

## VOICES OF RESILIENCE: SUCCESSFUL JAMAICAN WOMEN EDUCATORS

Sharon Dole  
Western Carolina University

*Through the use of the framework of risk and resilience in a narrative inquiry, the present study examined the protective factors affecting the academic success of 24 Jamaican women in a graduate cohort in educational administration. All but two of the women rose from poverty to become academically successful, defined as having achieved graduate student status in educational administration. The protective factors found in the women can be grouped under three broad categories: strong personal identity traits, such as perseverance and a sense of faith; positive relationships that served as sources of support; and the ability to reframe barriers to success. In view of the obstacles they faced, it took multiple protective factors working together to overcome the risk factors that the women encountered in their paths to academic success. This article further includes discussion about the cultural patterns relevant to Jamaica that contribute to both the risk and protective factors of women.*

**S**ocial scientists have long been concerned with the factors that place individuals at risk; however, in the last few decades the focus of the research has shifted from the risk factors to those protective factors that make an individual resilient in spite of adverse circumstances (Tough, 2012). The primary purpose of the present study was to examine the protective factors that led to the academic success of a group of 24 female Jamaican educators. A secondary purpose was to identify the cultural patterns that place Jamaican women at risk and those that insulate them from the negative effects

of risk factors. For the purpose of this study, success was having achieved graduate student status.

Resilience may be conceptualized as a constellation of traits that enables individuals to withstand and to recover quickly from adverse occurrences in their lives (Fraser, Kirby & Smokowski, 2004; Luthar & Zelazo, 2003). Although there has been much research about life resilience, there has been comparatively little research about academic resilience. Morales and Trotman (2004) defined academic resilience as “the process and results that are part of the life story of an individual who has been academically successful, despite obstacles that prevent the majority of others with the same background from succeeding” (p. 8). Resilience is not a fixed attribute within individuals, but changes with time and circumstances. It is a fluid process in that the acquisition and strengthening of resilient qualities take place

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Sharon Dole, Ph.D., is Professor of Special Education at Western Carolina University in Cullowhee, North Carolina.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to [dole@email.wcu.edu](mailto:dole@email.wcu.edu).

over time and within the context of life change or adversity (Luther & Zelazo, 2003). The protective factors that contribute to resiliency are those characteristics within the individual, the family, or the community that ameliorate the effects of adversity (Masten & Powell, 2003; Vanderbilt-Adrianne & Shaw, 2008). Resistance to adversity is relative, not absolute, in that a risk factor in one situation can be a protective factor in another. For example, single parenting, which is usually identified as a risk factor, may not be a risk factor in some cultures or in the presence of a strong single parent.

Risk factors are biological, psychological, cognitive, or environmental factors that make an individual more vulnerable to negative life outcomes (Fraser et al., 2004). Risk factors have the potential to create impediments to academic success (Morales, 2010). The probability of a risk factor varies with race or ethnicity, gender, and age of an individual (Fraser, 2004). A number of risk factors have been identified in the research, including poverty (Buckner, Mezzacappa, & Beardslee, 2003; Hamack, Richards, Luo, Edlynn, & Roy, 2004; Kim-Cohen, Moffit, Caspi, & Taylor, 2004), abuse (Jaffe, Caspi, Moffit, Polo-Tomas, & Taylor, 2007), community violence (Hamack et al., 2004; Gorman-Smith, Henry, & Tolan, 2004), and family dysfunction (Luther & Sexton, 2007). Poverty directly affects children, in that the quality of food, shelter, education, and health care that parents can provide depends on their economic resources. Poverty indirectly affects children because it reduces the quality of parenting. Parents who struggle to make a living are unable to provide stimulating educational experiences for their children that would increase their cognitive ability (Fraser, 2004). Poverty can also lead to family disruption, as one parent may need to leave the home in order to find employment.

Recent studies of academic resilience have focused on low socioeconomic groups and students of color in developed countries because, from an educational viewpoint, both groups are considered at-risk for academic underachievement (Conchas, 2006; Gayles, 2005; Morales, 2010; Morales & Trotman, 2010; Reis, Colbert, & Hébert, 2005). One of the most extensive studies of academic resilience is that of Morales and Trotman (Morales, 2010; Morales & Trotman, 2010) whose qualitative scholarship involved 50

high-achieving, low socioeconomic students of color. Morales and Trotman identified two clusters of ten interrelated protective factors working in a symbiotic relationship in order to facilitate academic success. Resilience is a complex phenomenon and protective factors rarely operate in isolation. It is the combination of factors that drives at-risk individuals to resilience (Morales & Trotman, 2004). The first cluster of protective factors found in the participants in the Morales and Trotman study consisted of (a) willingness to move up in social class, (b) caring school personnel in K-12 and college, (c) sense of obligation to one's race/ethnicity, and (d) a strong future orientation. The protective factors in the second cluster included (a) a strong work ethic, (b) persistence, (c) high self-esteem, (d) internal locus of control, (e) attendance at out-of-zone schools, (f) high parental expectations, and (g) mother modeling a strong work ethic. Other researchers have found that students of color, when compared to White students, are likely to require more protective factors working together in order to achieve academic success (Conchas, 2006; Reis, Colbert, & Hébert, 2005).

It is challenging, yet important, to view risk and protective factors, such as the ones Morales and Trotman (2010) identified, in the larger ecological and cultural context of the individual (Fraser, 2004; Wyman, 2003). Jamaica, the cultural context of my study, is a land of extremes. On the north coast and in the suburbs of the capital of Kingston, wealthy Jamaicans enjoy an elevated standard of living and their children attend private schools and universities abroad. In the Kingston ghettos, poor Jamaicans live in slum housing with inadequate access to quality water, health care, or education, and rival youth gangs clash for control of neighborhoods (Thomson, 2011). The rural poor struggle for survival as well. Rural farmers grapple to eke out a living that is adequate to support their families.

In both urban and rural areas, Jamaican classrooms are generally crowded, averaging 40, 50, or even 60 students per class and resources are scarce. The legacy of British colonialism is still evident in the island's educational system and documented by Evans in her ethnographic study of an urban Jamaican high school (2006). The teacher/student relationship is complex.

Corporal punishment, although used less frequently than in the past, is a consequence of slavery and is a form of discipline used on low-performing students (Evans, 2006). In addition to corporal punishment, teachers, especially those who are untrained or inexperienced, routinely use sarcasm and ridicule as a form of verbal discipline (Evans, 2006). Although education is free in the public schools in Jamaica, costs for textbooks, uniforms, lunch, and transportation pose obstacles for many families. Modeled after the British educational system, both private and public schools are characterized by numerous exams that determine placement and advancement. The official language of the schools is Standard English; however, Jamaican Creole, or patois, is the home language for a majority of children, particularly those from low socioeconomic groups. Traditionally, Creole has not been considered acceptable for the classroom and children who could not master Standard English were considered backward or lazy and ridiculed both by teachers and peers (Christie, 2003).

It is important to examine risk and resilience in cultural contexts different from the mainstream White middle class culture because resilience and resistance to stress are context-specific (Conchas, 2006; Morales, 2010; Reis et al., 2005). Typical developmental patterns may not apply to socioeconomically disadvantaged students or students of color who lack the resources, support, and diverse experiences available to more advantaged students (Ungar, 2004). Significantly, there is a lack of retrospective research exploring protective factors in academically successful adults in developing countries like Jamaica, where the cultural context is different and where the gap between rich and poor is even greater than it is in the United States.

## Method

I used the framework of risk and resilience to examine the personal narratives of 24 Jamaican women educators in a master's cohort in order to understand what protective factors enabled the women to become academically successful. For the purpose of my research, narrative can be described as events that are told from a point of view that constructs meaning from those events. In other words, it tells about past actions and how the participant

understands those actions. The narrative methodological approach analyzes a participant's story and how it is told, the cultural and linguistic devices it uses, and how it convinces the reader of its authenticity (Riessman, 2007). Stories are the essence of narrative. Stories do not exist in a vacuum, but are shaped by the socio-cultural context of the narrator. Narrative inquiry has been increasingly used to explore the experiences of a range of individuals, including teachers, to reflect on their learning and education at important times in their lives (Bathmaker, 2010). Narrative inquiry is especially appropriate for the present study because of the importance of hearing the stories of marginalized groups of people (Chase, 2005; Riessman, 2007). The participants' stories not only serve as a remembrance of the past, but as hope for the future.

The 24 female participants, all experienced teachers or administrators, were members of a graduate cohort in educational administration consisting of 25 individuals, 24 females and 1 male. The women ranged in age from their late twenties to their late fifties. A majority of the women were Afro-Jamaican, two having self-identified as belonging to mixed ethnic groups (i.e., Asian and East Indian along with African). They were participants in an educational program in Jamaica conducted by a regional state university in the southeastern United States. In the program, which has existed for 42 years, teachers can obtain their bachelors' degrees in early childhood education, middle grades education, special education, or administration, or their masters' degrees in educational administration. The teachers go through the program in cohorts, consisting mostly of women. All of the courses are taught in Jamaica by university faculty with the exception of one summer which the students spend on campus and experience a culture that is different from their own. The program takes approximately two years to complete. One of the assignments in a graduate course on diversity that I teach requires students to write personal narratives in which they describe their cultural identities and reflect about the impact those identities had in shaping who they are as individuals. In addition, the assignment invites teachers to discuss the relationship of their identities to their teaching and learning philosophies. Reflection is a commonly used

practice in the academy as teachers can improve their teaching through it (Darling-Hammond, Bransford, & LePage, 2005). Writing personal narratives helps teachers look inward and outward in the journey toward becoming multicultural educators.

I used thematic experience analysis to analyze the participants' personal narratives (Bold, 2012), and sought to identify themes within the stories in the Jamaican cultural context. According to Bold (2012), "The researcher is often seeking and identifying themes (or not) within the narratives; and that experience usually involve relationships between people and contexts" (p. 129). Data analysis began with repeated readings of the personal narratives to get an overall feel for the context. I read the narratives several times in their entirety until I noticed a pattern beginning to emerge. Then, using a chart, I wrote each participant's words in one column and my interpretation in a second column, thus leaving a trail of evidence. I subsequently identified categories of themes and tabulated the numbers involved. For example, all 24 of the women exhibited perseverance. This combination of thematic experience analysis and numerical data served to provide an overall picture. Bold (2012) stated that the thematic approach is most effective if there is a clear focus for the research, which was the case with my research. I sought to identify the protective factors that led to the participants' academic success.

Qualitative research is based on a different paradigm and different assumptions about

reality; therefore, the conceptualizations and perspectives about validity and reliability are different. Clandinin and Connelly (2004) stated that each inquirer should explore and defend the criteria that best fit his or her research. "Truth" is not the primary issue in narrative inquiry as it is possible to interpret events in very different ways. Trustworthiness, rather than truth, is the difference. Truth assumes an objective reality; however, trustworthiness places the process in the sociocultural world (Riessman, 2007). Could other researchers determine the basis for my findings and are they trustworthy enough to be relied upon for their own work? If a researcher can show direct linkages between data, findings, and interpretations, these questions can be answered in the affirmative. I sought to strengthen the findings of the study by having several persons familiar with the Jamaican culture, as well as the educational system, review the manuscript and give feedback. First, the manuscript was reviewed by 29 Jamaican graduate students in another cohort; second, the participants' words and related themes were reviewed by two faculty members in the program who have been teaching in Jamaica for several years. The reviewers confirmed that my findings are compatible with their experience and observations.

## Results

The data analysis resulted in several protective factors that I grouped under three major categories: (1) personal identity traits, in particular, perseverance and a strong sense of faith;

Table 1  
*Risk Factors*

Risk Factors	Participants
Family disruption caused by poverty, absent parent, alcoholism, death	N = 23
Childhood poverty	N = 22
Discrimination by family members, teachers, or peers	N = 10
Failure on exams (either Common Entrance Examination or Caribbean Examination Council)	N = 9
Low expectations by family members, teachers, or principals	N = 9
Early pregnancy and/or multiple pregnancies	N = 6
Harsh discipline including corporal punishment	N = 5
Physical abuse	N = 4
Sexual abuse	N = 1

Table 2  
*Protective Factor Categories*

Protective Factor Categories	Participants
Personal identity traits	
Perseverance	N = 24
Strong sense of faith	N = 17
Positive relationships that served as sources of support	
Family members (mothers, grandmothers, grandfathers, aunt)	N = 15
Teachers	N = 6
Grandmother's employer's wife	N = 1
Ability to reframe barriers to success	
Poverty	N = 20
Discrimination by teachers	N = 4
Low expectations from teachers, principals, family members	N = 4

(2) positive relationships with family members and teachers that served as sources of support; and (3) the ability to reframe barriers to success. The various factors that placed the women at risk are listed in Table 1 and the categories of protective factors are listed in Table 2.

### *Personal Identity Traits*

The protective factors in the first category are the personal identity traits of perseverance and a strong sense of faith. Perseverance and faith were demonstrated by all of the women. Although each of these factors alone is a strong protective factor, the interplay between the two led to more powerful resilience.

Education was recognized as a way out of poverty; however poverty was also cited as the reason for frequent school absences and subsequent failure on the placement exams. In the Jamaican educational system, placement exams determine what ability groups or streams the students will be in and, once placed, it is difficult to advance to a higher stream. Researchers of Jamaican schools have been critical of streaming because it not only increases the inequality of achievement, but also affects the self-concept and self-esteem of the students placed in the low stream (Evans, 2006). The Common Entrance Examination (now called the Grade Six Achievement Test or GSAT) is the test that qualifies students for a place in a

traditional high school and students take it at the end of the sixth grade. There are five subjects on the test that include language arts, social studies, science, arithmetic, and communication task. According to Evans (2006), 30% of graduates of primary schools do not get placed in the high schools. Most of my participants wrote about how important passing this exam was to their future educational success. For example, Nadine's family often compared her to her high achieving sister who had lighter skin and that fact warranted better treatment. She wrote of feeling "regret, rebuke and rejection" at failing the Common Entrance Examination twice. However, she was successful in passing the Technical Entrance Examination. Although she did not qualify to attend a traditional high school, Nadine became a leader at the technical high school that she attended and this experience enhanced her self-esteem and self-confidence and motivated her to continue her education. Joan had a similar experience in that she was the only child of her mother who did not pass the Common Entrance Examination and had to attend a technical school. She, like Nadine, rose to leadership positions at the school and was assured by the teachers and principal that her experiences turned out to be better than those in a traditional high school, a view with which she agreed.

The next important threshold in Jamaican schools is in grade 10 when students begin



the Caribbean Examination Council (CXC) program that extends for two years and culminates in the CXC examinations. Passing the CXC exams is important because it assures high school students' entry to universities and white-collar jobs. My participants were all the more determined to be successful if they experienced academic failure, especially failure on the CXC exams, as several of them did. This emphasis on academic achievement and performance on the national examinations almost to the exclusion of the other goals of education has received public criticism, but it has proven difficult to eradicate the attitudes and values that were established centuries ago during the British colonial period (Evans, 2006). The curriculum, which was not designed for Jamaicans and has changed very little since the colonial period, has alienated young people from their own culture and history. It has been difficult for Jamaicans to acknowledge that the effect of slavery and colonialism has been to internalize the colonial attitudes of race and class. Young people are constantly exposed to messages of the superiority of light skin in billboard advertisements, in the social pages of the newspapers, and in beauty products for hair straightening and skin lightening. While education has provided the gateway to wider opportunities for Jamaicans living in poverty, the emphasis on academic achievement and lack of attention to the social and emotional factors that lead to low self-confidence and low self-esteem has had damaging effects on the youth of the country. Students who do not do well on the exams spend time and money repeating subjects and re-taking the exams, a process that those in the lower socioeconomic groups can ill afford. The women tried to prove themselves in a competitive academic environment where they were at a distinct disadvantage because of their impoverished backgrounds and social class. Furthermore, because academic achievement is recognized as the basis for social advancement in Jamaican society, failure can do harm to an adolescents' self-worth as well as limit their future prospects. One of the few avenues of social mobility for Black people is educational achievement and this was a powerful incentive for those participants with darker skin to persist in their education in the face of failure. Tenika's self-esteem suffered when she failed the CXC

exams, but failure caused her to reassess her situation and she became determined to succeed:

At my school it was time to sit for the national Caribbean Examinations Council (CXC) selection and I was only chosen to sit three of them due to absenteeism. My friends, however, were chosen to sit five or more and to add insult to injury they passed their exams while I only passed one out of three. I was apprehensive of what my mother would say; I was also ashamed of myself and felt like a failure. I stopped and reflected on my life and questioned myself as to what I really wanted out of life. Did I want to continue living in the low socioeconomic group? Did I want to be jobless and hopeless? And the answers were no.

Tenika was also worried about what her mother would think about her failing the CXC exams. Parental expectations, a protective factor subsumed in category two, played a strong role in the participants' perseverance. It is customary for students in each cohort to sing Jamaican songs at a celebration held during their summer on campus. The students in this cohort, one that included Tenika, closed their performance with reggae artist Jimmy Cliff's, "You Can Get It If You Really Want," a fitting testimony to the perseverance that they demonstrated in their academic journeys.

In addition to perseverance, a strong sense of faith was the other identity trait the women had, even if they no longer attended religious services. Religion played a significant role in the participants' upbringing. Mothers, as well as grandmothers, were major sources of inspiration and support for the women, as well as the major sources of religious fervor. Religion is an important cultural value in Jamaican society, particularly among women. The participants wrote about the Christian nurturing they received from their mothers and grandmothers and credited their religious upbringing with instilling their values. The grandmothers and mothers and, in three cases, grandfathers, made sure that their children and grandchildren attended services every Sunday, read the Bible to them, and frequently quoted scripture verses. Faith, whose grandmother was a Sunday worshiper and whose grandfather was a Seventh

Day Adventist, had to attend church on both Saturday and Sunday when she visited them. Like other participants, Faith had to participate in church activities, such as youth choir, youth meetings, and Bible studies. Carol described attending similar church activities:

Church was a priority for my grandmother. We would go on Sundays for day worship, then we would attend Monday night family training hour, Wednesday night bible studies, and Friday night young people's meeting. All these days and nights at church helped to instill important morals and values that helped us then and I dare say are still helping me now.

The division of the protective factors into categories is somewhat arbitrary, as there was considerable interplay among the various protective factors. Given the scale of the obstacles that these women faced, they were successful because of several protective factors working together. For example, grandmothers stood out as a primary source of support and also as the source of religious fervor. Throughout the narratives, there were multiple examples of the role that grandmothers played, as Doreen narrated: "The greatest influence of my becoming a teacher came from the Christian nurturing of my grandmother who often quoted scriptures to me." Like many other participants, Carol's grandmother not only made sure that she attended church services, but also made sure that she attended school, even though she usually went without textbooks and there were days when she went without lunch or money for lunch. Carol recognized and appreciated the commitment her grandmother made to her education, as well as to her religious upbringing. The commitment that mothers and grandmothers made to the schooling and moral upbringing of their daughters and granddaughters served as a powerful incentive for them to persevere.

### *Positive Relationships*

The second category of protective factors consisted of positive relationships that served as sources of support. The women affectionately identified caring persons in their lives (see Table 2). In addition to the grandmothers, the persons who provided sources of support were mothers, teachers, extended family members,

and even the White female employer of a grandmother. Conspicuously absent were males, although in two cases the grandfather was identified as the head of the extended family. Fathers were described with much less affection than mothers, as they were generally absent from the home. When Faith's father migrated to England he left her mother with three children, two of whom were his, and in an advanced stage of pregnancy: "He left making all the promises of so many Jamaican men to come back or send money to maintain his family." Later, Faith's mother found out that he had married someone in England and started another family. Because of her dire financial situation, Faith's mother had to work as a domestic helper and leave her children in the care of their maternal grandmother, a situation very common in Jamaica. The participants recognized the sacrifices that their mothers endured because of financial restraints to ensure that their daughters were successful in school. When they failed exams, as Sheryl did, they blamed themselves for not working up to their mothers' expectations:

My mother was disappointed, but she was also determined to see me achieve academic success and sent me to extra classes at a private institution. From the initial stage I realized my mistake and decided to work harder than before because my mother had to find money that she didn't have to send me to school so that I could attain more subjects.

Without Sheryl's knowledge, her mother went to the pastor of their church and asked for assistance so that she could pay for private tutoring. Sheryl referred to her mother as a "strong woman of God" who taught her many lessons: to have faith, to be resourceful, and to be resilient.

Mothers, however, were not always in the picture. In the absence of one or both parents, grandmothers often became the primary caregivers and a source of support for these women. Marcia's paternal grandmother was her primary caregiver for the first 12 years of her life, as she had little contact with her mother during those years. Marcia had many unfortunate events occur in her young life, including the early death of her mother, an abusive father, and finally being left homeless after her father spent her grandmother's pension. The latter situation

prompted her to enter into a demeaning sexual relationship with a man for her and her grandmother's survival. Despite her depressed situation, Marcia never forgot the early lessons she learned from her grandmother, ones that kept her focused on furthering her education: "My grandmother's expectations of me to grow up and be somebody that others would admire and emulate propelled me to want to break the life cycle and standard of living for women from my socio-economy [sic] background." Marcia's case is unique in that she also had support from her grandmother's White employer's wife when she was very young, a woman who treated her like her own daughter. The boss's wife taught her to speak Standard English, read, write, ask critical questions, solve problems, and use her hands to create things. The experience of being exposed to a different social class, and thus a different culture at a young age, had an impact on Marcia's career path, as well as her relations with the students whom she now teaches. Marcia was fortunate in that she was exposed to higher level thinking skills, which are not ordinarily part of the curriculum of students in her socioeconomic class where the focus is on rote learning. Today, her classroom is child centered and the focus is on the development of critical thinking skills among her students. She seeks ways to build up their self-esteem and self-worth: "Someone once took an interest in me and that changed my life path. I am just passing it on."

The participants grew up surrounded by extended families, although often the family members did not include either parent. Carol fondly recalled living in an extended family consisting of grandparents, a sister, aunts, uncles, and cousins in a two-bedroom house. Estelle grew up in a happy and healthy family consisting of grandparents, aunts, uncles, two brothers, and thirteen cousins. Although poor, Estelle vividly recalled her grandfather returning from work on Friday evenings bearing treats of patties, candies, and sodas. Her grandmother was a stay-at-home grandmother and did all of the domestic chores and disciplined the children. Estelle attributes her positive outlook on life to her happy childhood.

A special bond with a teacher was a turning point for many of the women. Even though some teachers used verbal abuse and demonstrated

discrimination, other teachers served as sources of support by their caring attitudes. In describing these teachers, the women used adjectives, such as "encouraging" and "caring" and showed love and affection, such as Keisha's recollection of a caring teacher:

I was accustomed to hearing how worthless I was, I started living it. One day she [teacher] asked, "Keisha [Pseudonym], what's wrong?" all I did was cry. I did not say a word but she understood every tear that ran down my cheeks. She knew I could read and I was allowed to do peer reading with slower students in my class. This was my turning point. I began learning and started seeing myself as a person of worth.

Suzette wrote about the dedicated teachers who were willing to go beyond what was expected of them and the influence they had on her own teaching:

It is because of the attitudes of these teachers, which influences who I am as a teacher today. I try my best to give back to these children the love, affection attention and the care which I had received, especially when I needed it.

In describing the teachers who influenced them, the women repeatedly used the word "caring." The teachers made them feel special in positive ways and that, in turn, made them begin to believe in themselves and confidently engage in academic tasks. The realization of the positive effect that teachers could have on the lives of the students they taught inspired many of the women to become teachers themselves. Participants wrote about their desire to treat all students equally and not to discriminate against them because of their socioeconomic status. The importance of the support of teachers should not be underestimated because, in addition to their caring attitudes, they provided academic assistance that the participants would not necessarily get at home.

### *Ability to Reframe Barriers to Success*

The most intriguing category that emerged in the data is that the women were able to reframe risk factors into stimulants for success. Poverty, usually considered a risk factor, acted as an incentive for them to make something



of themselves. For example, Cameka lived in a one-bedroom house with her mother, father, and half-sister. They had no electricity or running water. The kitchen was in a corner of the dirt yard and the bathroom was a pit latrine. The family had to fetch water for the household from a river that was two miles from their dwelling and bathe in the river. At the young age of 10, Cameka lost her father and her mother had to go to Kingston for work. Cameka was sent to live with her maternal grandparents who did not treat her well because they had not accepted her father. Cameka realized early in her life that her only way of escape was education. She worked hard to do well on the Common Entrance Examination and was placed in a traditional high school in Kingston where she was able to live with her mother. She credited her childhood as determining who she is today: "The fact that I was poor didn't stop me from achieving." Likewise, Monica grew up in a poverty stricken environment with no electricity, telephone, or water in the community. She walked to school barefooted and with a meager lunch, if she was fortunate to have lunch at all. As the eldest sibling, there were days when she could not attend school at all because of lacking funds. Neither she, nor any of her siblings, took the Common Entrance Examination for a place in high school because her father and stepmother lacked knowledge about it. Instead of succumbing to her situation, Monica was positively motivated by her depressed lifestyle and knew that with determination and ambition she could make a change in her life: "Hence my philosophy is despite your socioeconomic status you can rise above because the sky is the limit."

The participants' low socioeconomic backgrounds were often the reason for verbal abuse and discrimination by teachers; however, this discrimination made them more determined to overcome the poverty and low social class that were the causes of the discrimination. Charmaine had very unpleasant memories of school, especially of her grade six teacher who treated the poor students like animals:

The teacher was so prejudiced towards the poorer class students that we were afraid to even talk in the class. He would treat the students of the upper socio economic strata like angels and

treat us like animals. He would shout at us, whether we were right or wrong.

Charmaine's experience reflects the social ordering in Jamaica that permeates every area of society where the darkest and poorest people are at the bottom. Being discriminated against made Charmaine all the more determined to be a teacher so that she could help the students in her care. Along with discrimination, the women experienced low expectations from teachers and principals, as Donna narrated: "A most compelling source of motivation was that of being told by my high school principal that I was not suitable material for teaching." Marcia, whose early experience with her grandmother's White employer's wife was a very positive one, experienced discrimination by instructors of her own race when she started college, a juxtaposition that is the result of the social ordering where one's skin color influences treatment. But, like Charmaine and Donna, Marcia was more determined to complete her studies and prove her instructors wrong about her. Marcia cried herself to sleep on many nights because she had to condition herself to taper her tongue and keep out of trouble, since she was an outspoken and independent individual. The early nurturing of her grandmother's employer's wife who taught her how to question, a skill not ordinarily taught in Jamaican schools, could likely have fueled the latter characteristics. Jamaicans are fond of using proverbs to teach life's lessons and Marcia's grandmother often told her that "young bird do not know storm, when you pass through hurricane then you will know where to perch." Marcia recalled these words when she was discriminated against by instructors and admitted that she has learned that each life experience made her stronger and built up her character.

Low expectations came from family members, as well as from teachers and principals. While Marcia's grandmother acted as a positive source of support, Donna's grandmother had low expectations of her: "I remember how my grandmother told me that I would not be of any worth. As the days went by these words lingered in my mind and I was determined to prove her wrong." Being that the grandmother is an important figure in Jamaican culture, her words were especially painful and prompted

Donna to prove to her grandmother that she was someone of worth.

The protective factors found in these 24 women are all that more important when considering the circumstances of their backgrounds. The fact that they managed to be academically successful in the face of extreme poverty; the absence of one or both parents; discrimination; low expectations; and verbal, physical, and sexual abuse is noteworthy. While the primary focus of the research was on academic success, it is important to recognize the role that the overall socioeconomic and cultural setting played. Their stories reveal the depth of the disparities that existed between them and Jamaicans of the upper and middle classes as they described having to be absent from school to care for siblings, walking barefoot to school, and going without textbooks and lunch money. The women realistically recognized the major risk factors in their lives and had the ability to assess what their challenges were and what it would take to achieve academic success. Furthermore, they did not underestimate what it would take to overcome the challenges. They were fully aware of what was necessary to compete in an academic environment that was not conducive to their situations. Academic resilience requires ongoing achievement as students move into more challenging academic environments (Morales & Trotman, 2010). As such, one or two protective factors would not be enough; it took multiple protective factors working together to overcome the obstacles the women faced.

## Discussion

Where one is born in the world largely determines what opportunities are open and what one hopes to achieve in life. Cultural patterns found in Jamaica that served as contributing factors to both risk and resilience were interlaced in the narratives of the women in the present study. As reflected in the narratives, the conceptualization of Jamaica is one of a matriarchal society, as mothers and grandmothers stood out as being primary sources of support for the participants. Although the absence of a nuclear family is considered a risk factor in some cultural groups, it is not necessarily a risk factor in Jamaican culture. However, compared to two-parent households, financial resources can be limited when the mother is the head of the family and may have to work more than one job to

keep the family afloat. This situation increases the value of the extended family. The extended family was the norm for my participants. The role of grandparents, especially the grandmother, was very important. The grandmother, who Jamaicans call the 'woman-a-yard,' is normally the main female in a household (Thomson, 2011). Mothers and grandmothers are honored in many reggae songs, but fathers rarely receive such an honor. Among the participants, nuclear families were the exception rather than the rule. In her ethnographic study of an urban Jamaican high school, Evans (2006) found that only one-fourth of the students attending a high school lived with their biological mother and father.

The narratives also revealed the significant role religion plays in Jamaican culture. The religious upbringing of my participants came primarily from mothers and grandmothers. The most common religious sects were evangelical Christian, with Church of God, Seventh-day Adventist, Baptist, and Pentecostal being the major sects. Participants spoke about being required to go to church services several times a week when they were young. Even though some of the women no longer attended church services, this sense of faith remained with them and had a great influence on their moral development.

Although only 6 out of the 24 participants mentioned having had children at a young age, it is worth considering that early sexual activity poses a risk factor for Jamaican females. Sexual debut occurs at an early age among Jamaican youth. Correia and Cunningham (2003) reported that sexual initiation in Jamaica is the youngest in the world. According to data collected in the Jamaican Youth Risk and Resiliency Behaviour Survey of 2006, 25% of the 15-19 year-old female adolescents in the survey reported sexual activity that resulted in pregnancy (Wilks, Younger, McFarlane, Francis, & Van Den Broeck, 2007). Furthermore, the number of youths who are engaged in sexual activity increases by age from 33% at age 15 to 86% among 19-year-olds. Therefore, the prevalence of unwanted pregnancy increases significantly with age. In addition, it is common in the Jamaican culture for women to have children with different fathers, which could result in less financial support from the father or fathers. Participants wrote about having siblings

with different fathers. In the dominant Jamaican culture, sexual prowess by males with multiple partners is the model and fathering children is a sign of manhood (Kempadoo, 2003), a reason why a majority of Jamaican children do not live with their fathers. Most of the women in my study lived in female headed, extended family households.

The lack of employment opportunities in Jamaica results in many Jamaicans seeking employment abroad. Migration by one or both parents to Kingston, the United Kingdom, the United States or Canada, largely for economic reasons, was one of the major reasons for the disruption of families among my participants. Children, even at a young age, are often left in the care of the grandmother or other relative or friend, while one or both parents, usually the mother, seek a better life in Kingston or abroad. While this Jamaican diaspora has introduced the world to the richness of the Jamaican culture, it has often left an unstable home life for many Jamaican children.

Color and class are intricately interwoven in Jamaica, a legacy of slavery and British colonialism (Glaude, 2011; Thomson, 2011). Although Jamaica is predominantly Black, racial prejudice exists in the form of color and class prejudice. There is a color-class pyramid consisting of a White upper class, a Brown middle class, and a Black lower-class majority (Glaude, 2011; Thomson, 2011). The addition of the Chinese and East Indian immigrants, as well as other ethnic groups, adds complexity to this pyramid. Jamaicans call this 'social ordering' and it is at the base of all social interactions. This class socialization is carried over into the schools where students continue to receive messages associated with class, race, and color (Evans, 2006). Although only three of my participants wrote about being discriminated against by family members because of their dark skin color, several women described incidents of discrimination by teachers because of their low socioeconomic class. Since most Jamaicans in the low socioeconomic class are Black, it is not clear if teachers discriminated because of skin color or low socioeconomic class, or a combination of the two.

In summary, culture plays an essential role in the development of protective factors in various ways. Research on resilient individuals

from diverse backgrounds can reveal protective factors that can be applied to specific cultural groups. Certain aspects of a culture, such as spirituality and extended family relationships, can ameliorate poverty, which is a clear risk factor in any culture. Types of coping strategies, such as reframing negative barriers and perseverance may also be related to cultural values. While resilient individuals do share some common characteristics across cultures, there are differences among groups of coping mechanisms related to cultural experiences.

Children are placed at risk by many conditions, individual as well as cultural and ecological. The research on resilience suggests that an effective approach to supporting the social and emotional needs of children is to reduce known risk factors and enhance protective factors and strengthen personal qualities that promote emotional health. Risk factors identified in the literature should be used to guide intervention, with the goal being to reduce those risk factors. Likewise, protective factors identified in the literature should be strengthened. In my study, I found the following three categories of protective factors in the women that helped them overcome obstacles in attaining educational success: strong personal identity traits, positive relationships that served as sources of support, and the ability to reframe barriers to success. Positive teacher-student relationships have been identified in the literature and in my study as important factors in students' academic success. When school improvement is discussed, the emphasis usually is centered on physical resources, more qualified teachers, and improved curriculum. The assumption is that somehow student learning will improve if these resources are provided. However, caring relations between teachers and students are just as important, if not more important, for student achievement and well-being. Female students at risk may benefit from being mentored by female educators who have experienced similar circumstances and want to share their 'insider' knowledge. Students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, in particular, can benefit from knowledge from experienced educators about how to effectively negotiate educational resources and organizations. Even the most basic understandings about the educational system may not be part of the students'

experiences. For example, neither Monica nor her siblings took the Common Entrance Exam for high school because their parents were unaware of its importance. However, no matter how special and caring the teacher, it takes multiple protective factors working interactively to overcome the acute factors that place students at risk. To make a meaningful difference in the lives of Jamaican children, both the reduction of risk factors and the strengthening of protective factors need to be incorporated simultaneously.

### Limitations & Future Research

One of the limitations of my study was that it was retrospective and based on the participants' memories. Prior to writing their narratives, the participants had not been asked to think about how they got where they are academically. It is possible that if they were asked to write the narratives again after they have had considerable time to reflect, different protective factors would be emphasized. They had to rely on several protective factors because of the magnitude of the obstacles facing them in order to be successful. The placing of the protective factors in categories is arbitrary as they were symbiotic and interdependent. My research was limited to the strongest protective factors found in one cohort of 24 successful Jamaican female educators; there is no guarantee that these same factors would be found in other cohorts or in successful Jamaican male educators, as their experiences could be quite different. One must also bear in mind that, even though they shared a common socioeconomic background and culture, these 24 women are unique, complex individuals and took their own paths to academic success.

My study examined the protective factors that contributed to the high educational attainment of 24 Jamaican women educators in spite of the adversities they faced in their lives. All participants were successful in that they had completed their bachelors' degrees and were pursuing their masters' degrees at the time of the study. My study was limited to the risk and resilience factors in Jamaican females; however, Jamaican males are at an even greater risk of underachieving in school (Evans, 2006; Samms-Vaughn, 2008). Ganja and alcohol use is much more prevalent among males (Wilks et al., 2007); males are drawn to the underworld of crime (Thomson, 2011); and there is a lack of

positive male role models both at home and at school (Evans, 2006). One of my participants, Paulette, is determined to address this problem in Jamaican society:

Despite the feelings of powerlessness I sometimes experience teaching these children [inner city], I intend to save as many as I can, especially the boys, many of whom are targeted and trained for the underworld by the dons in their areas and many of whom are murdered by these same gang members before they graduate from high school.

My research contributes to our understanding of the educational attainment of women in a developing country, an area that has been neglected in the research. Further research should focus on the factors that put Jamaican males at risk and the protective factors that can moderate that risk. The risk and resilience perspective offers information to assist us in making profound differences in the lives of children.

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