's challenged without feeling like she's being thrown to the wolves. I think she's stretching herself, but still feeling a comfort level. I would like to think that calculus is that ideal environment for her.

So, calculus appears to place Ronnie into the zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978), where she is challenged enough to be engaged, but not so challenged as to be overwhelmed.

Within the framework of academic challenge lies a second aspect of the school environment that supports Ronnie's success as a student: being surrounded by her intellectual peers. Inherently, her advanced classes are attended by other students who are similar to Ronnie in terms of their desire for challenge. Beyond the classroom, Ronnie nurtures relationships with these students, who subsequently challenge and support each other through their academic pursuits. Ronnie's mom provided an example:

Like her best friend, they're very against each other academically. And it pulls them so much closer. They take all the same classes, they all take advanced classes...And with those girls, when they do a test, they're on the phone with each other. You know, and it's "well, we'll see what happens at school tomorrow." Like that. And when they come in, it's "Ma I got two points better than her" or "Ma, she beat me this time" or whatever like that. They're *at it*.

Ronnie's calculus teacher describes the interactions among Ronnie's intellectual peers in his class:

[Her] buddies...are other students who are of high ability and who have high expectations...In calculus she's one of many bright students...she's got some good friends who she collaborates with who are also good students...I see [competition] come out in fun ways, too, with her buddies, you know, sort of jabbing each other, "oh, you missed that!"...

Consistent interactions with her intellectual peers from school lent Ronnie both the academic and the social comfort needed to motivate her to continue along her path of academic success.

Ronnie and her mother both discussed a third aspect of the school environment that provided additional support for her continued academic success: teachers and guidance staff. Ronnie talked at length about an opportunity that her high school guidance counselor discussed with her when she entered ninth grade. This opportunity, about which she would have never known without the help from her counselor, provided compelling motivation for Ronnie to maintain her record of academic excellence throughout high school:

At the high school [the guidance counselor] is *very* supportive. She's been like, the most supportive since I've been here. She's the one that started me with the [college scholars] program that I'm in right now. I didn't know anything about it, and she just came to me one day and asked me, gave me the guidelines of it and asked me would I want to try it. And I was like, "yeah!" So she got me started with that. I'm just very fortunate.

I got it in the ninth grade. You have to have at least a 3.5 GPA to even be considered a [college scholar], and it gives you a free scholarship to Mary Washington if you keep your grades steady. They pay for everything that your family can't provide for you, like they give a full scholarship, room and board, food, and all that...with a stipend.

The opportunity that Ronnie's guidance counselor presented to her was a motivator throughout high school, providing Ronnie with a clear goal and specific expectations that needed to be met to achieve that goal. In addition, Ronnie and her mother mentioned teachers that served as supports throughout her school years. Ronnie shared:

[In elementary school] my teacher came to me and she was like, she noticed how good I was doing in class, how I wasn't missing any homework or failing any tests, and just asked if I wanted to be a part of "Problem Solvers"...it gave you a start to make sure that this is what you want to do – you want to do good academically. So it really let me know that I *have* to go to college, just to be something.

My favorite subject [in high school] is math. And I think they have, like the best math teachers. 'Cause in ninth grade, when I was taking Algebra II, I had [a particular teacher]. And she was a tutor, she taught math, and she taught science. And she was just wonderful. She helped you with anything you need. If you had problems with other classes, then you could go to her [for those], too. And now I have [my calculus teacher], and he's a really excellent teacher. He really knows how to give you more in-depth of a problem. He'll teach you one way, and then he'll teach you another, easier way if you want to do it that way...

Ronnie's school environments provided her with academic challenge, interaction with her intellectual peers, and support from her guidance counselor and teachers. In conjunction with the relationships she maintained with her mom, peers, and teachers, these factors served as external protective barriers against the risk factors she possessed.

Specific Personality Traits

Further shielding Ronnie from barriers to achievement were the personality traits that she possessed of even temperament, internal locus of control, persistence, self-confidence, and self-image. Ronnie's mother and teachers noted her easy-going temperament and the ease with which she interacted with others. Ronnie's mom shared:

She is the sweetest child. She gets along with everybody. [Ronnie keeps] her head straight...She's *never* been in any type of trouble. I mean, not a disrespect, not a talkin' too much, nothing.

Her calculus teacher provided his perspective:

She seems to get along with everybody. She likes to work with other people. She always seems to come in happy. She always seems to be very positive.

In addition to her even temperament, Ronnie possessed an internal locus of control. She was keenly aware that her behaviors would determine the extent she would be successful, and this was manifest in the hard work that she put forth in school. Ronnie provided her perspective:

[While] I believe that other people can help, if you really don't put your own effort into it then it's not going to go as far as you like. If I see something that I want, I'll

try my best to get it. I try my hardest in school...I don't like to fail. I prefer to work [rather than] goofing around like everybody else.

Her mom shared that Ronnie was well aware that her actions would determine her outcomes:

Interviewer: Does [Ronnie] believe that her own efforts impact her success? Please explain.

Mom: Yes. She's a big believer in that...yeah, she's real big on the fact that whatever happens to her will be through her hard work - her grades is gonna come from how much you put into it so yeah, she knows that. She's big on that.

Ronnie's calculus teacher observed her efforts first hand:

She pushes herself. She works to get what she wants. Her expectations for herself are very high, but she knows what she has to do to get there. I think she realizes it doesn't just happen - it's all about what you put into it. [Last year] on a few occasions in pre-calculus when she didn't understand something, she came and asked for extra work. She didn't blame me, she registered that "I need to do more work on this" and asked for more work. So to me, that shows a connection of "I need to work more on something so I can reach that goal up there."

Related to Ronnie's internal locus of control is a third trait that she possessed:

persistence. As she was aware that her efforts would determine her success, she persisted through academic challenges by focusing, working hard, and tenacious questioning. Ronnie possessed insight into her own best methods of learning and studying, and utilized these to maintain focus on the tasks at hand. She tended to plug methodically through academic tasks that posed challenges for her, and reached out insistently to her teachers to ensure she correctly understood difficult concepts before attempting to conquer them on her own.

Ronnie's mom explained her take on Ronnie's persistence:

[If school work is difficult], she will shut the door and she has to be by herself. Her thing is she has to think. She gotta be by herself. If it's stumping her, she doesn't want nobody around. She is a child who has always had to work in complete silence. If it's something with school work, she'll break it down. Well, if I do *this*, what happens?

One-on-one can do it [at school]. She's not afraid [to ask for help]. She's not afraid *at all*. And sometimes she gets a little pushy with it...She's a child who knows to put one foot at a time in front of her. Put one foot in front of you and just walk through it. And she does it.

Ronnie's calculus teacher confirmed her tenacity:

She pushes herself. She works hard to get what she wants. She's got the kind of work ethic that you would need to make [her goals] happen, and the type of persistence. [If she faces difficulties], normally she rolls up her sleeves and does a little bit more work, asks a few questions, and she solves the problem by hard work. She's a doer. Once you get into advanced mathematics, there's often a variety of ways you can state your answer. Where most students would put it through whatever method is the least resistance for them, she would put it in multiple formats just to cover all the bases...and to make sure that she got the right answer...She's gonna seek me out or raise her hand or call on me – she's gonna find me when she needs something.

Ronnie shared her thoughts regarding her own persistence:

I don't like failing at anything. So I just try to ask as many questions as I can in school, and that way when I get home to do it by myself I know exactly what I'm doing. [If faced with a difficult problem], I'll try the problem as much as I can, and if it gets too hard, I'll ask somebody else their opinion. If I see a possible solution with theirs, I'll probably go with theirs. If not, then I'll go back to my original plans and just see what went wrong, what happened, and I'll try to do it. If I see something that I want, I'll try my best to get it. I try my hardest in school. Like I said, I don't like to fail.

In addition to possessing an even temperament, an internal locus of control, and persistence, Ronnie also exuded self-confidence. These personality traits worked together to support her academic success. An even temperament and belief in the pay-off of hard work allowed Ronnie to persist through difficult tasks, and by accomplishing them, her confidence continued to be fed. Ronnie explained, “[I am] very confident. If I see something I want, I'll try my best to get it...As determined as I am, I'm pretty sure [I'll reach my goals]. Her mom provided her view of Ronnie's confidence level: “I think Ronnie's very confident...She's very sure [that she will reach her goals]. You cannot tell her that it's not going to happen.”

And Ronnie's calculus teacher noted his observations of Ronnie's confidence:

She has a mature sense of confidence in her own abilities. She's not cocky or anything. She will volunteer [in calculus class] – without me even saying, “Anybody want to do this one on the board?” – she'll say, “I'll do it on the board.” And that only comes when there's that level of confidence first of all with your environment, but also with your subject matter. So she's confident in what she's doing...[On her papers] she always writes, “The best calculus student you ever had.”

Finally, Ronnie possessed a self-image that centered on her being an intelligent, high achieving student. She was very conscious of the way she was perceived by others, and worked hard at projecting a persona that mirrored her feelings of academic self-worth. Her mother noted:

[School] is where she's comfortable. In the school, or around anyone that talks like they know what they're talking about. Anything education-wise, that's Ronnie's thing...that's her comfort zone.

Ronnie's enrolling in only advanced classes or programs and choosing only academic achievers as friends not only perpetuated the image that others had of her as intelligent, but also served to solidify this image to herself.

Goals and High Expectations

Ronnie, her mother, and her teachers all had high expectations for her. This realm included very specific goals for college and career that Ronnie had set for herself and that her mother and teachers encouraged. Due to her internal locus of control, Ronnie perceived that her hard work was the key to fulfilling her expectations and reaching her goals. Furthermore, these lofty goals and expectations served to drive Ronnie to persist through any difficulties.

Ronnie's plans for college were set in stone. As a [college scholar], she set her sights on Mary Washington for her undergraduate studies. Ronnie had dreams of becoming a neurosurgeon, so planned to follow a pre-med program there and then move on to medical school. She explained:

After I graduate from Mary Washington for four years, I'm going to do graduate school at Johns Hopkins in Maryland...I want to get my medical degree so that I can be a neurosurgeon. One of the biggest dreams I have is to start my own medical program, non-profit, to go abroad to help little kids or adults with brain aneurysms or tumors, things like that, if they can't afford the surgery or if they can't afford to care for it – that's what I want to do.

When asked how sure she was that she will achieve her goals, she responded:

As determined as I am, I'm pretty sure. I've always wanted to be a doctor since I was little. It hasn't changed at all...I just kept at it...

Ronnie's mother described the expectations that Ronnie had for herself as "very, very, high." When asked to describe the expectations that she had for Ronnie, she responded, "Very high. I think that it's only because we know what she can do, and she's drilled it at us what she's *going* to do, so we're just waiting to see it happen." It was clear that Ronnie and her mom had discussed Ronnie's future plans, and mom expressed confidence that Ronnie would reach her goals:

She has a *plan* that she has had and stuck with. I've been real proud of her being able to stick with it...there's no deterring her...She's *always* talked about college. It's been the past two years that it's been Mary Washington that she's finally pinpointed where she's gonna go. So it's Mary Washington for her first four years, then it's Johns Hopkins.

Ever since she was eight, that little girl has always said she's going to be a doctor. She is going to be a neurosurgeon. And I'm like, do you know what it is? [*Laughs*]...That's always been her goal. She [*also*] wants her own foundation that she can start, where her and a group of doctors of *her* choice can go over to different little small areas around the country or impoverished areas to help out. That's her big thing.

When asked how sure Ronnie was that she would meet her goals, she responded:

She's very sure. You cannot tell her that it's not going to happen. I don't even talk to her about it not happening. I have no doubt that she'll meet every goal she puts in front of herself. No doubt...

Ronnie's calculus teacher, whom she had also had the previous year for pre-calculus, was similarly assured that she would realize her goals, which she had made known to him:

She has set very high expectations for herself. She works to get what she wants...It's funny, she always takes her name, and when she spells out her name she turns her whole name into a piece of art...the other day, she wrote "neurosurgeon." Yeah. And that's been pretty consistent, that's what she was saying last year. Yeah, neurosurgery is what she wants to do...I think whatever that young lady wants to do, she's going to do. That's a really big challenge, only a few people can meet that challenge, but I think she has a high probability of making it.

When asked if Ronnie seemed confident that she would meet the challenge of becoming a neurosurgeon, he stated:

Yeah, she's got the kind of work ethic that you would need to make something like that happen, and the type of persistence. She knows she'll have to work very hard and have to do it for a long time to make something like that happen. I see that [in her] every day.

Coping Strategies

Ronnie had relationships, a school environment, personality traits, and high expectations that all supported her academic achievement. Embedded in those factors, however, were also a number of self-coping strategies. First, Ronnie's peer relationships were almost exclusively with other high-achieving students. While she was pleasant to anyone she encountered, she was very selective in terms of whom she chose to "hang out with." The high achieving students with whom she shared her advanced classes were the same students with whom she associated socially. When Ronnie chose to try a sport for the first time during her junior year, she chose field hockey over other sports, primarily because the majority of the girls on the team were the more academically-oriented students. She characterized her closest friend as being "smart, just like me." This selectiveness of peers served a dual purpose: by immersing herself in a world of intellectual peers, she maintained a level of comfort in both the academic and social milieu.

Second, in addition to maintaining peer relationships exclusively with her intellectual peers, Ronnie utilized problem-solving skills to overcome difficult challenges. She

understood that she worked best with no distractions, so when at home, she retreated to her room. At school, she intently focused on the tasks at hand, methodically weighing a number of possible approaches before settling on the best solution. She was a thinker first, then a doer. It was important to Ronnie to be able to ask clarifying questions of her teachers to make sure that she was on the right track. She was rather insistent with this, as she desired to have a thorough understanding of the concepts taught before attempting to tackle work at home.

Last, Ronnie had high expectations and clear goals for college and career. She was well aware of the relationship between academic achievement in high school and attaining the college and career goals she had set for herself; due to her family's financial status, Ronnie's opportunity to attend college lay with her ability to earn a full scholarship. Visualizing herself as a successful doctor, Ronnie was better able to cope with the hard work necessary to realize her dreams.

Table 4

Data Matrix of Theme Derivation across CS4 Data Sources

Theme	Category	Subcategory	Source
Relationships	Mom	Authoritative	CS4S/CS4P
		Support	CS4S/CS4P
		High expectations	CS4S/CS4P
	Peers	Intellectual equals	CS4S/CS4P/CS4H
		Support	CS4S/CS4H
		Competition	CS4P/CS4H
	Teachers	Support	CS4S/CS4P
School environment	Academic Challenge	Zone of proximal development	CS4S/CS4M/CS4H
	Choice of peers	Academic/social comfort	CS4S/CS4P/CS4H
	Teachers/Guidance	Support	CS4S/CS4P
Personality traits	Even temperament	Coping	CS4P/CS4M/CS4H
	Internal locus of control	Effort	CS4S/CS4P/CS4H
	Self-confidence	High expectations	CS4S/CS4P/CS4H
	Self-image	Academic identification	CS4S/CS4P/CS4H
	Persistence	Focus/questioning	CS4S/CS4P/CS4M/CS4H

High expectations/goals	Student	Self-confidence	CS4S/CS4P/CS4M/CS4H
	Mom	Support	CS4S/CS4P
	Teachers	Support	CS4M
Coping strategies	Choice of peers	Academic/social comfort	CS4S/CS4P/CS4M/CS4H
	Problem-solving skills	Persistence	CS4S/CS4P
	High expectations/goals for self	Grades/education/career	CS4S/CS4P/CS4M

Note. CS4S=Case 4 Student; CS4P=Case 4 Parent; CS4M=Case 4 Middle School Teacher; CS4H=Case 4

Cross-case Analysis

The four cases heretofore presented examined themes that arose from each participant's respective story of academic success. Due to the nature of the sampling methodology, the participants shared identical factors that rendered them at risk for academic underachievement: African-American ethnicity, rural residence, low socio-economic status, and adolescent giftedness. In addition, the students were all determined to have been academically successful based on course rigor and grade point average. The analysis of each case sought to identify those resilience factors that enabled each student, in spite of possessing multiple risk factors, to be academically successful.

Although similar in their shared risk factors and academic successes, the students nevertheless differed in some basic ways. Serendipitously, the four cases yielded two girls - Jaynelle and Ronnie - and two boys - Tyrone and Josh. The boys each lived in a home where both a mother and a father figure resided; both of the girls lived in a single-parent household headed by their mothers. In Ronnie's case, the father was incarcerated at the time the study was carried out. The mothers of Ronnie and Tyrone were not working outside of the home during the period in which the study was conducted; the mothers of Jaynelle and Josh were. While Tyrone and Jaynelle had lived in the same rural county all of their lives, Ronnie and Josh had each moved numerous times.

Given the similarities and differences of the four participants, what elements of resilience do they share that serve to buffer against their multiple at-risk factors? The following analysis will serve to identify the themes that have emerged across all four cases, revealing with some specificity the participants' shared resilience factors.

Theme #1: Relationships

The theme of relationships as a resilience factor arose across all four cases. More specifically, the participants' relationships with their mothers and their peers were noted in all cases; participants' relationships with teachers were apparent in Tyrone, Jaynelle, and Ronnie's cases.

The relationships that all four participants had with their mothers proved to have a profound positive influence on their academic success. In all cases, the mothers parented with an authoritative style. That is, while they held their teenagers accountable for their schoolwork and their behavior, they remained flexible and maintained a positive, nurturing environment in the household. In addition, the participants' moms were all portrayed as being very supportive of their children, whether moving to another city to ensure a better education, such as in Ronnie's case, or keeping abreast of school assignments, such as in Tyrone's case. Perhaps the most profound aspect revealed of their mothers' roles in their lives was that of high expectations, including a sincere belief that their children could and would succeed. Each mother expressed without hesitation that her son or daughter *will* go to college. And regardless of their child's dream for a career – Josh as an attorney, Tyrone as a writer, Jaynelle as an accountant, or Ronnie as a neurosurgeon - they believed that he or she would be successful in that pursuit and expressed that belief to their child.

Relationships with peers was revealed as another factor that served to support academic achievement among all the participants. Josh, Tyrone, and Ronnie all specifically chose to associate with other students who shared their academic prowess; Jaynelle preferred to “hang out” with students that were primarily beneath her in terms of academic achievement, at least outside of the classroom setting. They all, however, appeared to choose

their friends to support both academic and social comfort. In the cases of Josh, Tyrone, and Ronnie, the purposeful choosing of other highly intelligent students as their friends and apathy toward all others created an insular world where they could be themselves without for the scrutiny by their non-academic peers. Jaynelle, on the other hand, the most outgoing of the four, straddled the worlds of the intellectual and the popular; she associated with other academically talented students primarily within the classroom while socializing in all other settings with students who shared her athleticism. In this way, Jaynelle preserved her popularity without shutting the door on her academics.

The third type of relationship that served to support academic success among the participants was that with teachers; Tyrone, Jaynelle, and Ronnie were all positively impacted by the close bonds they forged with at least one teacher. All three had experiences with a teacher or teachers who very specifically targeted them for additional help with school work or opportunities beyond the school day.

Theme #2: School Environment

The second theme that is manifest within all cases as supporting academic success is the school environment. Academic challenge proved to be a factor within the school environment that was apparent for three of the four participants. For Josh and Ronnie, the academic challenge placed them within the zone of proximal development, wherein they were challenged to the point of true engagement but not to frustration. For Tyrone and Ronnie, the academically challenging school environment provided them with the competition on which they thrived.

Also evident within the realm of the school environment is the choice of peers. As mentioned above, for all four students, the choice of peers within the school environment

supported both academic and social comfort. While Josh, Tyrone, and Ronnie thrived when with their intellectual peers, Jaynelle preferred the company of peers that were not as academically-oriented as she. For Tyrone and Ronnie, being in the presence of their intellectual peers also served to provide them the competition that they so enjoyed.

The school environment also provided for Tyrone, Jaynelle, and Ronnie teachers and/or guidance counselors whose support proved to be life-altering. The opportunity to participate in a college scholars program that was present to Ronnie by her guidance counselor served to inspire her to work hard at keeping her grades up to ensure a cost-free college education. Tyrone's English teacher who kept him informed of writing contests and provided him with unlimited access to her library motivated him to continue honing his writing craft. Jaynelle's teacher who took the time to assist her with her other classes provided the understanding of content that enable Jaynelle to continue progressing academically.

Theme #3: Personality Traits

The third theme to arise across cases was that of personality traits that supported academic achievement. All four participants possessed an even temperament, internal locus of control, self-confidence, and persistence.

The trait of even-temperament is one that allowed the gifted participants to better cope with the demands of taking advanced courses at school as well as living with the realities at home such as poverty, overcrowded living conditions, and/or living in a single-parent household. The students were all characterized as taking stressors in stride, instead focusing on succeeding academically so that they could secure a bright future.

Josh, Tyrone, Jaynelle, and Ronnie also shared the trait of an internal locus of control.

These students not only took responsibility for their own successes and failures, but were acutely aware that their own efforts would be responsible for the extent to which they were able to meet their goals and aspirations. The students were characterized by themselves and others as being fiercely hard-working, and they reaped the benefits of their hard work. Because they believed that the successes they enjoyed occurred as a result of their own efforts, they were motivated by each subsequent success to work even harder, thus perpetuating the trend.

The four study participants were also all characterized as possessing self-confidence. Although three of the four – Josh, Tyrone, and Ronnie – were rather reserved, they joined the outgoing Jaynelle in exhibiting confidence based on their awareness of their academic abilities and achievements. In addition, various experiences that they each had helped to support this confidence further. Tyrone's Summer Governor's School experience wherein he thrived with elite students from all over the state, Ronnie's selection for the college scholars program, Jaynelle's repeated selection as a scholar athlete, and Josh's maintenance of his position at first in his class despite the rigor of the regional Governor's School reinforced the positive image that the students had of themselves.

Finally, the trait of persistence was shared by all four of the students, although the trait sometimes manifested itself differently with each student. For Ronnie and Jaynelle, persistence meant asking clarifying questions of their teachers to make certain they understood the concepts being taught. For Tyrone and Ronnie, persistence was apparent when they retreated to their quiet rooms to contemplate difficult tasks, only to return later with the answers. And for Josh, persistence meant trying multiple approaches to a task until finding the one that would unlock the answer.

Theme #4: Goals and High Expectations

Josh, Tyrone, Jaynelle, and Ronnie all maintain extremely high expectations for themselves, including very specific goals for college and career. The mothers of the students also shared their high expectations, truly *believing* that they would accomplish their goals. And for Tyrone, Jaynelle, and Ronnie, the sustained high expectations of teachers helped to keep the students' academic momentum driving forward.

It is interesting that the expectations the students have for themselves in terms of their high school grades seem to align very closely with their actual grades. For example, Josh's expectation is that he will never receive anything less than an A, and he never has. For Jaynelle and Ronnie, the expectation is A's and B's, and the girls maintain A's and B's. Tyrone's expectation is for primarily A's and B's with perhaps an occasional C, and that is precisely what he has earned.

The students all have very specific goals for college and career. They all know where they would prefer to go to college and what career they plan to undertake after college. In some cases, they have chosen a college specifically because it will prepare them for their planned career. For example, Josh hopes to go to Harvard Law to earn his law degree, which will prepare him as an attorney. Ronnie plans to go first to Mary Washington, where she anticipates receiving a full scholarship, and then to Johns Hopkins for medical school. Jaynelle has plans to go to VCU, primarily so she can commute, for accounting. And Tyrone is toying with NYU for writing and film or Sarah Lawrence, where all assignments are in written form.

Theme #5: Coping Strategies

The final trait possessed by all of the participants is the use of coping strategies,

although the strategies used do vary by student. While all four utilized choice of peers as one strategy, Jaynelle alone copes through her participation in sports, clowning, and choice of classes that are specific to her areas of strength. This is likely because unlike the other three participants, Jaynelle is very concerned about being noticed in the school and being identified by her peers *not* as a high achiever, but rather as an athlete.

Ronnie, Josh, and Tyrone use the previously discussed high expectations and goals as coping strategies in that, by looking to the future, difficult tasks of the moment become more palatable. In addition, when faced with a difficult task the three use their problem-solving skills to attack the problem and render a solution.

Table 5

Data Matrix of Theme Derivation across Cases

Theme	Category	Subcategory	CS1	CS2	CS3	CS4	
Relationships	Mom	Authoritative	X	X	X	X	
		Support	X	X	X	X	
		High expectations	X	X	X	X	
	Peers	Intellectual equals	X	X		X	
		Mixed intellect/interests			X		
		Support		X			
		Competition		X			
		Teachers	Support		X	X	X
			Academic challenge	Zone of proximal development	X		
		School environment		Competition		X	
Choice of peers	Academic/social comfort		X	X	X	X	
	Competition			X		X	
Co-curricular activities	Academic Team			X			
	Summer Governor's school			X			
	Teachers/Guidance		Support		X	X	X
	Recognition		Confidence		X		
	Academic choices		Coping			X	
Personality traits	Even temperament		Coping	X	X	X	X
	Internal locus of control		Effort	X	X	X	X
	Self-confidence	High expectations	X	X	X	X	
	Self-image	Academic identification	X			X	
	Self-awareness	Strengths, weaknesses		X			

	Persistence	Focus	X	X	X	X
High expectations/goals	Student	Self-confidence	X	X	X	X
	Mom	Support	X	X	X	X
	Teachers	Support		X	X	X
Coping strategies	Choice of peers	Academic/social comfort	X	X	X	X
	Problem-solving skills	Persistence	X	X		X
	High expectations/goals for self	Grades/education/career	X	X		X
	Choice of Classes	Academic/social comfort			X	
	Participation in Sports	Social comfort			X	
	Clowning	Social comfort			X	

Note. CS1=Case 1; CS2=Case 2; CS3=Case 3;CS4=Case 4

CHAPTER V: SUMMARY OF FINDINGS, IMPLICATIONS, AND CONCLUSIONS

The present study sought to explore the internal and external protective factors that serve to ameliorate barriers to academic achievement posed by the cultural factors of poverty, minority status, and rural residence for high-ability adolescents, rendering them academically resilient. Forthwith follows a discussion of the study's findings and its implications for practice and further research.

Summary of Findings

The study presented herein provided a window into the lives of four gifted adolescents who shared a confluence of factors that placed them at risk for academic underachievement. Yet against the odds, all four prevailed to achieve academic success. The primary intent of the study was to ascertain the commonalities among the students that rendered them academically resilient.

While heretofore studies have existed that addressed educational resilience among children either of African American ethnicity, with rural residence, or living in poverty, only Hebert and Beardsley's (2001) case study provided insight into a gifted child who prevailed academically in spite of possessing a convergence of all three risk factors. Furthermore, the subject of Herbert and Beardsley's study was an elementary school child, unlike the present study, whose participants were high school students. The utilization of older students provided a broader data set that allowed for exploration of protective factors of academic resilience over the students' educational careers.

Moreover, several authors have addressed the concept of resilience among children in the broadest sense, i.e., coping with various types of trauma, whether physical, psychological, or financial. However, few have specifically discussed *educational* resilience,

and among those even fewer have explored academic resilience among high-ability adolescents (e.g., Reis, et al., 2005); until the present study, the literature has been barren of such studies addressing academic resilience among students who are African American, rural, and poor. This study helps to enhance the body of research in the realm of academic resilience by illuminating protective factors that pertain to such students. In addition, previous studies related to academic resilience that utilize the accounts of students themselves - interviewing students directly - have been rare (e.g., McMillan & Reed, 1993; Reis, et al., 2005). The present study has utilized extensive interviews with students to provide the intimate stories of their academic resilience that only such conversations could generate.

This study's findings revealed that the participants shared a number of protective factors of resilience that rendered them to be academically successful. In addition, there were varied manifestations of these protective factors among the participants and a number of these factors occurred in clusters. Academic resilience was revealed herein through the derivation of themes from analysis of transcribed interviews. The themes that ran across cases were (1) relationships as protective factors, (2) school environments as protective factors, (3) high academic expectations as protective factors, (4) specific college and career goals as protective factors, (5) personal traits as protective factors, and (6) coping strategies as protective factors. As per the conceptual framework set forth at the inception of the study, themes of resilience fell within external (environmental) and internal (affective) realms.

External Protective Factors

Relationships as protective factors. Key relationships in which the participants were involved proved to support their academic achievement in spite of their possessing multiple

factors placing them at risk for underachievement.

Maternal relationships. Across all four cases the positive relationships between the adolescent participants and their mothers appeared to be critical to their academic success, supporting this notion set forth by McMillan, Reed, and Bishop (1992). The most salient aspect of these relationships revealed in the present study was that of the mothers' authoritative parenting styles; i.e., they provided structure and guidance without being overbearing (Baumrind, 1971). All of the mothers of the participants in this study maintained the delicate balance of holding their children accountable behaviorally and academically while also providing them with nurturing, happy home environments; this was the case in spite of various hardships. While previous research has addressed authoritative parenting and its relationship to academic achievement (Neihart, 2006), none reviewed spoke to the role of authoritative parents in supporting the academic achievement of at-risk gifted adolescents. Also unique to this study is the effusively-expressed admiration and love for the gifted teens by their authoritative mothers during the interview process, illustrating the extent of their close connections. However, the mothers' praise for their children was not simply expressed to outsiders such as the researcher, but was served along with encouragement directly to the participants (Grotberg, 1996; Gutman and McLoyd, 2000), providing them motivation to achieve academically.

While none of the authoritative mothers in the present study was oppressive regarding school, Tyrone's was aware of the scope and due dates of his assignments, and, to the extent which they were able, Jaynelle and Ronnie's moms helped their daughters with their assignments, providing various strategies for approaching their children's school work. This is consistent with extant research citing help with homework as supporting academic

achievement (Gutman and Lloyd, 2000; Prisapia and Westfall, 1994). An additional component shared by the mothers of all the participants that lay within the realm of authoritative parenting was the articulation of high expectations for their teens, also noted in the research as serving to promote high academic achievement (Borland, Schnur, and Wright, 2003; Gutman and McLoyd, 2000; McMillan and Reed, 1993; Neihart, 2006; Wang, Haertel, and Walberg, 1998). The participants in the present study did not see these expectations as burdensome, but rather conceded that they were capable of earning excellent grades and that their mothers were justified in their expectations. Indeed, the four participants held these same high expectations for themselves in terms of grades, as well as goals for the future, as discussed below.

Peer relationships. The second type of relationship revealed in the current study that was integral to the academic success of the four participants was with their peers. Josh, Tyrone, and Ronnie developed networks of high-achieving friends who served to support each other's academic and social comfort, confirming prior research on peer relationships as academic supports (Reis et al., 1995; Wang, Haertel, and Walberg, 1998; Kuriloff and Reichart, 2003). Indeed, both in and out of the classroom these gifted teens spent their time almost exclusively with other gifted students. All three thrived academically in a social universe where everyone was gifted and high-achieving, for as Tyrone stated simply, "You want to be like your friends." This finding aligns with the assertion made by Wang, Haertel, and Walberg's (1998) that "a peer group's attitude toward school is a significant predictor of group members' ... value placed on being a good student..." (p.12). It is important to note that three of the participants were identified in second or third grade for gifted programs and the fourth, while not officially identified until sixth grade, nevertheless was placed in

advanced classes in elementary school. As a result, all of the participants were clustered with other gifted or advanced students in the elementary school and all four were clustered with other gifted students in the middle school. This exposure to such students from a young age acculturated the gifted participants to both social and academic milieus that were centered on the highly able, high achieving student. Both Ronnie and Tyrone specifically attributed their current academic success in part to their exposure to other academically-oriented peers from elementary school forward.

While Jaynelle functioned well socially with her high achieving peers in the advanced classes she attended, she chose to socialize out of the classroom with students who tended to be beneath her academically, primarily other athletes. Unlike the other three participants, whose talents were manifested solely in more academic realms, Jaynelle was truly gifted in the two very different worlds of sports and academics. For her, these two worlds ran parallel beginning in elementary school, where she began developing friendships in both worlds concurrently. By the time she transitioned into high school, she chose to identify publicly with the more socially acceptable of the two when outside of the classroom. This, however, did not hinder her achievement, but rather functioned as a coping mechanism that enabled her to straddle the two worlds of academic success and popularity among the athletic elite with apparent ease.

Interestingly, while all four participants claimed to be apathetic regarding the ethnicities of their peers, in reality, Josh was very aware of this aspect, negotiating the primarily White social landscape of the Governor's School with ease while choosing to align himself with other minority students in classroom settings. This is reminiscent of the African-American students in Kuriloff and Reichart's (2003) case study, who bonded together to

support each other in their largely White, elite prep school. Similar to the boys in that study, Josh appeared to utilize the relationships with his minority peers as a coping mechanism within the context of a largely White educational environment. Considering the extensive body of literature initially spawned by Fordham and Ogbu (1986) regarding race as it relates to African American adolescents' academic achievement, it seems puzzling at first blush that for three of the four participants in the present study, race appears to be a non-issue. However, recalling that these three students were all placed in gifted clusters since elementary school, their peers became the students with whom they spent the most time – other gifted students, regardless of race.

Teacher relationships. The third type of relationship that was revealed herein as a protective factor was that of teacher relationships. While the literature teems with studies noting a student's relationship with at least one caring adult being key to academic success (e.g., Herbert and Beardsley, 2001; McMillan, Reed, and Bishop, 1992; Reis, et al., 1995; Wang, Haertel, and Walberg, 1998; Westfall and Prispia, 1994), heretofore there has been a paucity of studies specifically pinpointing close, caring relationships with teachers as essential protective factors. In the present study, Tyrone, Jaynelle, and Ronnie all maintained positive relationships with teachers that extended far beyond the normal parameters of the classroom setting. While it is clear that the resilience factors serving to support achievement among the participants coalesced rather than working in isolation, these relationships proved to be indispensable for the students in question in terms of academic support.

School environments as protective factors. A second element that supported academic achievement among the four participants was that of school environments.

Academic choices. In terms of class choices, the students all participated in rigorous coursework in which high expectations were the norm. This finding aligns with extant literature's evidence of rigorous coursework as an important contributor to educational resilience (Prisipia and Westfall, 1994; Reis et al., 1995; Wang, Haertel, and Walberg, 1997). While all of the participants enrolled in rigorous coursework, their choices varied somewhat. As a student at the half-day Governor's School, all of Josh's courses were dual-enrollment and considered to be on the college level; at his home school, the remainder of his courses were the most challenging available, either "advanced" or Advanced Placement. As the students' home school offered no dual enrollment and only a handful of Advanced Placement courses (in history and English only), the most challenging courses available for the remaining three students who attended there full time were primarily "advanced" or "honors" level courses. Ronnie and Tyrone took advantage of the opportunity to take as many advanced courses as possible, including calculus their junior year. And while Jaynelle, the sole senior in the study, took advanced courses, she chose not to take any of the Advanced Placement courses offered and deferred taking calculus until her senior year. Jaynelle was aware of her strengths and weaknesses, and strategically concentrated her efforts on mathematics, which she saw as the precursor to a career in accounting. Similarly, while Tyrone did not attend the academic-year Governor's School, which focused on mathematics and science, he did attend the Summer Regional Governor's School, which focused on the arts and on writing, his area of strength and his chosen profession.

Early identification and placement in gifted programs. An important advantage that the participants shared related to the school environment was their early identification for and placement into gifted programs. While the literature abounds with theories suggesting the

probable benefits of such early identification and placement, studies providing evidence of sustained academic achievement for at-risk gifted students over the course of their educational careers have heretofore been scarce. The present study provides such evidence, as in spite of the multiple at-risk factors possessed by its participants, they all were high academic achievers. Because gifted students were clustered in the schools they attended, they not only had the opportunity to associate with gifted peers from an early age, but also had exposure to the more advanced curriculum offered in these classes. The opportunity that they were all afforded to participate in challenging educational experiences with their intellectual peers beginning in the elementary school served as a protective factor against the at-risk traits they possessed. Ronnie and Tyrone spoke at length of the advantages of this early identification scenario, with both specifically stating that these early experiences instilled in them an expectation to do well in school.

Choice of peers. Another factor embedded within school environments that helped to support academic achievement among the four participants was their choice of peers. As mentioned above, the relationships that the gifted adolescents maintained in school helped to buffer impediments to academic success (Reis, et al., 1995; Wang, Haertel, and Walberg, 1998). Again, the early identification of the students for participation in gifted programs provided the opportunity for them to forge positive relationships at a young age with their like-minded peers.

Teacher support. A third element of the school environment that had a positive impact on student achievement was teacher support. Although teachers were mentioned above in the realm of relationships, the assistance afforded to students by their teachers within the classroom added an additional layer of support. Tyrone and Jaynelle both

specifically mentioned *caring* teachers as being important to their academic success, and were clearly able to see the distinction between teachers who cared about their students and those who did not. While this notion of caring teachers supporting academic achievement is mentioned in the literature (Wang, Haertel, and Walberg, 1998), less evident is previous research that has illustrated the benefits of the close contact of teachers with their gifted students in a classroom wherein students are granted the opportunity to ask questions as needed, as is the case in the present study. Josh, Jaynelle, and Ronnie all appreciated the opportunity to ask their teachers questions at will in order to ensure their understanding of important concepts; Jaynelle and Ronnie both noted math teachers that took the time to work through procedures with them until they felt comfortable working independently.

High academic expectations of significant adults as protective factors. The fourth external factor that served to support academic achievement among all four gifted study participants was the high expectations of the significant adults in their lives. In each case, there was at least one adult who truly believed in the ability of the student to reach the high expectations they set forth. Josh, Tyrone, Jaynelle, and Ronnie all had mothers who were well aware of their giftedness and who expected them to maintain excellent grades. In addition, there was no question in their minds that their children would attend college and have successful careers. They frequently articulated these expectations to their children, which helped to build confidence and further motivate them to do well. This finding is congruent with previous research that noted the articulation of high expectations by parents as a positive support for academic achievement (Borland, Schnur & Wright, 2004; Gutman, & McLoyd, 2000; McMillan & Reed, 1993; Neihart, 2006; Wang, Haertel, & Walberg, 1998).

The high expectations of the students' teachers added additional support for academic success. Teachers held their students accountable for mastery of material while providing the support they needed to do so. The teachers interviewed for the study clearly had no doubt that the students would successfully reach both their immediate academic expectations and their future goals, and they shared this with their students. For example, Tyrone's high school English teacher was so confident that he would someday be a successful novelist, she purchased books for him specifically geared toward writing a first novel; this in turn validated Tyrone's perception of himself as an excellent writer. These findings add to the existing body of research that notes a culture of high expectations in academic environments as contributing to the academic success of at-risk students (Prisipia & Westfall, 1994; Reis, et al., 1995; Wang, Haertel & Walberg, 1997).

Internal Protective Factors

In addition to the external protective factors of relationships, school environments, and high expectations of significant adults, the themes derived herein also presented a number of internal factors that served to ameliorate the inherent risks for underachievement that the participants possessed. These included specific personal traits, high academic expectations for self, specific college and career goals, and coping strategies.

Personal traits as protective factors. Personal traits that served as protective factors for the participants in the present study were an even temperament, an internal locus of control, persistence, self-confidence, and self-image.

Even temperament. A personal trait that all of the participants shared was an even temperament. In spite of the risk factors that they possessed, Josh, Tyrone, Jaynelle, and Ronnie were all characterized as being happy, easy-going students who did not exhibit excess

frustration when faced with difficulties. An even temperament not only enabled them to better focus on the intellectual demands of their school work, but also drew to them supportive parents, teachers, and peers. This finding enhances the scarce literature regarding the relationship between an even temper and educational resilience (Wang, Haertel, & Walberg, 1998).

Internal locus of control. A second personal trait possessed by all four participants was an internal locus of control (McMillan & Reed, 1993; Wang, Haertel, & Walberg, 1997; Westfall & Pisapia, 1994). The students indicated in no uncertain terms that they believed their own efforts were directly related to their outcomes. While they conceded that circumstances and the support of others could help, they all took responsibility for their actions and attributed both their successes and setbacks to their own efforts.

Persistence. The belief in their ability to control their own high achievement spawned the students' persistence - a third personal trait - toward that end (McMillan and Reid, 1993; Reis et al., 1995; Westfall and Pisapia, 1994). Although Josh, Tyrone, Jaynelle, and Ronnie were well aware of their intellectual abilities, they all revealed that they worked very hard to maintain their level of academic success. When faced with challenges, none of the students ever retreated from the tasks at hand, but rather attacked them head on. They took their time to contemplate the problem, attempt to work through it, and try a number of solutions. In the event that they remained perplexed, all were willing to ask questions of teachers, parents, or classmates; rather than viewing this as a sign of weakness, they simply considered such inquiry as another tool toward achieving a successful outcome.

Self confidence. Josh, Tyrone, Jaynelle, and Ronnie were all quite confident of their abilities, a trait noted in the literature as a factor of resilience (Huang and Waxman, 1996;

McMillan and Reed, 1993; Reis et al., 1995; Wang, Haertel, and Walberg, 1997). Operating from an internal locus of control, the gifted adolescents believed that the academic successes they achieved were due to their own efforts; each successive success likewise perpetuated a sense of confidence. These students simply *knew* that they would reach the high expectations and goals that they set forth for themselves, and they possessed the confidence to say so.

Self-image. Two of the participants, Josh and Ronnie, possessed a self-image that revolved around their being high achieving and of high ability. They each projected a public persona that included plans to attend prestigious universities for graduate school (Harvard Law and Johns Hopkins Medical, respectively) and to pursue highly respected careers (law and medicine). This persona included association only with other intelligent high achievers. Josh and Ronnie appeared to have internalized the images that they had projected, pushing themselves to live up to those images. In addition, as they made their plans quite public, the feedback that they received from others further helped to motivate them to succeed.

High academic expectations for self and specific college and career goals as protective factors. All four of the gifted African-American adolescents studied possessed high academic expectations for themselves (Huang and Waxman, 1996; Peterson and Colangelo, 1996; Reis, et al., 1995; Wang, Haertel, and Walberg, 1995) and clear long-term goals (McMillan and Reed, 1993; Reis, et al.) for college and career. Rather than striving for good grades simply for the purpose of having a nebulous “better future,” they all had definite ends that served to support their means of academic achievement.

Coping strategies as protective factors. John Ogbu (1994) noted that many high achieving African-American students utilize coping strategies to help them do well

academically in spite of myriad barriers. This was certainly the case with the four participants in the present study, whether or not their coping strategies were intentional.

Choice of peers. All of the student participants in the present study strategically chose their peers as a coping mechanism; Josh, Tyrone, and Ronnie chose other high-achieving peers (Ogbu, 2004; Reis, et al., 1995) while Jaynelle chose peers that were less academic and more sports-minded. While all of the students interviewed claimed race was not a factor, it may tacitly have been so for Josh, as he assimilated into the generally White culture of the Governor School (Hemmings, 1996; Turner, 1992) while forming an allegiance with other minority students within the classroom (Ogbu, 2004; Kuriloff and Reichert, 2003).

Problem-solving skills. Another coping strategy utilized by the four participants was the use of problem-solving skills. Josh, Jaynelle, and Ronnie readily - even insistently - asked questions of their teachers to better understand the concepts taught. This finding of insistent questioning as it relates to academic achievement among gifted students provides an important addition to the body of literature on educational resilience. Another problem-solving skill shared by the participants was that they methodically and persistently worked through difficult tasks by trying a number of approaches to solving the problems at hand. Josh, Tyrone, and Ronnie also tended, especially at home, to approach problems by withdrawing into a quiet room where they could contemplate these various approaches.

Participation in sports and “clowning around.” It is worth noting that in only one student, Jaynelle, the coping strategies of participation in sports and being a class clown were evident. Jaynelle was able to balance her need to fit in with the general student population with her desire to excel academically by not only participating in sports, but also by creating a public persona that put emphasis on her athleticism over her academics. In addition, in her

desire to “be seen,” Jaynelle actively pursued being a class clown, again de-emphasizing her ties to academics publicly while allowing her to work toward academic success when out of the public eye.

Additional Observations

It is important to note that some of the barriers discussed in the literature regarding gifted students in rural cultures ran counter to the observations made in the present study. Howley’s (2003) assertion that community self-reliance conflicts with individual student achievement was not supported herein. In fact, the participants, parents, and teachers commented that there was little sense of community in the rural area in which they resided; this is in direct opposition to Howley’s (2003) claims regarding the concept of an all-encompassing rural lifeworld. Individual achievement was clearly important to this study’s participants and their parents over collectivism, as high expectations for academic achievement were shared by students and their mothers across cases.

Furthermore, literature claiming concerns by parents that their gifted children would leave their rural communities (Howley, Rhodes, & Beall, 2009) simply did not play out within the present study. In fact, the parents interviewed were extremely supportive of their children’s wishes to leave home for college and career pursuits.

It is likely that the combination of aforementioned protective factors contributed to this lack of conformity to the rural lifeworld portrayed in the literature. While it appears as though sense of place may provide a needed common identity for many residing in rural areas, the desire for intellectual challenge and the support mechanisms provided apparently superseded this need for the gifted students in the present study.

Implications for Policy and Practice

The findings of the current study suggest that the need for attention to both policy and practice with regard to educational issues is essential to provide protective factors of resilience for at-risk gifted students that replicate those revealed in the findings of the present study. Early identification and placement into gifted programs with intellectual peers, equitable inclusion of under-represented student populations in such programs, specific supportive behaviors by teachers, and assistance to parents in understanding supportive behaviors toward their gifted children are needed.

Early identification of giftedness and placement into gifted programs in the elementary school were found to acculturate students at an early age to a world of academic challenge with same-ability peers; this expectation of academic challenge persisted through the high school years. From this finding, it is apparent that early identification of giftedness is important, especially for students who are at risk for underachievement. Once identified, placement in gifted programs that provide challenging learning experiences with curricula that stretch students' boundaries to the zone of proximal development is necessary to maintain their engagement and interest and to catalyze the cycle of high expectations – persistence – success. As students progress through the middle and high school levels, it is important that rigorous courses differentiated for gifted learners are offered in order to maintain this momentum throughout their school experiences.

In addition to rigorous courses, opportunities to attend classes with same-ability peers proved in the present study to be an essential factor supporting the participants' academic success. These opportunities provided the gifted students with both social comfort and additional academic challenge on which they thrived. This is an important consideration in

light of the competing directions within the field of education regarding homogeneous grouping by ability versus differentiated instruction in heterogeneous classrooms. Proponents of homogeneous grouping for gifted students have long argued that such grouping is necessary in terms of both their social-emotional as well as their academic benefit (e.g., Adams-Byers, Whitseel, & Moon, 2004; Bloom, 2007; Delcourt, Cornell, & Goldberg, 2007; Fiedler & Lange, 1994; Gessner, 2008; Kulik & Kulik, 1992; Rogers, 2002; Tieso, 2003; VanTassel-Baska, 1992;) as long as appropriately challenging curricula are also utilized. However, opponents to ability-grouping, led by Slavin (1987, 1991) and Oakes (1986, 1994, 2008) and supported by the tenets of the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001*, claimed that such grouping is inequitable for students of average or below average ability. In order to accommodate the demands of these competing mindsets while attempting to appropriately serve all students, the differentiated education movement, led by Carol Tomlinson (e.g., 1999, 2000, 2004), became a common response to this conundrum. As well-meaning as the concept of teaching multiple ability levels with multiple approaches in the same classroom may be, it has been shown that students who most benefit from heterogeneous grouping are average and below average students, *not* those who are gifted (Kulik & Kulik, 1992). The present study, albeit small in scale and limited in scope, supports grouping gifted students with their intellectual peers in conjunction with the teaching of appropriately challenging curricula, as such practices served to promote academic achievement for its gifted participants.

Another implication regarding school-related issues drawn from the present study is the need for equitable inclusion of under-represented populations into gifted programs. It is telling that of the forty-seven identified gifted high school students in the district wherefrom

the sample for the present study was drawn, only four were both African American and qualified for free or reduced meals; this was in a school where 60% of students were African-American and 60% qualified for free or reduced meals. The participants in the study were referred for gifted identification evaluation virtually through happenstance; in each case, an astute teacher noticed the student's talents and pushed to have him or her evaluated. One has to wonder how many additional gifted African-American students living in poverty have not been identified for lack of such serendipity. This speaks to the need for a more systematic approach to identification that actively searches for students for inclusion in gifted programs rather than simply relying on referrals from those who take the time to make them.

An additional implication for practice regarding the school environment is the need for teachers who provide appropriate support for gifted students once they have been identified for and placed in gifted programs. The present study clearly reflects the need for teachers who demonstrate care for their gifted students, who are available to them to help with and answer questions about challenging academic tasks, and who articulate high expectations and praise.

The presence of mothers who were authoritative in parenting style, had high expectations, and were supportive emotionally and pragmatically was another important element reported in the present study that undergirded the academic achievement of its gifted participants. In spite of personal challenges that they faced, the support of these mothers began before their children entered school and continued through their high school years, having a potent positive effect on their academic success. Furthermore, all of the mothers in this study recognized very early the special talents that they possessed. Each of the mothers forged relationships with their child's school in order to ensure that the school provided for

these special talents. However, as illustrated by Gutman and McLoyd (2000), mothers of gifted at-risk children are frequently not inherently aware of how their behaviors can affect their children's academic achievement. Although there is no indication that the supportive mothers of the present study's participants received any assistance in identifying behaviors that could best help their children, it would be prudent for schools to reach out and provide such assistance so that all gifted students could derive this benefit.

Implications for Further Research

One important finding of the present study was the commonalities among the participants regarding the confluence of affective traits they all possessed that served as protective factors. These traits included an even temperament, persistence, and internal locus of control, self-confidence, and goal-setting. Bandura's (1989, 2006) discussions of human agency and self-efficacy touched upon the confluence of affective traits found herein. However, more research needs to take place to determine the effects of human agency and self-efficacy on student achievement and, more specifically, the role of these constructs as protective factors against multiple at-risk traits possessed by gifted adolescents.

Secondly, the resilience factors identified herein occurred for all of the participants as aggregates rather than in isolation. Within the parameters of this qualitative study it was not possible to control for individual resilience factors. Further research might explore the question as to what extent gifted adolescents who possess a singular protective factor might be academically resilient. Additional questions in this realm might be: which single protective factor has the greatest effect on academic achievement? What combination of protective factors appears to be the most salient in providing support for the academic achievement of at-risk students?

Another implication for further research is within the realm of rurality. While designation as a rural area by various agencies is primarily determined by population and proximity to metropolitan areas, rural culture may be quite different in one region of the U.S., for example, than it is in another. Studies that draw samples from rural areas in different regions of the U.S. would enable researchers to carry out comparative analyses to determine if resilience factors differ among gifted students from those respective areas.

As few studies have heretofore been carried out addressing academic resilience among gifted adolescents from any ethnicity combined with additional risk factors, it would be interesting to replicate the present study with other ethnic groups to determine of the resilience factors found herein prove to serve minority students other than African Americans.

Last, while numerous studies have attempted to address the key to academic achievement among African American students in urban settings, those attending suburban schools have been largely ignored. Therefore, replication of this study in suburban settings might help to illuminate protective factors among those African American students with multiple risks for underachievement.

Conclusions

The present study has provided an important contribution to the existing literature. New ground has been forged herein with the identification of resilience factors that support the academic achievement of gifted adolescents possessing the confluence of African American ethnicity, rural residence, and living in poverty. By providing insight into

these resilience factors, it may be possible to replicate the conditions that contributed to the academic success of the students in this study for other students in similar settings, hence enabling them to likewise enjoy academic success.

Secondly, while early identification and placement of high-ability students into gifted programs has been discussed previously in the research as important, heretofore many of these assertions have been based upon conjecture. The present study provides evidence that identifying gifted children early and then providing them with programming suited to their special needs may indeed result in their academic success. The impact of peer relationships that resulted from this early identification and placement in settings where the participants were socialized along with academically able peers who did not share the same risk factors seems to have been important in the cases of these four students.

Furthermore, the present study adds weight to the sparse number of studies that have utilized direct interviews with adolescent participants in order to ascertain their personal perspectives on the factors that contributed to their own academic achievement. This approach has provided insights into their successes that only they could share.

APPENDIX A: INFORMED CONSENT

Informed Consent to Participate in a Research Study

As a partial requirement of her PhD in Educational Policy, Planning, and Leadership at the College of William and Mary, the researcher, Wendy Taylor Ellis, is conducting a study to determine what factors help “at-risk” high-ability students to be successful in school. Factors that are considered “at-risk” for the purposes of this study are living in a rural area, receiving free or reduced meals at school, and being a member of a racial minority.

In order to collect the information that she needs for the study, the researcher will be interviewing an academically successful secondary student who has been identified as gifted or is otherwise identified as high-ability and who also is considered “at-risk” based on the description above. One elementary or middle school teacher and one secondary teacher of the student as well as his or her parent or guardian will also be interviewed for the study.

Each participant in the study will be asked to take part in a one-to-one interview with the researcher during the winter of 2009/2010. Each interview will last approximately one-half hour and will be tape-recorded for accuracy. Participants may be asked to clarify portions of the interview that are unclear on the tape. As a thank-you for participating in the study, the researcher will provide each participant with a \$25.00 Wal-Mart gifted card at the conclusion of the tape-recorded interview.

In addition to interviews, data will be collected from the student’s cumulative folders and electronic student information database.

Participation in this study is voluntary, refusal to participate will not result in penalty, and participation may be discontinued at any time without penalty. Names of all participants will be kept confidential. Tapes of interviews, typed transcriptions of the tapes, and any other potentially identifying information will be kept under lock and key in a location that is accessible only to the researcher.

The current project will serve as the researcher’s doctoral dissertation. In identifying, here, factors that support academic achievement, it is hoped that future replication these factors in similar settings may help to increase academic achievement among high ability students sharing similar at-risk traits.

When the participant’s teachers who will be interviewed have been determined, an addendum to this consent form will be provided indicating their names and requesting your permission for the researcher to interview them.

Participants may contact Ms. Ellis by phone or e-mail with any questions about this project at (804) 443-1382 or wellis@essex.k12.va.us.

I am aware that I may report dissatisfactions with any aspect of this study to the Chair of the Protection of Human Subjects Committee, Dr. Michael Deschenes, at 757-221-2778 or mrdesc@wm.edu or to the Chair of the Education Internal Review Committee, Dr. Thomas Ward, at 757-221-2358 or tjward@wm.edu.

Signature of researcher _____	Date _____
Signature of participant _____	Date _____
Signature of the participant’s parent _____	Date _____

Addendum to Informed Consent to Participate in a Research Study

I understand that the following teachers have been selected to be interviewed as a part of Ms. Wendy Taylor Ellis's study on academically successful at-risk high-ability students:

I understand that the aforementioned teachers will be asked questions about the participating student and I give my express permission for these interviews to take place.

Signature of researcher _____ Date _____

Signature of participant _____ Date _____

Signature of the participant's parent _____ Date _____

APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW PROTOCOLS

Interview Protocol: Student

Opening

1. Can you describe an experience for me when you were aware that you were academically successful?

Relationships

2. Please describe your family dynamics.
 - P1. How would you describe any role that your parents or any other family member may have played in your academics over the years?
 - P2. Now?
3. Please describe any close relationships that you have had with adults outside of your family over the years.
 - P1. Describe any influence they may have had regarding your academics.
4. How long have you lived in this area?
 - P1. If you knew someone who was going to move here, how would you describe this community to him or her?
 - P2. Please describe any ways in which this community has contributed to or has been supportive of your academic success.
5. Who do you consider your peers?
 - P1. In what ways have your peer relationships impacted your academics?

School

6. How would you describe your experiences in school over the years?
 - P1. What particular factors can you think of related to the school environment that have helped you to be academically successful?
7. How comfortable do you feel in an academic environment (like school)?
 - P1. Are there some areas where you feel more comfortable than others?
 - P2. Are you more successful in those, or are you equally successful regardless of the comfort level?
8. In what ways do you learn best?
 - P1. If you could create the ideal learning environment for yourself, what would it be?
 - P2. Have any of your school experiences over the years resembled this ideal in any way?

Personal

9. Please describe any activities that you have been involved in over the years, including extra-curricular activities and those not related to school.
 - P1. Which have you enjoyed the most, and why?
10. How would you describe the expectations that you have for yourself in terms of academics?
 - P1. What are the expectations that other important people in your life have for you?
11. What are your goals for the future?

- P1. How sure are you that you will achieve your goals?
P2. When you think back over the years, in what ways have your goals changed?
12. How confident are you of your own abilities?
P1. Are there some areas in life that you feel more confident about than others? Please explain.
13. Do you believe that your own effort impacts your success, or do you think it has more to do with fate or luck? Please explain.
14. How do you deal with things that initially seem difficult to accomplish?
P1. What processes do you go through?
15. What, if any, challenges have you overcome in your pursuit of academic success?
P1. How did you do so?

Interview Protocol: Parent

Opening

1. Can you describe an experience when you became aware that _____ was academically talented?

Relationships

2. Please describe your family dynamics.
 - P1. How would you describe any role that you or any other family members may have played in _____'s academics over the years?
 - P2. Now?
3. Please describe any close relationships that _____ has had with adults outside of your family over the years.
 - P1. Describe any influence they may have had regarding his/her academics.
4. How long has your family lived in this area?
 - P1. If _____ knew someone who was going to move here, how do you think he/she would describe this community to that person?
 - P2. Please describe any ways in which this community has contributed to or has been supportive of _____'s academic success.
5. Who does _____ consider his/her peers?
 - P1. In what ways has his/her peer relationships impacted his/her academics?

School

6. How would you describe _____'s experiences in school over the years?
 - P1. What particular factors can you think of related to the school environment that have helped him/her to be academically successful?
7. How comfortable does s/he feel in an academic environment (like school)?
 - P1. Are there some areas where s/he feels more comfortable than others?
 - P2. Is s/he more successful in those, or are is s/he equally successful regardless of the comfort level?
8. In what ways does s/he learn best?
 - P1. If s/he could create the ideal learning environment for him/herself, what do you think it would be?
 - P2. Has any of his/her school experiences over the years resembled this ideal in any way?

Personal

9. Please describe any activities that s/he has been involved in over the years, including extra-curricular activities and those not related to school.
 - P1. Which has s/he enjoyed the most, and why?
10. How would you describe the expectations that s/he has for him/herself in terms of academics?
 - P1. What are the expectations that other important people in his/her life have for him/her?
11. What are his/her goals for the future?
 - P1. How sure is he that he/she will achieve his/her goals? How do you know?

P2. When you think back over the years, in what ways has his/her goals changed?

12. How confident is s/he of his/her own abilities?

P1. Are there some areas in life that s/he feels more confident about than others? Please explain.

13. Does s/he believe that his/her own effort impacts his/her success, or does s/he think it has more to do with fate or luck? Please explain.

14. How does s/he deal with things that initially seem difficult to accomplish?

P1. What processes does s/he go through?

15. What, if any, challenges has s/he overcome in his/her pursuit of academic success?

P1. How did s/he do so?

Interview Protocol: Current/Former High School Teacher

Opening

1. Can you tell me a story where _____'s academic success was evident?

School

2. Can you tell me about _____'s experiences in school?

P1. What particular factors related to the school environment of which you are aware

seem to have helped him/her to be academically successful?

3. How comfortable does s/he seem to feel in an academic environment (like school)?

P1. Are there some areas where s/he seems to feel more comfortable than others?

P2. Does s/he seem to be more successful in those, or are is s/he equally successful

regardless of the comfort level?

4. In what ways does s/he seem to learn best?

P1. If s/he could create the ideal learning environment for him/herself, what do you think it would be?

P2. Does his/her school environment resemble this ideal in any way?

Relationships

5. Who does _____ seem to consider his/her peers?

P1. In what ways has his/her peer relationships seem to have impacted his/her academics?

6. Please describe any ways, to your knowledge, in which this community has contributed to or has been supportive of _____'s academic success.

7. Please describe your understanding of _____'s family dynamics.

P1. How would you describe any role of which you are aware that parents or other family members may have played in _____'s academics?

8. Please describe any close relationships about which you are aware that _____ has with adults outside of his/her family.

P1. Describe to the best of your knowledge any influence they may have had regarding his/her academics.

Personal

9. Please describe any activities about which you are aware that s/he is been involved in including extra-curricular activities and those not related to school.

P1. Which does s/he seem to enjoy the most? Why do you say so?

10. How would you describe the expectations that s/he seems to have for him/herself in terms of academics?

P1. What are the expectations of which you are aware that other important people in his/her life have for him/her?

11. What are his/her goals for the future, as far as you know?
 - P1. How sure does s/he seem to be that he/she will achieve his/her goals?
How do you know?
12. How confident does s/he seem to be of his/her own abilities?
 - P1. To your knowledge, are there some areas in life that s/he seems to be more confident about than others? Please explain.
13. Does s/he appear to believe that his/her own effort impacts his/her success, or does s/he seem to think it has more to do with fate or luck? Please explain.
14. How does s/he deal with things that initially seem difficult to accomplish?
 - P1. What processes does s/he go through?
15. To your knowledge, what, if any, challenges has s/he overcome in his/her pursuit of academic success?
 - P1. How did s/he do so?

Interview Protocol: Former Middle School Teacher

Opening

1. Can you tell me a story where _____'s academic success was evident?

School

2. Can you tell me about _____'s experiences in school?

P1. What particular factors related to the school environment of which you are aware

seem to have helped him/her to be academically successful?

3. How comfortable does s/he seem to feel in an academic environment (like school)?

P1. Are there some areas where s/he seems to feel more comfortable than others?

P2. Does s/he seem to be more successful in those, or are is s/he equally successful

regardless of the comfort level?

4. In what ways does s/he seem to learn best?

P1. If s/he could create the ideal learning environment for him/herself, what do you think it would be?

P2. Does his/her school environment resemble this ideal in any way?

Relationships

5. Who does _____ seem to consider his/her peers?

P1. In what ways has his/her peer relationships seem to have impacted his/her academics?

6. Please describe any ways, to your knowledge, in which this community has contributed to or has been supportive of _____'s academic success.

7. Please describe your understanding of _____'s family dynamics.

P1. How would you describe any role of which you are aware that parents or other family members may have played in _____'s academics?

8. Please describe any close relationships about which you are aware that _____ has with adults outside of his/her family.

P1. Describe to the best of your knowledge any influence they may have had regarding his/her academics.

Personal

9. Please describe any activities about which you are aware that s/he is been involved in including extra-curricular activities and those not related to school.

P1. Which does s/he seem to enjoy the most? Why do you say so?

10. How would you describe the expectations that s/he seems to have for him/herself in terms of academics?

P1. What are the expectations of which you are aware that other important people in his/her life have for him/her?

11. What are his/her goals for the future, as far as you know?
 - P1. How sure does s/he seem to be that he/she will achieve his/her goals?
How do you know?
12. How confident does s/he seem to be of his/her own abilities?
 - P1. To your knowledge, are there some areas in life that s/he seems to be more confident about than others? Please explain.
13. Does s/he appear to believe that his/her own effort impacts his/her success, or does s/he seem to think it has more to do with fate or luck? Please explain.
14. How does s/he deal with things that initially seem difficult to accomplish?
 - P1. What processes does s/he go through?
15. To your knowledge, what, if any, challenges has s/he overcome in his/her pursuit of academic success?
 - P1. How did s/he do so?

APPENDIX C:

To:
Fr: Wendy Taylor Ellis
Re: Interview checking

Thank you so much for participating in my dissertation study. I have enclosed a copy of the transcription made from our interview. You will notice that the names of the persons discussed have been given pseudonyms and/or alpha-numeric codes; this is to ensure confidentiality of the study participants.

I do want to make sure that I portray your responses as accurately as possible. I have included a cover sheet along with the transcription. Please check the appropriate statement on the cover sheet and return to me, along with the transcription, in the envelope that has been provided. Please make sure that the envelope is securely sealed to ensure confidentiality.

Local students and teachers may return the envelopes to the secretary at your respective schools, who will forward them to me here at EIS. Governor's School teachers may return your envelopes to your school director who will see that I receive them. Out of town teachers may mail the materials directly to me in the postage-paid envelopes provided.

Once again, thank you for your input. I have very much enjoyed having the opportunity to work with all of you on this important project.

APPENDIX D:

Thank you for participating in my study. In order to ensure that I have accurately captured in the attached transcript what was stated on tape, please check the appropriate statement, below, and return to me in the enclosed envelope.

Wendy Taylor Ellis
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_____ I have read the attached transcript of my interview and believe that it accurately reflects what I said

_____ I have made corrections to the attached transcript of my interview to reflect what I said or to better convey what I meant to say

_____ I have not read the attached transcript of my interview, and I willingly forego this opportunity to make corrections.

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