“Not Giving Up”: Ghanaian Students’ Perspectives on Resilience, Risk, and Academic Achievement

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Abstract
Resilience research began in North America and Western Europe but there is a growing call for exploration of what resilience might mean in specific cultural contexts. Placed within the context of Africentrism and resilience perspectives, this study explores academic experiences of Ghanaian youth in three universities. Semistructured and focus group interviews were used to explore the academic resilience of 30 college freshmen in Ghana. Using narrative inquiry, the study examined the schooling experiences of young people in Ghana who have made it to college despite a myriad of adversities. Academic and socioeconomic adversity stemming from spatial inequality and negative cultural practices emerged as risk factors that negatively influence academic outcomes. Similarly, social support systems in the form of collective family/kinship values, future orientation, and individual characteristic of “not giving up” emerged as protective factors that tend to support academic resilience. Implications of the findings for social work education, practice, and policy are discussed.

Keywords
resilience, Africentric, academic achievement, Ghana, qualitative research, culture
in Western societies. Drawing from Africentrism and resilience perspectives, this study highlights academic experiences of Ghanaian youth in three disadvantaged universities. The study aims to explore the African perspectives and manifestations of resilience and how young people construct the meaning of their schooling experiences. Recent studies on risk and resilience among young people in South Africa have shed some light on the cultural nuances of the concept similar to conditions that exist in many places in Ghana (e.g., Theron, 2015; Theron & Theron, 2013; Theron, Theron, & Malindi, 2013). These studies suggest that while there may be some overlap in risk conditions in the West, such as material deprivation and exposure to violence, such conditions are manifested differently in sub-Saharan Africa and the coping and adaptation mechanisms are distinctly contextualized, where African youth tend to rely more on familial and kinship networks for adaptation.

**Theoretical Perspectives**

Resilience is often understood within the risk and resilience framework. From this perspective, risk factors are defined as attributes or factors that increase the likelihood that people with similar characteristics will develop a problem (Lucio, Rapp-Paglicci, & Rowe, 2011). Risk factors can be specific such as parental substance abuse or generic such as poverty and conflict. Lucio et al. (2011) also defined protective factors as countervailing factors that tend to modify the risk factors and mitigate potential risks and negative behavior outcomes. This can also be manifested at the individual and system levels. Finally, from a Western perspective, resilience has been defined as an individual characteristic that contributes to positive adaptation in the presence of adversity (Luthar, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000; Wright & Masten, 2005), or ability to withstand extraordinary circumstances to achieve positive behavior outcomes despite the presence of adversity (Masten & Coatsworth, 1998; Rutter, 2006).

Resilience has also been defined from a cross-cultural perspective that acknowledges the influence of the larger environment in more collectivistic societies such as Ghana. For example, in their study of resilience across cultures, Ungar et al. (2007) define resilience as “both an outcome of interactions between individuals and their environments, and the processes which contribute to these outcomes” (p. 288). These authors further explain that behavior outcomes are influenced by context-specific interweaving factors such as the well-being of the community in which they reside, ability of social institutions such as schools and health facilities to meet their needs, and the larger culture that prescribe values, beliefs, and daily mechanisms of coping. Using a transactional-ecological perspective, Ungar (2011) conceptualizes resilience as a reciprocal process that is embedded in a specific society and culture that relies on culturally appropriate interaction between young people and their social ecologies. Laird (2008) further underscores the principle of reciprocity in collectivist societies by noting that in sub-Saharan Africa where there are no well-functioning welfare systems, with high rates of poverty, social capital becomes a critical safety net for survival and coping with adversity. Laird (2008) also contends that reciprocal exchange of resources between households becomes the norm during difficult times to mitigate the effects of problems such as illness and drought.

From a social constructionist perspective, young people make meaning of themselves and their environment through their interactions with each other and the social environment in which they live, and a full understanding of human behavior requires a focus on “how people construct meaning, a sense of self, and a social world through their interactions with each other” (Hutchison, Charlesworth, & Cummings, 2015, p. 52). According to the authors, the interactions people have with each other and their social environment are based on shared meanings or understandings about the world and themselves. These shared understandings emphasize the diversity of social and cultural realities and the significant role the sociopolitical environment and history play in understanding human behavior, which shapes meaning over time (Hutchison et al., 2015). Geldenhuys (2015), in his study of industrial psychology in South Africa also underscores the significance of social construction, adding that the ways in which the world is traditionally understood is not derived from the world as an entity, but from the shared or relational construction of the world by people who are in agreement as to what that world constitutes. These arguments reaffirm social constructionists’ view that there is no such thing as independent or objective reality but the existence of multiple realities based on a specific culture and one’s social location.

In a similar vein, Ungar (2001) challenges practitioners and researchers to deconstruct the elitist and adult-centric notions of risk and resilience that are often based on a biased perception of the risks facing disadvantaged youth. Ungar further notes that the pathologizing labels assigned to less privileged youth make it difficult to describe resilience objectively because it is based on the nature of adversity facing youth and their coping mechanisms. In his extensive review of literature about social construction of resilience among different at-risk youth populations, Beardslee (1989), as cited in Ungar (2001), suggested that the best way to understand resilient individuals is to pay attention to how they themselves describe their own life stories, and the coping mechanisms that have sustained them. In other words, researchers should pay attention to the contextual construction of positive outcomes of marginalized and high-risk youth. Creswell (2013) added that social constructivism recognizes the existence of multiple realities constructed and shaped by our lived experiences and interactions with others. This qualitative study was therefore designed to explore how Ghanaian youth describe their own contextual means of sustenance and achievement in the presence of adversity.
A Brief Review of Literature

African Perspectives on Resilience

There is a growing understanding that although children and adolescents worldwide experience a variety of adversities that have the potential to disrupt typical development, these experiences are diverse in their sources, intensity, and manifestations (Noltemeyer & Bush, 2013). It has also been observed that despite the similarities in resilience-promoting transactions that might be informed by similar resources across contexts, these resources would likely not be identical and would most likely reflect cultural and contextual influences (Noltemeyer & Bush, 2013; Ungar, 2011). From this growing understanding has emerged new conceptualizations of resilience viewed through the lens of an African perspective described interchangeably as Africentrism or Afrocentrism (Akbar, 1984; Asante, 1988; Gilbert, Harvey, & Belgrave, 2009; Theron et al., 2013). Gilbert et al. (2009) describe the Africentric model as African-centered based on African worldview that emerged in response to theoretical approaches that failed to consider the worldview of historically oppressed populations. According to this philosophy, Africentrism embodies the traditional African values of interdependence, collectivism, transformation, and spirituality (Akbar, 1984; Gilbert et al., 2009). A more recent study by Theron et al. (2013) enunciates the Africentric paradigm as an African way of being where “individuals are integrally part of a larger community, and it is the community that facilitates individual self-realization” (p. 66). According to Mokwena (2007), as cited in Theron et al. (2013), some African cultures call this collective way of being Ubuntu; a philosophy that “teaches esteem for the inherent dignity and goodness of all human beings and reverence for human interdependence” (p. 66). Within this collectivistic system (Nukunya, 1992; Triandis, 1995), individual and group goals are closely aligned and decisions are usually made based on the needs of the collective group. Thus, in this system of social arrangement, family members including young people are protected from hardship and isolation as it provides social and economic support in times of need for all members.

Furthermore, given that the existing Eurocentric theories on resilience reflect only the experiences of youth in North America and Europe, the resilience of many marginalized youths in non-Western countries such as Ghana is not well understood and social institutions struggle to facilitate resilience in ways that respect the insights of underprivileged youth and their cultural and contextual positioning (Theron, 2015). In a cross-cultural study of adolescents in the United States and Ghana, Hunter (2001) suggested that there is a possible relationship among resilience, anger, violence, sadness, distrust, poor ego development, and low coping ability. According to Hunter (2001), what distinguishes the American teens from their Ghanaian counterparts was the presence of a sense of collectiveness among the Ghanaian adolescents who, though poorer economically, have rich interpersonal relationships, a protective factor. Notwithstanding, adolescents in both countries also identified their strengths with caring and loving adults in their lives such as teachers, parents, and other role models. These findings also mirror Laser, Luster, and Oshio’s (2007) study of Japanese youth who exhibit the protective factors identified in the Ghanaian youth.

Focusing specifically on African perspectives on resilience, some early advocates of Africentrism, such as Akbar (1984) and Asante (1988), related the Africentrism philosophy to nature, that is, the unique order of human nature. Akbar (1984) observed that although this may sound vague and unscientific in Western epistemology, the naturalistic model is to a large degree consistent with the philosophical, religious, and symbolic traditions of most human societies. Akbar (1984) added that one characteristic of this model is the tendency to preserve itself through survival, or what he called the principle of collective survival or simply “survival of the tribe” (p. 406). Akbar argues that human behavior can be understood as normal or abnormal to the degree that it adheres to this principle, and behaviors that maintain, enhance, or secure this “survival of the tribe” are normal (emphasis added). Asante (2009) echoed a similar argument by noting that Africentricity as a paradigm is based on the idea that African people should reassert a sense of agency to achieve sanity. To Asante, Africentricism is both reflexive and introspective; Africentrism asks the question “What would African people do if there were no White people?” (p. 3). According to Asante (2009), Africentrism addresses this question by putting the Africans in charge of their own history, not the European or the American as the center of African reality. In this sense, Africentrism becomes a revolutionary approach to understanding social phenomena in Africa including behavior and academic outcomes.

Gilbert et al. (2009) extended the discussion of Africentrism to include Africentric models of evidence-based practice. They describe the concept as a paradigm shift whose values are based on the premise that Africans have for the most part, survived historically because of the principle of living or, to put it in Akbar’s (1984) words, the “survival of the tribe” as a natural order. Akbar (1984) identified another important characteristic of Afrocentricity. To him, the Africentric approach to social science is to conceptualize the self (emphasis added) as a collective phenomenon. Akbar does not dismiss or deny the uniqueness of the individual, but rather the isolated notion of individualism; that is, the notion that the person can be understood independent of other persons. This collective experience of the self is symbolized by the African adage, “I am because we are and because we are, therefore I am” (Mbiti, 1970, cited in Akbar, 1984, p. 407).

With regard to youth resilience studies in Africa, some of the most comprehensive recent studies in South Africa have increased our understanding of youth resilience in the African
context. In her study on culturally sensitive understanding of resilience among Black South African youth, Theron (2015) observes that marginalized youth cope with hardship and related risks using instrumental resources such as material resources, relational supports, and adherence to cultural values. She further underscores the important role of kinship in supporting the resilient processes of young people, including the role of mothers, grandmothers, sisters, and aunts. Education was also found to be a means of upward social mobility and power. This finding is consistent with Theron et al.’s (2013) earlier study, which found that resilient Black South African youth aspire for better education as a pathway to a better future for themselves, their families, and communities given the history of racial segregation and the resultant suffering of the Black people. The last point underscores Akbar’s (1984) Africentric principle of collective survival of the tribe and the self as the collective phenomenon: that personal aspirations are connected to the collective whole. Similarly, Gilbert et al. (2009) on their application of Africentric model to African Americans underscored the need for Africans and Americans of African descent to rescue and reconstruct themselves in their own image and build and sustain an Africentric family, community, and culture.

In a similar study, Theron et al. (2013) explored an African definition of resilience, which revealed that African youth’s definitions are markedly different from those reported in previous resilience studies in Europe and North America. For example, the resilient youth in their study made no mention of a bond with a significant adult but emphasized the importance of supportive systems, which is consistent with the Africentric values of interdependence and community networks. According to the authors, spirituality and kinship ties also nurtured youth resilience and suggest that attention should be paid to the role that African cultural values play in youth’s resilience. The central role of spirituality and interdependence in the Africentric paradigm was recognized in earlier writings by Akbar (1984) and Gilbert et al. (2009). Akbar argued that the essence of human being is spiritual, and that human behavior can only be understood through a holistic model that includes the full dimension of human makeup, including physical, mental, and metaphysical. Gilbert et al. (2009) emphasize the core Africentric values of interdependence, collectivism, and spirituality as supporting systems for survival and coping in the midst of adversity.

**Study Context**

This study emerged from the researchers’ interest in exploring the schooling experiences of Ghanaian youth based partly on their own personal experiences with the Ghanaian education system of which they are products, and the limited number of studies on youth resilience in sub-Saharan Africa. Particularly interesting to us was how some Ghanaian youth navigate the transition from poor marginalized backgrounds and low-performing schools to secondary and postsecondary education, and the meaning they attach to these experiences. Discussions about educational inequality in the country has been largely based on the North–South divide on socioeconomic indicators (e.g., Ghana Statistical Service, 2014), and general risks and protective factors for academic outcomes (e.g., Abukari, 2010; Abukari & Laser, 2013; Chowa et al., 2015; Dunne et al., 2005; Fentiman, Hall, & Bundy, 2001; Glewwe & Ilias, 1996; Hunter, 2001; White, 2004). However, data on students’ own accounts of their experiences with the educational system is lacking. Moreover, few studies focus on cultural and environmental influences on academic outcomes, particularly on female students, given the patriarchal nature of the Ghanaian society. Many existing studies are also based on quantitative methods that do not capture the personal stories of the students. To fill these gaps, our study sought to answer the following questions:

**Research Question 1:** What are Ghanaian students’ constructions of resilience in relation to educational outcome?

**Research Question 2:** How do social support systems contribute to or hinder youth resilience and academic outcomes?

**Research Question 3:** What sociocultural factors contribute to low school achievement among Ghanaian youth?

To answer these questions, we conducted this constructivist study using narrative analysis (Bloom, 2002; Merriam, 2002) to explore the individual and collective stories of first-year Ghanaian college students. According to Merriam (2002), narrative analysis focuses on making sense of experience, constructing, and communicating meaning.

**Method**

**Study Design**

In qualitative research, the researcher is the primary instrument for data collection and analysis (Creswell, 2013). We designed our study from social constructionist and Africentric perspectives that focus on how people learn, through their interactions, to classify the world and their place in it and, through interdependence, find social support in times of need (Akbar, 1984; Hutchison et al., 2015; Theron et al., 2013). As mentioned earlier, the Ghanaian culture is collectivistic in nature and social constructionism provides a framework to delve into the challenges our participants faced in their schooling experiences and the meanings they attribute to the processes that help them to succeed in school. Marginalized and disadvantaged students and females were of particular interest to us because of the stark contrast between the schooling experiences of students from rural areas and those from urban areas and the unique challenges female students face in the educational system. To capture participants’
culturally situated views on schooling experiences in Ghana, we used narrative inquiry as an analytic approach to understand how the culture shapes their understanding and the shared meanings of their experiences (Bloom, 2002). According to Merriam (1998), narrative analysis is the study of experience through stories and the emphasis is on the stories people tell, on how these stories are communicated, and the language used to tell the stories. Furthermore, Giovannoli (2006) describes narrative analysis as a suitable approach to study people in their natural setting because it enables them to construct their own realities through their stories, and for “capturing the detailed stories or life experiences of a single life or the lives of a small number of individuals” (Creswell, 2013, p. 12). Narrative inquiry is appropriate for this small-scale study because it is well suited for addressing issues of cultural complexities and human centeredness and has the capacity to retell the stories that have the most influence on individuals (Mertova, 2001). Mertova further notes that narrative inquiry “is more concerned with individual truths than identifying generalizable and repeatable events” (p. 8). The method called for the collection and organization of rich, descriptive stories of our participants and provided us with a strategy to interpret their stories to detail the schooling experiences in the Ghanaian educational system. Through a biographical style of narrative inquiry (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990), our goal was to tell the stories of our participants situated within the context of the educational environment in Ghana. In sharing the voices of these students, we intended to describe their lived experiences in a manner that would resonate with other students who share similar experiences in the continent and other parts of the world. We also sought to provide critical insights for Ghanaian teachers, the government, and school administrators, and contribute to the research literature.

Participants

Participants for this study were part of a larger doctoral dissertation study on risk and protective factors associated with academic outcomes of high-risk youth (see Abukari, 2010; Abukari & Laser, 2013) who volunteered to participate in focus groups for in-depth interviews. We received permission from three colleges in Ghana to collect retrospective data from first-year students about their schooling experiences prior to college including challenges they faced as well as support they received. The study was approved by the institutional review board of the University of Denver as well as the ethics committee of each institution in Ghana. Surveys for the quantitative data were completed during class sessions and the researchers asked for volunteers among these students to participate in the focus groups. Three groups of 10 students \((n = 30)\)^1, one focus group from each of the three colleges, were interviewed for the current study. The sample was a purposive, convenience sample with equal numbers of males and females consisting of 15 males and 15 females with age ranging from 19 to 24 with a mean age of \((M = 21)\). The interviews were intended to collect information from the respondents about their schooling experiences prior to college and revealed varied experiences including gender, spatial, cultural influences, as well as the nature and type of support they received.

Data Collection and Analysis

Using a semistructured interview format, we interviewed each group to gain a deeper understanding and appreciation of their schooling experiences, particularly from cross-cultural and gendered perspectives. Using this interview format offered participants unrestricted opportunities to discuss issues that were important to them in their educational experiences rather than limiting their responses to issues that we had identified as likely obstacles to educational outcomes in our literature review (Creswell, 2013). We developed open-ended questions designed to encourage discussions about our participants’ conceptualizations and constructions of resilience, their perspectives about obstacles or risk factors for academic achievement, as well as promotive factors that enhance coping with adversity. Participants were also given an opportunity to tell their personal stories about how they coped with adversity in their educational pursuits from the earliest time they could remember.

A 60-min focus group interview was scheduled for each group. Each interview was held in an empty, quiet classroom or a spacious office on the campus to provide a familiar location for the participants. The researchers adopted the focus group format to suit the condition of our research participants as they had no prior experience in research participation and we decided that this approach would be more convenient and less intimidating. Experts on qualitative research see focus group as “a way of collecting qualitative data, which, essentially-involves engaging a small number of people in an informal group discussion (or discussions), ‘focused’ around a particular topic or set of issues” (Wilkinson, 2004, p. 177, as cited in Onwuegbuzie, Dickson, Leech, & Zoran, 2009, p. 2). Onwuegbuzie et al. (2009) point out that focus groups are less threatening to research participants, and the open nature of the focus group environment encourages participants to discuss perceptions, ideas, and opinions, and thoughts.

Similarly, Madriz (2000) observes that “focus group is a collectivistic rather than an individualistic research method that focuses on the multivocality of participants’ attitudes, experiences, and beliefs” (p. 836). Given that this study was conducted with Ghanaian students who hold collectivistic orientations, we place focus groups within the context of collective testimonies and group resilience narratives. This method was used to unveil specific and little-researched aspects of Ghanaian youth’s experiences growing up, their educational experiences and struggles, and their feelings, attitudes, hopes, and dreams.
The actual interview ranged in length from 60 min to 90 min because participants in some groups provided rich, in-depth answers while others were less expansive. After we obtained consent, all three focus group interviews were recorded with a voice recording device and transcribed verbatim. We used a qualitative trustworthiness method of triangulation (Merriam, 2002) by reading each of the three transcripts and individually developing initial codes or constructs through open coding and focused or axial coding (Creswell, 2002, 2013; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Saldaña, 2010). According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), the coding process generates two categories of themes: one constructed by the investigator through his or her observations and the other emerges from respondents’ unique cultural terms about the issue(s) being investigated. Each coder separately examined the transcripts and codes generated and identified all distinct statements (any word, phrase, sentence, or response that pertained to a single concept). The researchers convened to discuss differences in themes and statements and worked toward consensus to reconcile the themes. Field notes taken by the researchers during the research were also compared with the transcripts for additional validation.

Furthermore, we engaged peers and participants from the three colleges in critical analysis of our preliminary findings to ensure that our proposed themes were reasonably reflective of the data obtained (Merriam, 2002). The research team met a couple more times to discuss and negotiate the meaning of emergent codes and themes and to identify interrelated themes to produce a grid of themes (see Table 1).

Findings
This study was conducted to explore Ghanaian students’ definitions of resilience and their coping mechanisms to adversity in relation to academic achievement. While a few of the findings overlap with resilient traits in Western societies, they underscore the contextuality of resilient youth’s social positioning and cultural constructions. For instance, students who grew up in rural communities experienced frequent teacher absenteeism and inaccessible roads while female students endured cultural expectations of early marriage and other gender role expectations. In addition, early death of a parent (mostly the father as breadwinner) ran through the stories of most research participants, laced with the complexities of cultural practices associated with inheritance that left the children and their mothers further impoverished, thereby threatening their education and developmental trajectory. However, the students’ personal and collective educational experiences were not all negative. Some participants described how individual perseverance, familial and kinship support, and the collective expectations of future role helped them in times of stress.

Overall, five themes emerged from the analysis: not giving up, family, future orientation, culture, and spatial inequality. These themes are consistent with previous findings (e.g., Laird, 2008; Theron, 2015; Theron et al., 2013; Ungar et al., 2007) that reveal the importance of social relationships and access to material resources and instrumental needs, as well as cultural influences on resilient youth’s construction of resilience in non-Western cultures.

Details of the emergent themes are discussed in the next section in relation to the research questions outlined earlier.

“Not giving up.” In response to the first research question regarding Ghanaian students’ definition of resilience, participants were asked to describe the concept of resilience and what it means to them in relation to academic achievement. “Not giving up” is how many participants defined their ability to cope when faced with adversity. Their definitions also centered on individual perseverance and being positive in the face of challenges or obstacles. As a 24-year-old male student noted, “I wanted to travel [abroad] but later decided to rewrite the exams [high school certificate exam]. By then I had spent 7 years at home. . . [after high school]. That’s how I made it and I’m here today.” Another student supported this view

Like when you complete SSS [senior secondary school] and the results are out, you realize that you passed only 2 subjects out of 8, you don’t have to think that you can’t make it. If others can, why can’t I?

Resilience to these participants also meant “ability to withstand a difficult situation” in the presence of adversity. As a 22-year-old male student remembered,

When my father was alive I was getting a lot of support from him. After he died I experienced abject poverty. My mother was a trader but she lost her job and it became very difficult for her to take care of me and my brothers.

While the students’ narratives about how they overcame hardships to go to university are examples of individual adaptation to adversity, their narratives are consistent with Akbar’s (1984) principle of survival and the collective self, values that underlie the Africentric philosophy of collectivism and coping with adversity. As Theron and Theron (2013) has noted, the African kinship system promotes resilience in youth by members of kin purposefully narrating stories of difficult childhoods and how they survived it. In this instance, disadvantaged young people are socialized to expect hardship and be ready to cope with it.

Future orientation. In a follow-up question, when participants were asked to describe how they coped with difficulties in their lives and stayed in school, almost all of them attributed it to hope and optimism for the future and their ability to delay gratification to accomplish their educational goals. As a male student demonstrated, “Having the patience and understanding that every obstacle that comes your way can be overcome,
“Sometimes when you lose one parent or both, it’s always difficult to continue your education”

“My father was an educated person but my mother is an illiterate. Because my father had the benefit of education, he wanted all his children to be educated”

“Because my father is an educated man he wanted to make sure that his children got an education”

“My mother supported me financially and everything”

“He [my father] helped me with many physical needs such as clothing and food”

“She [my mother] helped me with food and bought my clothing and paid my school fees”

“She pays my school fees, she buys books and other things”

“It is my mother who has made me who I am and where I am today . . . she supported me financially and everything, she pays my school fees”

“Most of my inspiration came from my dad . . . and some inspiration came from my grandparents”

“My mother advised on what to do to help myself like get a job to support myself”

“Having the patience and understanding that every obstacle that comes your way you can overcome it and achieve what you want”

“Nobody cared about me anymore, so I put in a lot of effort and decided that I will make it and go back to school, and I did it”

“I knew that he [my father] couldn’t take care of me anymore so I decided to look for work and for about 6 years now I have been taking care of myself; that’s how I made it and I’m here today”

“Hope for the future”

“In our school, for example, in our hostels, sometimes you hear your colleague telling you that you never wore any expensive clothing, One doesn’t have to think that you should follow what others are saying because we’re from different homes”

“We came here individually but we came for a purpose so we shouldn’t feel discouraged by other people’s behavior or attitudes”

“I wanted to travel [abroad] but I didn’t succeed, so I decided to rewrite the exams. By then I had spent 7 years at home. . . . That’s how I made it and I’m here today”

“Like when you complete SSS and the results are out, you realize that you passed only 2 subjects out of 8, you don’t have to think that you can’t make it. If others can, why can’t I!”

“The time my father was alive I was getting a lot of support from him. After he died I experienced abject poverty. My mother was a trader but she lost her job and it became very difficult for her to take care of me and the rest of my brothers”

“Resilience means the challenges you can withstand”

“I’ll be general. Muslims have a perception that as a lady if you’re 15 years or older you’ve got married and not to be in school. The belief is that education is not for women because the men have to work hard to support them”

“Some family members will give you something like food but not money. The things that the family will come together to contribute is funerals. When there is a funeral, they contribute a lot”

“My father had two wives and everything changed, he used to look after all of us but when he married a second wife things changed [for the worse]”

On my part, the death of my father created a big problem. After his death things were tough because when he was alive he worked as a [private] contractor so he left some property for us. I completed SSS in 2006 and even though all my requirements were not set the following year I rewrote the exams and got all my requirements but my family didn’t have the money to support me because my elder sister was already in the university and I had to wait for her to finish before I could enroll

“In my final year in secondary school while I was waiting for my results my father died. So the results came out and I was hoping to continue my education. But the little assets that my father [had] left, the [extended] family members came and took everything because we were young and they knew we couldn’t do anything; and my mother too, they gave her nothing”

“Sometimes when you lose one parent or both, it’s always difficult to continue your education”

“I am from Brong Ahafo and the major problem is infrastructure. Where I come from there is only one secondary school which does not have qualified teachers”

“There are not enough schools and you don’t know if you’re doing well or not” “In my hometown the roads are very bad which makes transportation very difficult”

“Some students have to go to neighboring towns or city to study and that affects their movement and teachers cannot also come to the village if there is a school”

“The most competent teachers who would have come to teach students to succeed don’t come because of the bad roads”

“Sometimes living in a Zongo community for example, there is no motivation, and when you reach the level of education we’re in right now and you’re passing by [a group of people] somebody would say, look at this girl; is it because you’re in the university or something, we were all in this community. There is no motivation”

“We grew up with a Zongo mentality—smoking [tobacco] was very common. Growing up in such an area is very difficult. I had some friends who smoked and had to study with them and that was very difficult”

Note. SSS = senior secondary school.
you can achieve whatever you want.” Another student added, “As I grew older nobody cared about me anymore, so I put in a lot of effort and decided that I will go back to school, and I did it.” Students also demonstrated their control over their own situation instead of externalizing their difficulties. A male participant demonstrated this when he observed,

I knew that he [my father] couldn’t take care of me anymore so I decided to look for work and for about 6 years now I have been taking care of myself. That’s how I made it and I’m here today.

Furthermore, students demonstrated their resilience by noting that effective coping transcends beyond optimism in the face of adversity but it includes self-discipline; that is, one’s ability to resist peer pressure and recognize the uniqueness of your circumstances. A 24-year-old female student demonstrated self-discipline when she noted,

In our school, for example, in our hostels, sometimes you hear your colleague telling you that you never wear any expensive clothing. One doesn’t have to think that you should follow what others are saying because we are from different homes.

Another student added, “We came here individually but we came for a purpose so we shouldn’t feel discouraged by other people’s behavior or attitudes.”

Again, while these qualities are individual resilient traits, they should be understood within a proper context. As noted earlier, the notions of hardship and suffering are African cultural myths that are accentuated by both legend and spiritual beliefs. Theron et al. (2013) characterize this cultural myth as equanimity or impulse control, as a protective factor in the African context. This kinship and cultural value of equanimity nurtures a resilient trait in youth and, according to Theron et al. (2013), this impassive attitude toward present suffering with a focus on their competencies and hope for the future, helps young people to cope with current stress to achieve educational success. Theron and colleagues further observe that when the concept of equanimity as a protective factor is viewed from a cultural perspective, African youth are traditionally socialized to accept their modest place in the kinship system and their relative powerlessness compared with adults, which is consistent with the Ubuntu value of tolerance and forbearance, and it is consistent with Ungar et al.’s (2007) adherence to local culture as a coping strategy. However, we are quick to add a caveat that this stoical attitude should not be conflated with Peterson, Maier, and Seligman’s (1995) and Werner’s (2000) learned helplessness; although young people accept their sense of powerlessness, they do not give up, and they believe that this position is only transitory and will get better, and that is what promotes endurance.

Some may argue that due to the history of colonialism and more recently, globalization, which has exposed Africans to Western style education and lifestyle, the influence of the kinship system, and for that matter, Afrocentrism, has waned and does not exert the same amount of influence it once had on individual behavior outcomes. Admittedly, the influence of these factors on African indigenous ways of life is palpable. As Kuznesof (2005) astutely points out, globalization has produced a common vision of what childhood experience should look like, a kind of “global morality” standard. Nonetheless, Kuznesof argues that despite these influences, family and kinship have served and continue to serve important roles as an institution for social stability. Based on her analysis of the impact of globalization and colonialism on family and kinship systems in Latin America where conditions are similar to sub-Saharan Africa, Kuznesof (2005) acknowledges the negative impact of these forces but argues that despite these changes children still utilize kinship and family relations in creative and adaptive ways. For example, the values of interdependence and reciprocity sustain children in times of economic crisis, marital strife, and parental death; parents also depend on their children for sustenance in times of need. Alber and Bochow (2011) as well as Smith (2011) echo similar views on their study on globalization and kinship structures in Africa. Alber and Bochow (2011) observe that despite the rise of nuclear families in urban areas of Africa, this does not undermine the traditional understanding of children belonging first to their lineages and secondarily to immediate parents. Smith (2011) supports this observation based on his studies on the effects of globalization on kinship of the Igbo people in southeastern Nigeria. Smith observed how the kinship network remains an important resource for how people navigate the contemporary world by adapting to outside changes using resources from kinship networks.

Family. The second research question asked students to describe social support systems that supported or hindered their educational experiences. Consistent with earlier research (e.g., Theron, 2015; Ungar et al., 2007), family, as a social system, provided basic and material resources, such as food, clothing, shelter, and school fees for our research participants. When asked to describe what has helped them to reach their present level of schooling despite the numerous barriers to education in the country, participants’ descriptions of family relationships were both supportive and tenuous. The tenuous nature of family relationships will be discussed later in this section under “culture.” The extent to which family was a supportive resource is more fully appreciated when considered from the types of support that aided academic achievement of participants. Family support can be categorized according to whether they are tangible or intangible (Berndt, 1989; Tietjen, 1989). According to Berndt (1989), the types of social support received by young people can be categorized as esteem support, informational support, instrumental support, and companionship support. Esteem and instrumental support were both salient among study participants and are described below.
Esteem support. Esteem support is defined as “statements or actions that convince people of their own worth or value” (Berndt, 1989, p. 310). Words of encouragement from parents and other family members were important sources of support that helped young people to cope in times of difficulty. As a 21-year-old female participant noted, “When I wrote the final exams and didn’t make it, family members will tell me to rewrite it and that since others have done it I could do it [too].” Furthermore, the family constellation in Ghana includes grandparents, uncles, and aunts from whom some student found support:

Most of my inspiration came from my dad because my mom didn’t have much time to go through my academic work and everything. It was almost like I was always on my own but some inspiration came from my grandparents.

Participants also found the support they received from their mothers helpful to reducing stress associated with loneliness and unemployment during the transition from secondary school to college. As observed by a female participant, “My mother advised on what to do to help myself like get a job to support myself.” This is consistent with youth resilience research that identified the important role of emotional support in the adjustment of at-risk youth and academic outcome (Lynch, Hurford, & Cole, 2002; Theron, 2015; Theron & Theron, 2013; Theron et al., 2013). Specifically, Theron (2015) in her study on culturally sensitive understanding of resilience among Black South African youth observes that marginalized youth cope with hardship and related risks with instrumental resources, such as access to material resources, relational supports, and adherence to cultural values. She further observed the important role of kinship in supporting the resilient processes of young people, including mothers, grandmothers, sisters, and aunts.

Instrumental support. Resources or tangible goods that are provided and are necessary to solve practical problems are referred to as instrumental support (Berndt, 1989; Tietjen, 1989). Many participants explained how payment of school fees and provision of basic needs such as food and clothing by their parents were instrumental to their present achievement. As one participant noted, “She [my mother] helped me with food and bought my clothing and paid my school fees.” Another student added, “she [my mother] paid my school fees, she bought books and other things,” “It is my mother who has made me who I am and where I am today . . . she supported me financially and everything, she pays my school fees,” another student added. The role of the mother in the lives of these students is worth noting. While many participants indicated that their mothers had no formal education, their instrumental role in their children’s education was surprising. This is contrary to existing research findings in the United States where low maternal education is a risk factor for poor behavior and school outcomes (Cobb, 2007; Gonzales, Cauce, Friedman, & Mason, 1996; Werner, 2000). While these findings underscore the important role of kinship network in promoting resilient processes in young people in specific cultural context (Laird, 2008; Theron, 2015), it is important to not exaggerate them. As it is revealed in the next sections, cultural and structural barriers, coupled with extreme poverty, especially in rural areas, can diminish mothers’ support for their children’s education.

Culture. In this study, culture is defined as distinct aspects of gender, family, and community practices that are related to patterns of interaction and use of resources. This definition presupposes gender roles, traditional norms and customs, and family processes. Study participants perceived local culture (gender, religion, tradition) as both a protective factor and a risk factor for educational outcomes. For example, a female student noted,

I’ll be general. Muslims have a perception that as a lady when you’re 15 years or older you have to get married and not to be in school. The belief is that education is not for women because the men have to work hard to support them.

In this instance, culture or religion, specifically suppresses women and inhibits their educational access and achievement. These observations by the study participants are reflective of the expectations commonly held among some rural folks; Muslims who hold radical and fundamentalist beliefs, and those with little or no formal education. For females in these subcultures, marriage may take precedence over the education for young girls, increasing their risk for low educational attainment and marginalization as evident in the above statement. This is an illustration of one instance where family relationship was tenuous and an obstacle or risk factor for academic achievement.

Another situation in which family relationships was tenuous is cultural practices associated with funerals and the practice of polygyny. Polygyny is more common among rural people in general and Muslims in particular in Ghana. These customary and religious practices were identified by some participants as anathema to academic achievement. Although there exist variations in tribal/cultural rituals in many Ghanaian cultures, family and community members would rather save toward giving departed kin a deserving funeral (emphasis added) rather than for the education of children. As a participant noted, “Some family members will give you something like food but not money. The things that the family will come together to contribute [toward] are funerals. When there is [a] funeral, they contribute a lot.” There is evidence to support this view. Many observers, local and international, have expressed surprise and concerns over expensive Ghanaian funerals. For example, Ghanaian veteran journalist and politician, Elizabeth Ohene (2018) observed that the body of a dead kin may be kept in the morgue for months if not years while the family plans and
squabbles with funeral plans with accumulating cost, and efforts to provide a befitting burial may also involve renovating the home of the deceased to accommodate guests at funeral. de Witte (2003) and Newton (2014) echo similar observations by pointing out that money and death are inseparable in Ghanaian culture. They further observe that Ghanaian funerals are not a somber, low-key affair but a social event usually attended by a large number of mourners, which can cost several times more than a wedding.

In addition to expensive funerals, death of a parent was a common denominator among the study participants at their tender ages and its adverse impact on their lives and education was palpable. The negative impact of death of parents was poignantly illustrated by a 23-year-old participant:

In my final year in secondary school while I was waiting for my results my father died. So, the results came out and I was hoping to continue my education. But the little assets that my father [had] left, the [extended] family members [took] everything because we were young and they knew we couldn’t do anything; and my mother too, they gave her nothing.

In addition to inheritance, the death of a father who is often the sole breadwinner of the family in many Ghanaian families impoverishes the surviving family, as one student observed:

On my part, the death of my father created a big problem. After his death things were tough because when he was alive he worked as a [private] contractor so he left some property for us. I completed SSS in 2006 and even though all my requirements were not met, the following year I rewrote the exams and got all my requirements but my family didn’t have the money to support me because my elder sister was already in the university and I had to wait for her to finish before I could enroll.

As is common in every society, death of a parent often may result in the disruption of the personal life of young children and their education. Death of a parent in any society is a monumental loss to the child. Within the Ghanaian society, death of a parent has several nuances and it is an added layer of risk to children’s developmental trajectory. In addition, customary practices relating to inheritance after the death of a parent, particularly the father, can have devastating consequences on children. One possible explanation is that currently Ghana does not have a well-functioning child protection system or a developed foster care system, and current laws on child protection and inheritance are very weak and are rarely enforced. The high illiteracy rate among the general population is another factor. Many illiterate mothers have no knowledge of the current formal national inheritance laws. Extended family members also revile wills left by deceased fathers as alien to their culture, and inheritance, based on wills may alienate surviving children from the extended family forever. This can result in the disruption of children’s education. Nonetheless, participants identified some positive aspects of the local culture that support positive adjustment, as demonstrated in this example with regard to getting support from the community:

It depends on the lifestyle you live within your family. If you live a good lifestyle, anytime you have a problem even if it is beyond their means they will do all they possibly can to support you. But if you live otherwise they have some [negative] perceptions about you and [if] you have problems they won’t help you.

Apart from the cultural value of good behavior and lifestyle, participants identified other sources of support and protection against adversity: “If you combine your studies with bible studies it can help you. Any time you’re feeling bad you can open your bible and read and that will change your mind so you can focus on your studies.” Another student extended this view in relation to the role of religion and behavior restraint:

[My] religion forbids drinking alcohol and any form of hard drinks and for that matter if you’re [a] young lady or a guy you’ll not even be interested in alcohol because your religion forbids it and that will help you achieve whatever you’re doing.

It can be induced from these examples that culture is intertwined with several aspects of Ghanaian youth’s lives, and the role of religion and spirituality in general in providing a sense of security, meaning, stability, and purpose in the face of adversity is documented in many studies (Akbar, 1984; Gilbert et al., 2009; Theron et al., 2013). In the study sample, resilience was accounted for as the capacity to effectively cope with the multiple faces of culture in ways that were culturally acceptable, which is also consistent with Ungar et al.’s (2007) observation of the role of culture in influencing youth behavior and educational outcomes.

Spatial inequality. Finally, in response to questions about factors that make it difficult to achieve educational success in Ghana, participants identified inadequate infrastructure and living in a zongo (inner city) as risk factors that inhibit academic success. The impact of inadequate infrastructure is more pronounced in rural communities where teachers are unwilling to work due to lack of potable water, electricity, and reliable transportation. As one participant pointed out, “Some students have to go to neighboring towns or city to study and that affects their movement and teachers cannot also come to the village if there is a school.” Another participant added, “In my hometown the roads are very bad which makes transportation very difficult.” The impact of bad roads and the reluctance of teachers to teach in rural communities were underscored by another student: “The most competent teachers who would have come to teach students to succeed don’t want to come because of the bad roads.” In other instances, lack of schools is a major obstacle to educational access and achievement, as observed by another participant:
“There are not enough schools and you don’t know if you’re doing well or not.” All these support the availability and access to material resources emphasized by Ungar et al. (2007) in supporting or inhibiting youth resilience in non-Western countries.

These contextualized risk factors of lack of transportation and freedom of movement as well as poverty are consistent with Ungar et al.’s (2007) findings on resilient-inhibiting factors in non-Western cultures. According to the authors, access to these basic and instrumental needs are vital for youth resilience. As reported by some participants, some communities in Ghana are marginalized by bad roads and poor social amenities, and these have negative consequences on school outcomes. Previous research has documented the relationship between poor community characteristics and youth behavior outcomes including academic achievement in Ghana (e.g., Glewwe & Ilias, 1996; White, 2004).

Implications for Practice and Policy

The findings in this study have several implications for prevention, intervention, and social policy. First, the stories the participants shared offered insights into the types of problems they are confronted with in pursuit of their education in Ghana. Consistent with social constructionist theory, study participants adapted in response to environmental realities, and in doing so, their socially constructed realities changed. This was highlighted by many challenges and opportunities including family and individual protective factors as well as cultural and spatial challenges. These are factors that promote resilience for some but are sources of vulnerability for others with regard to academic outcomes within the Ghanaian context. Furthermore, these findings suggest that assessment of youth needs in Ghana should include the strengths and personal agency of the individual, personal and family survival strategies, and leveraging the kinship and community resources, both tangible and intangible. The findings also suggest that reducing vulnerability for marginalized youth including girls requires better assessment strategies such as use of focus groups at the school and community levels to identify unique personal and community needs expressed by the local people themselves and not by some experts.

In addition, lack of knowledge and understanding of risk and resilience can lead to arbitrary and wrong priorities that are not based on the expressed needs of populations most at risk of low academic achievement. This study, albeit on a small scale, demonstrated how focus groups can be used as an assessment tool to identify risk and protection at the community level, such as identifying the needs for equal opportunities for inheritance, access to education, and changing attitudes about gender equality and access to education.

Finally, some limitations must be considered when interpreting the results of this study. Although we sought to understand Ghanaian students’ perceptions of resilience and barriers to educational success, it is important to acknowledge that the small size of our sample might have limited our ability to fully capture all the manifestations of these factors. Second, our study relied on three focused groups drawn from three deprived universities in three metropolitan areas in the country whose educational experiences might be markedly different from those in more privileged schools and rural deprived communities. Future studies should target a larger, more representative, sample across different levels of the Ghanaian educational system to fully understand these processes.

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1. Data from two of these groups were used for the doctoral dissertation study (Abukari, 2010).

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