The Trials and Triumphs of Black Deaf Students

For the past 30 years, research has often focused on the characteristics of deaf students and the obstacles they face but less on success factors. Carolyn Williamson advocates for research based on a success model. Specifically, she discusses the protective factors (caring and supportive relationships, acceptance of African-American and Deaf culture, open ongoing communication, parent involvement, high expectations and positive reinforcement, challenging educational experiences, meaningful participation, spirituality, and disciplined structure) that have contributed to the success of African-American deaf and hard-of-hearing (AA d/hh) students.

In contrast, a deficit model focuses on students and their families as responsible for the academic underachievement of African-American students. A deficit focus results in low expectations and stereotyping of AA d/hh students that too often leads to placement in low-level groups and special education classes. On the other hand, a resilience model identifies and explains the vital protective factors that provide a successful model to implement strategies for success in education.

The theme of this book is resilience—the ability to rebound and achieve healthy development and successful learning despite obstacles and adversities. Resilience happens because of internal and external protective factors. Protective factors, as referenced by Williamson, are the buffers, insulators, and modifiers that reduce the impact of risk on healthy development and academic achievement. Considering the educational havens for youth, Williamson notes there are protective factors for both individual characteristics and environmental supports.

Based on the participants’ responses, most developed tenacity and perseverance from within themselves, whereas they credited their individual characteristics to their parents. The environmental supports are the family (parents and extended family), school (administrators, teachers, and staff), and community (churches, vocational rehabilitation, and cultural organizations). All three components have proven to have a critical role in their transition from elementary school to postsecondary education. Parents have been shown to be the primary influence in the success of the participants throughout their academic career. Williamson calls for a collaborative work of all three components, through a resilience program model, to make an immediate and effective impact on the lives of AA d/hh students by resulting in their matriculation and graduation from 4-year colleges and universities.

In this qualitative research, Williamson interviewed nine highly motivated participants who identified themselves first as African-American and second as deaf and hard of hearing. All participants work in professional jobs requiring bachelor’s degrees or advanced degrees. All the participants were Gallaudet University graduates and most grew up in the Washington, DC area. No participants were Children of Deaf Adults. It would have been nice to have a broader representation of students, but this does not diminish the value of this book.

Although this book focuses on AA d/hh students’ successful academic achievement, the content is applicable and beneficial to all students. This is a great read for all educators, school personnel, community stakeholders, parents, and anyone involved in the education and mental health preparation programs. It also has potential application for future researchers.

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