

WHAT FACTORS INFLUENCE THE ACADEMIC SUCCESS OF LIBERIAN HIGH  
SCHOOL STUDENTS?

by

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## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

*“Why do these students have so much trouble? I explain it over and over and they just don’t get it! Is there something wrong with them? Is there a reason why they seem to struggle more than other ESL students?”*

A math teacher made these remarks about the Liberian students in her class. However, a computer keyboarding teacher, a science teacher, or a physical education teacher just as easily could have made them. I have heard them more than once, and I have felt both anger and compassion - *anger* for their lack of understanding, and *compassion* for their lack of understanding.

### My Initial Experience with Liberians

For almost five years, I have been teaching English Language Learners (ELLs) in a second-tier suburban Minnesota high school. In the first days and months of the new job, I was not prepared to handle the discipline issues; I was not educated in the cultural background of refugees from war-torn Liberia; I was not ready for the behavioral extremes and disrespect these same students exhibited toward me and others; I was not willing to accept students who apparently could not or would not take responsibility for their education. I *was*, quite honestly, very scared.

At that time, the Liberian students I was teaching were grouped in class with only other Liberians. In this case it was five teenage girls with very strong personalities. The

rationale here was that their academic English needs would be different from those of ELLs coming from non-English language backgrounds. The downside of this assumption was they had no other group to interact with, be responsive to, or be respectful of. This gave them a perceived sense of power, and they felt the class and school rules did not apply to them. They knew English and felt they should not be in an ESL (English as a Second Language) program. Their academic skills, however, were quite low. This was due to their education being interrupted by civil war in Liberia. In reality their academic needs were even greater than many of their non-English-speaking peers.

Their behavior shocked and baffled me. They would ignore me by continuing to talk to each other once instruction began. They chewed gum loudly and ate chips and candy when these things were against class rules. They used profanity, did not do homework, refused to answer questions when called upon, and were belligerent with authority figures when reprimanded. One day they told me, “We will never participate in class as long as you separate us from other students.” Of those five girls, one dropped out of school, one was put on a behavioral contract for the remainder of the school year, and three returned in the fall. When school started in the fall, we changed our class structure. All ELLs were grouped by skill level regardless of language background. This presented new challenges but did improve upon the extreme behavioral situation of the year before.

With time, education, and experience, I became confident in my ability as a teacher in a multicultural environment. It was then that I realized there is more to the Liberian student population than meets the eye. Though many struggle and fail both

academically and socially (e.g., poor “people” skills – either too afraid or too aggressive in their interactions), there are those who succeed. They overcome the odds, work hard, take time to study, get good grades, pass state graduation tests, join extra-curricular activities as athletes, singers, and dance line members, go on to post-secondary education, get jobs and contribute to the economy, display good manners, appreciate their teachers, show affection, and integrate successfully into a culture very different from their own. How do they do it? Why do some acclimate to U.S. culture and others do not? Why do some succeed in school and others do not? Why do some take responsibility for their actions, while others take on helplessness, a “victim” mentality of sorts? I wanted to understand the variation among my students, particularly as it pertained to their academic success or failure.

#### Liberians in the United States

In the process of looking for research to answer my questions, I found a distinct lack of data on Liberian refugees. The reason may be because their arrival in the U.S. has only been within the last 15 years, and we are just now feeling the impact of this population on our communities and schools. Additionally, Liberian refugees have not relocated to all parts of the U.S. In their work at the Center for Applied Linguistics, Dunn-Marcos, Kolllehlon, Ngovo, and Russ (2005) have obtained the following information. According to the 2000 U.S. Census, of the 25,140 Liberians living in the United States, the largest concentrations were found in New York (13%), Minnesota (12%), Maryland (11%), New Jersey (10%), and Pennsylvania (7%). Smaller communities were found in North Carolina (5%), Georgia (5%), and California (5%).

Along with these statistics, Dunn-Marcos et al. (2005) state that 14,000-plus Liberian refugees have entered the U.S. since 2000, making the total number in 2004 well over 39,000.

A newspaper article by Schmickle (2005) states unofficially that Minnesota's Liberian population now exceeds 20,000 people, making it one of the largest recent immigrant groups in the state. It also mentions that the suburban area in which I teach now has one of the nation's largest populations of West Africans. Nearly one in five of the 100,000 residents (of two cities combined) are from a war-torn region. Brandt (2005), in a subsequent newspaper article, mentions that Minnesota ranks high for hosting refugee groups in general. According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Office of Refugee Resettlement (as cited in Brandt, 2005), Minnesota ranked first, nationally, in the number of foreign refugee arrivals in 2004 *on a population-adjusted basis* (i.e., one refugee for every 875 Minnesotans). That rate is four times the national rate and is attributable to the state's long-established concentration of settlement agencies. The refugee population in Minnesota is unique. The agencies work only with refugees joining family members already in the state. This is a contrast from states that also allow unattached refugees.

Dan Nichols, ELL Intake Facilitator for the school district, verified the following numbers as of December 2004 (written communication, January 4, 2005). Of a total of 1938 students served in the ESL program, there were 289 students (15 percent) who were born in Liberia. Thirty-eight of those 289 students (13 percent) attended my high school. In addition, 264 (14 percent) of the total ELLs in the district indicated Liberian English as

their first language. With so many Liberians in my district, and a limited number of secondary colleagues who shared my experience, I was motivated to focus my research in this area. I wanted answers to my questions regarding the behavior of my students. I wanted to learn more about the refugee experience, particularly that of West Africans. I wanted to share this information with my colleagues, most of who do not understand and are still struggling to make the classroom experience meaningful for ELLs.

#### History of Liberia and the United States

The history between our two countries is worth mentioning. Mowell and Thompson (1997) tell us that it began in early 19<sup>th</sup> century America with the slavery issues. Efforts to relocate freed slaves began long before the end of the U.S. Civil War. Americans felt fear and guilt and didn't want freed slaves living in the South as a reminder of the loss of a way of life for Southerners. An 1818 trip to West Africa resulted in a meeting with Bassa chiefs to choose a place for returned settlers (Americo-Liberians) to live. A 60-mile stretch of land on Africa's northwest coast was chosen. Settlement began in 1822, but the settlers were not allowed to interfere in the affairs of the indigenous people, particularly in slave trade practices. The population initially was 95 percent indigenous Africans (representing several tribes) and 5 percent Americo-Liberians. Liberia declared independence in 1847 and modeled its money, government, and flag after the U.S.

Religion takes a variety of forms in Liberia and is a pervasive feature of Liberian society (Dunn-Marcos, et al., 2005). The principal forms include animism, ancestral worship, Christianity, and Islam. Witchcraft is also practiced, particularly among

indigenous peoples. According to the 1984 Liberian census, 14 percent of the population is Moslem (i.e., believers in or adherents of Islam), and 68% of the population is Christian. Islam was brought to Liberia in the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century; Christianity arrived in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century with the Americo-Liberian settlers from the U.S. The Christians quickly established the Methodist Episcopal and Baptist Churches, but Christian missionaries arrived shortly afterwards, representing many different denominations. The Americo-Liberians, Bassa, Gio/Dan, Kpelle, and Kru ethnic groups are predominantly Christian, and the Gola, Mandingo, and Vai tend to be predominantly Moslem. It should be noted that Islam in Liberia is not practiced as strictly and traditionally as in other parts of the world.

Tensions and struggles for control of Liberia have evolved over the years into the eruption of civil war in 1989. The war continues on and off to the present day among various rebel groups. The aforementioned newspaper article by Schmickle (2005) also outlines how the civil unrest has recently unfolded. Rebel leader Charles Taylor was elected president of Liberia in 1997, but in 2003 the rebels turned against his government. During the years of continual war between rebels and presiding governments, many atrocities were performed against the people. Families were forced to leave their homes and businesses with minimal possessions. Some went to refugee camps; some did not. Some were separated and never reunited. They scavenged for food and water, sharing little among many. They traveled cautiously, often at night, trying to find a location not under siege. They suffered random interrogations and had their food and belongings stolen. Their educations were left behind, as schools were closed during war and opened

again during the lulls. They left behind the safety, love, and memories of a country that will not return to normalcy for some time. Over the years, the hardship of civil war in Liberia has caused many people to relocate to neighboring African countries as well as foreign countries.

### Research Goals

My hypothesis is that the hardship and trauma my students have endured has something to do with their success in school. I know they have all had tough times, but what specifically happened to each and how did they move beyond it? They have all survived and are in an American school to pursue their dreams. I wonder if their individual experiences contributed positively or negatively to their academic achievements. In addition to the effect these traumatic events may have had on these students, I want to find out if there were social or family conditions, other previous experiences (e.g., schooling), or personal attributes that might explain why some succeed and some do not. To develop insights into what molded these students into who they are, I decided to interview several of them, talk to some of their teachers, and review their cumulative school records.

In summary, my goal is to learn what factors affect the academic experience of the Liberian refugees in my classroom. As an ESL teacher, I am challenged to be effective with all my students. However, I am particularly challenged with the reality that the academic needs of a Liberian student may differ from those of other ELLs. One example is the fact that Liberians come to school already speaking English. Many Liberians resent being in ESL because English is their language. However, Liberian

English and Standard American English have differences that must be addressed if a Liberian student is to be successful in the American school environment. In some ways, it is almost harder to teach differences *within* the same language than it is to teach differences *between* languages. Many Liberian students seem unable or uninterested in changing their well-established speech and writing patterns. This presents a unique challenge. Public schools are already being mandated to show certain levels of academic progress for *all students* in order to avoid punitive consequences. The trend will continue in the future, with educators being accountable for student success or failure. The “No Child Left Behind” (NCLB) legislation is one example of this, requiring that all students achieve high school graduation. Therefore, increased awareness of factors that may affect the school experience of Liberian refugees should guide teachers in providing a more positive and productive classroom environment. Increased understanding and tolerance, positive student-teacher relationships, varied and relevant curriculum whenever possible: these need to be the goals of all teachers who work with refugee and immigrant students, but especially those who work with Liberians.

In the next chapter, I will provide a review of the literature as it relates to factors affecting academic success. Studies focus on the following topics: 1) trauma, 2) resilience factors, and 3) acculturation. In chapter three, I will describe the methods used to collect data for the study. In chapter four, I will share results of the study and discuss their relevance. In chapter five, I will provide concluding remarks and recommendations.

## CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

There are many areas of research which support the question addressed by this project: What factors influence the academic success of Liberian high school students? The literature review begins by discussing childhood trauma and its possible effect on student academic achievement. The study moves on to a look at resilience factors that may influence academic success for at-risk students. These may include individual attributes, positive use of time, family, and the school environment. The end of the chapter focuses on acculturation, including resettlement and cultural identity, length of time in the U.S., and language factors. This portion is a review of studies that analyze various aspects of acculturation, that is, the changes that occur when a group or individual encounters another culture. Finally, I will outline the value of my study in terms of educating teachers, administrators, and the community at large.

### Trauma and Its Effect on Scholastic Achievement

Everstine and Everstine (1983) define trauma as the problems that are created, inspired, and exacerbated by violence, which are the worst that can affect mental life. According to Herman, Andreason, and Green, Linday, and Gross (as cited in Stow Bolea, Grant, Burgess, & Plasa, 2003), traumatic events generally involve threats to life or bodily integrity, or a close encounter with violence and death. This psychological trauma is a feeling of intense fear, helplessness, loss of control, and the threat of annihilation.

Experiences that exacerbate the intensity of these feelings include being taken by surprise, feeling trapped, and being exposed to danger to the point of exhaustion. In a study of 30 Central American immigrant youth exposed to trauma and violence, Arroyo and Eth (as cited in Guarnaccia & Lopez, 1998) found a wide variety of mental health problems including suicidal behavior, insomnia, somatic complaints, antisocial acts, and school-related problems. Though I have not witnessed all of these behaviors in all of my Liberian students, I have observed many occurrences of somatic complaints (as measured by frequent requests to see the school nurse and absences due to illness); antisocial acts (as measured by inappropriate, disruptive, and rebellious behavior in and out of class); and school-related problems (as measured by academic failure, trancies, and dropouts). Initially I believed that past trauma could be a negative factor in future school success, but I found that this was not the case with the students in my study.

Although one might believe that past trauma would be a factor in whether students have the resources to achieve academically, research suggests that childhood trauma is not necessarily a predictor of failure and negative outcomes later in life (Rosseau & Drapeau, 2000; Sheehy, 1986; Henderson, 1997). In a study by Rosseau & Drapeau (2000) of Cambodian and Central American adolescent refugees in Canada, findings indicated only a tenuous relationship between previous emotional problems and the scholastic achievement of teenage refugees. Of 152 male and female student participants, the mean scholastic achievement score was virtually identical for both ethnic groups of either sex, and was close to that of their classmates. Those who failed one or more courses could not be distinguished from those who did not on the basis of scores on

their emotional profiles. They also could not be distinguished on the basis of post-migration variables, such as household income, degree of acculturation, family cohesion, number of years in Canada, and family conflict. The relationship between pre-migration experiences (i.e., trauma experienced by the family, and significant separations experienced by the adolescent in his or her homeland or on the way to Canada) and school achievement was fairly weak except for Central American males. For these males, an even greater number of scholastic problems were associated with family trauma that occurred *after* the birth of the adolescent male. Post-migration variables of household income, degree of acculturation, and family cohesion were significantly associated with scholastic achievement among Central American females. Overall, among the adolescents studied, the scholastic achievement corresponded by and large to the average achievement of their classmates, contradicting the general perception that refugees have more academic problems.

In his studies with Khmer teenage refugees, Sack (as cited in Rousseau & Drapeau, 2000) found no differences in overall scholastic achievement between refugees with and without post-traumatic stress syndrome or any psychiatric diagnosis. In discussing the relationship between children and risk, Sheehy (1986) states that, "The premise that disturbing early childhood experiences inevitably lead to a neurotic adulthood is dangerously uninformed" (p.354). Her research and her experience with her adopted Cambodian daughter have contributed to her beliefs that early trauma can actually benefit children in their personality development. Sheehy noticed a level of maturity in these children that resulted from having to deal with many of life's

unpredictable crises. The knowledge that they had survived what seemed to be insurmountable offered a perceived shield of invulnerability against future disasters.

In her research synthesis of resiliency, Benard (1991) points out that while a certain percentage of high-risk children develop various problems, a greater percentage become healthy, competent adults. For example, Bleuler (as cited in Benard, 1991) found that only nine percent of children of schizophrenic parents became schizophrenic, while 75 percent developed into healthy adults. Rutter's research (as cited in Benard, 1991) on children growing up in poverty found that half do not repeat that pattern in their own adult lives. In addition, Bronfenbrenner (as cited in Benard, 1991) refers to an increasing acceptance, in the child development field, of the transactional-ecological model of human development. This model views the human personality as a self-righting mechanism that is engaged in active, ongoing adaptation to its environment. Henderson (1997) highlights that this current research view is in contrast to earlier impressions that high-risk children would present a multitude of problems for educators.

To summarize, the literature points to several studies of human beings and their ability to survive trauma. While there are circumstances where early trauma may result in a variety of mental health problems, this does not seem to be the case for the majority of people. Studies repeatedly found that childhood trauma is not a predictor of future failure, and that scholastic achievement did not vary overall between students with and without psychiatric diagnoses. In some cases, trauma may actually enhance personality development as a result of the child's ability to survive a crisis. A great number of at-risk children go on to become healthy, competent adults. The current research view of the

human personality as an adaptive, self-righting mechanism contradicts previous beliefs that at-risk children would become future problems for educators.

### Resilience

Resilience may be a factor in the academic success of Liberian high school students. Knowing that my students are all refugees who have fled their countries after experiencing self-described horror and hardship, I could not help but be intrigued by the levels of resilience they might have and how their various personalities might account for this. With many of them appearing to be resilient, simply by having survived thus far, what distinguishes those who use resilience to achieve school success from those who do not?

The term resilience has recently been described in a variety of ways. Rutter and Garmezy (as cited in Jarrett, 1997) define resilience simply as the individual's ability to positively respond to stressful situations. In addition, Rutter, Garmezy, and Fonagy, Steele, Steele, Higgit, and Target (as cited in Olsson, Bond, Burns, Vella-Brodrick, & Sawyer, 2003), respectively, define it as a dynamic process involving an interaction between both risk and protective processes, internal and external to the individual, that act to modify the effects of an adverse life event; an ability to recover from negative events; and, normal development under difficult conditions. Resilience is the ability of some people to resist or reject the potential negative effects caused by adversity or risk factors that make people vulnerable to diminished well-being (Bachay, 1999). Risk factors are conditions in an adolescent's environment that may negatively affect that adolescent as they progress into adulthood. These can include poverty, alcohol and drug

abuse, teen pregnancy, delinquency, gangs, school dropout, neglect, physical handicaps, war, depression, parental schizophrenia, separation, parent conflict, and criminality (Benard, 1991; Olsson, et al., 2003; Jarrett, 1997). There is a linear relationship between the number of risk factors in a child's environment and the number of psychosocial problems at ages 15-16 years (Olsson, et al., 2003).

Protective factors are those processes, or interventions, that seem to lessen the effects of a risk setting, given the appropriate dose and timing of the process. Olsson, et al. (2003) focus on three levels of the protective process: individual, family, and community. Benard (1991) categorizes protective factors similarly as individual personality attributes or dispositions, family characteristics, and environmental influences (e.g., peers, school, and community). Segal and Garmezy (as cited in Benard, 1991) define protective factors as those "traits, conditions, situations, and episodes that appear to alter-or even reverse-predictions of negative outcome and enable individuals to circumvent life stressors" (p.3). The goal is to translate negative risk factors into positive action strategies (i.e., protective factors) that research has identified as contributing to the development of resilience in youth (Benard, 1991).

Resilience is thought to be an important factor in helping at-risk students succeed (McMillan & Reed, 1994). A researcher herself in the areas of resilience, schooling, and development in African American youth, Winfield (as cited in McMillan & Reed, 1994) defines resilient students as follows:

Despite incredible hardships and the presence of at-risk factors, some students have developed characteristics and coping skills that enable them to succeed.

They appear to develop stable, healthy personas and are able to recover from or adapt to life's stresses and problems. (p.137)

In a large-scale study of 17,000 tenth graders from low-income families, Peng, Lee, Wang, and Walberg (as cited in McMillan & Reed, 1994) found that approximately 19 percent of students who could be classified as at-risk became individuals who had success in school, with positive goals and plans for the future. They wondered what educators and concerned citizens could do to foster these same qualities in the 81 percent of at-risk students who do not succeed. They combined their findings with existing literature to examine resilience. According to Peng, et al., and McMillan and Reed (as cited in McMillan & Reed, 1994), the factors that seem to be most related to resilience in at-risk students can be organized into four categories: *individual attributes, positive use of time, family, and school.*

#### Individual Attributes

Resilient at-risk students have positive attitudes and temperaments that elicit positive responses and helpful reactions from others. This includes respecting others, coming to class prepared, volunteering for in- and out-of-class assignments, and knowing how to play the school game. They also show high intrinsic motivation and, very importantly, an internal locus of control. The Center for Social Epidemiology defines internal locus of control as the perception of positive or negative events as being a consequence of one's own actions and under one's own personal control (Job Stress Network, 2006, para. 1). Those with an internal locus of control see themselves able to control their destinies and often excel in educational or vocational realms. They do not

attribute their successes or failures to luck or other environmental factors. They rarely see themselves as victims in any given situation (Wikipedia, 2006, para. 1). McMillan and Reed (1994) continue with their description of the individual attributes of resilient students. In addition to being personally responsible for their achievements, resilient students are motivated to succeed and be self-starting, and they have high educational goals. They gain satisfaction from experiencing success in self-fulfilling activities. Resilient students also have clear, realistic goals. They are optimistic and hopeful despite negative circumstances in their lives. They have confidence they will achieve long-term goals. Difficult experiences may provide even greater motivation toward positive goals. They are mature in explanations and goals and do not believe their family, school, or neighborhood is critical to their success or failure (Peng et al., as cited in McMillan & Reed, 1994).

Another researcher giving credence to the concept of internal locus of control is Sheehy (1986). In her discussion of what she calls “the victorious personality,” she states that resilient students are self-starting and personally responsible. She cites that those who defy negative predictions about themselves are generally highly self-directed. They have the ability to set goals without depending on people, or in spite of the push and pull of others. Seeing change as possible and rewarding is a source of power, especially if challenged to the contrary. Sheehy adds that having a religious ideal that goes beyond oneself is an important factor for many people who beat the negative odds. She states that more than half of those who beat the odds held to their faith, despite disconfirming experiences. Supplementing this theory is Gordon (as cited in Sheehy, 1986), who points

out in his study of the religious tradition of black people that religion provides a significant strength often overlooked by many white observers. Coles (as cited in Sheehy, 1986) reports on the literal identification with Christ he found in many black American homes, where young people were taught to regard themselves as those who will lead their people to a better fate. Preliminary observations of my students, as well as discussions we have had, lead me to think that the strength of religion found in black American homes may also be found in black Liberian homes.

African Americans and Africans share race and common ancestry, but are they similarly at-risk? Do they share personality traits that contribute to their academic success? To answer my questions, I began by looking for research on successful African American students. Dorsey and Jackson (1995) conducted a study at a large midwestern college campus. African Americans comprised only six percent of the undergraduate student population. The focus of their study was to examine how and why African American students remain and persist at predominantly white institutions. Dorsey and Jackson (1995) examined student perceptions of factors associated with their academic performance. Results of a student survey showed that attributes such as their own personal motivation, high aspirations, and positive self-concept were part of the reason they survived. Research by Astin (as cited in Dorsey & Jackson, 1995) showed that African American students at primarily white institutions of higher education experience higher rates of attrition compared to white students. Swanson (2004) similarly noted that the graduation rate for public high school students from historically disadvantaged minority groups is only 50 percent. The Liberian students in my study attend a

predominantly white school also. Even though it is high school instead of college, perhaps there are similarities in their experiences and motivation.

An article by Clark (as cited in Winfield, 1991) focused on the various identities that adolescents develop that have important consequences for future school success. She states that those who develop a “raceless,” or bicultural, identity are less at risk for academic failure. Even though this process may alienate them from their peers (at a time when peer support is important), peer interactions in multicultural settings have been shown to promote academic resilience among African American adolescents. Can we make the leap from African Americans to Liberians? Possibly. They share race, which does establish a common bond between them in terms of other people’s perceptions. However, they have unique cultural characteristics that distinguish them from each other as well as from non-black groups. I can only speculate that peer interactions in multicultural settings would promote academic resilience for Liberians as well as others.

#### Positive Use of Time

In a qualitative study conducted by McMillan and Reed (as cited in McMillan & Reed, 1994) resilient students were asked about their hobbies, activities, participation in clubs, church, or other organizations, and how they spend their time. It was clear they used their time positively and were meaningfully involved in school and other activities. The programs they were involved in were not solely for at-risk students. This active involvement in a variety of areas left little spare time for students, and it seemed to provide a refuge of sorts. Hobbies, creative interests, and sports helped promote the growth of self-esteem, as did being recognized for special talents. Being involved in an

activity considered special appeared to increase self-esteem (Geary, Werner, Coburn and Nelson, and McMillan and Reed, as cited in McMillan & Reed, 1994). Such involvement may provide a social-psychological support system by connecting the students to others in meaningful ways. Success in these activities may enhance self-esteem by providing recognition and a sense of accomplishment.

Involvement in “required helpfulness” seems to be another factor in resilience says Werner and Philliber (as cited in McMillan & Reed, 1994). Among other things, this may mean doing volunteer work in the community, tutoring or buddying at school, or taking care of siblings or otherwise helping at home. Activities like this seem to give purpose to the difficult life of an at-risk student and serve to increase their caring about others. The at-risk students realize there are people that even *they* can help. To support this theory, Lee, Wilson, and Winfield (as cited in Winfield, 1991) reviewed the academic achievement of African American students and identified trends obtained in national surveys. They then examined the academic behavior and characteristics of schools attended by a high-achieving sample of African American eighth-graders (those students scoring above the national average). They identified a more positive use of time on homework and reading as one factor related to resilience that influenced academic success. Several of the students in this study give time to homework and other priorities in their lives. It will be interesting to see what effect this may have on their school achievement.

## Family

As Peng, et al. point out, an attribute of successful at-risk students seems to be family support (as cited in McMillan & Reed, 1994). Parents of resilient students have higher expectations for their children's educations and put pressure on them to become involved in school and work hard. Though the educational background of parents is related to student resilience, family composition seems to have no significant relationship to the success or failure of an at-risk student. There is not necessarily a higher level of resilience in students living with both parents versus those who live in single-parent families or other configurations.

Providing further support to the importance of family is a study of 12 Chicano students and their families in La Victoria, Colorado. In this study, Delgado-Gaitan (1988) concluded that students who stayed in school had consistent systematic support from their families throughout their elementary and high school careers. The researchers were interested in learning why some students within the same ethnic and socioeconomic group were able to remain in school considering the nearly 50 percent dropout rate at the local high school. Of the 12 students chosen, some dropped out of school and stayed out, some left school and returned, and some stayed in school and were determined to stay. Data were collected via ethnographic observations and interviews as well as demographic census data analysis. Profiles of education were constructed for these students from the resulting data. Overwhelmingly, results showed that the degree of support students experienced helped them reinterpret the day-to-day conflicts in order to understand the

problems more objectively, such that it demystified the competition and enabled the student to conform to the school values enough to stay there.

Ibanez, Kuperminc, Jurkovic, and Perilla (2004) conducted a study to examine achievement motivation among Latino adolescents. The researchers found a correlation existed between a parent's belief that school is important and the child having the same belief. Many Liberian parents also share the belief that school is critical to their children's success. Does this belief motivate these children as it motivated the Latino adolescents? I think it does for some.

Werner (as cited in McMillan & Reed, 1994) states that resilient at-risk students also have had the opportunity to establish a close bond with at least one caregiver who gives them attention and support (this may be someone other than a parent). Sheehy (1986) continues her discussion of the "victorious personality" by adding that autonomous effort alone is not enough for individuals to overcome negative odds. They need a strong relationship with another person who acts as a model, a provider, or a mentor (e.g., parent, teacher, guidance counselor, minister, or peer). Resilient students seem adept at finding these substitute caregivers since they are generally good at eliciting positive responses from people (McMillan & Reed, 1994). In his study of Chinese immigrants attending high school in Canada, Chow (2000) concluded that the presence of the father, specifically, has a significant impact on academic performance. In a follow-up study to his earlier work, Marjoribanks (1998) found that the father's support for learning was more strongly related to the education aspirations of girls than of boys.

The research work of Lefkowitz (as cited in Wang & Gordon, 1994) highlighted the role of caring adults in fostering resilience. Lefkowitz reported that the majority of 500 at-risk youths identified a caring adult as contributing strongly to their success. Jarrett (1997) used observational and interview data to illustrate protective mechanisms in the lives of poor African American students. She noted that some parents help control dangers (e.g., drug use, violence, premature sexuality, gangs) in the lives of their adolescent children by closely monitoring their time, space, and friendships. Some Liberian parents are quite protective of their children's time and peer associations, even when their teenagers complain. It will be interesting to see if this strictness pays off. Coleman (as cited in Marjoribanks, 1992) suggested that the combination of the parents' education and a positive parent-child relationship is significant to the child's educational growth. If the parents' education is not complemented by a supportive parent-child relationship, it is irrelevant to the child's educational growth.

Furthermore, Winfield, et al. (as cited in Wang & Gordon, 1994) used National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) data to determine the influence of ethnicity and socio-economic class on learning and school achievement. They also looked at ways that at-risk populations differ from the mainstream. They found higher achieving African American students tend to come from higher social classes, and a higher proportion of higher achieving students have working mothers.

### The School Environment

Werner (as cited in McMillan & Reed, 1994) points out resilient students often find support outside of the home, usually in school. They seem to like school, or at least

put up with it. Most participate in class discussions or activities. Adding to their profile of academically successful African American college students, Dorsey and Jackson (1995) stated an additional trait the students in their study exhibited. They were all generally satisfied with their schools, were intelligent, had good study habits, and pushed themselves academically.

Because school is more than just academics for resilient students, most are involved in at least one extracurricular event. It becomes another source of support and increases involvement, belonging, and self-esteem. According to Geary (as cited in McMillan & Reed, 1994), involvement with nonacademic activities can keep students positively engaged at school. This is because many of them feel that to fit in, they should get involved with extracurricular things. Winfield (1991) explores the role of extracurricular activities, particularly athletic involvement, in fostering resilience among young African American males. Braddock, Royster, Hawkins, and Winfield (as cited in Winfield, 1991) used National Educational Longitudinal Survey information to examine various aspects of sports programs and athletic participation as they relate to resilience for African American males. Analyses show sports participation is positively associated with the aspirations of eighth-grade African American males to enroll in academic or college-preparatory programs in high school. Athletic participation for this group is also related to plans for completing high school and attending college. It enhances self-esteem and promotes positive peer relations. I would suggest, however, that while the association between sports and resilience may hold true for African American males, it may not automatically hold true for Liberian males or other black refugees. Refugee and

immigrant students may not participate in extracurricular athletics to the same degree as American students do. Additional variables would need to be considered.

Teachers play an important role in the success of these students. Most resilient at-risk students mention school staff who had taken a personal interest in them as being important to their success. The 86 college students in Dorsey and Jackson's (1995) study of successful students all said they used at least one faculty member for support. Sixty-one percent indicated they were comfortable about asking faculty for assistance, and sixty-five percent felt that at least one faculty member had had a strong impact on their intellectual development. I have observed that for every teacher who takes little interest in their refugee students, there are many who care about them and greatly impact their lives.

Attendance as a predictor of academic achievement is heavily debated in the professional community. While studies by many, including Turner (1927), Jones (1931), Anikeef (1954), Jones (1984), Schuman, Walsh, Olson, and Etheridge (1985), Van Blerkom (1992), Gunn (1993), Romer (1993), and Clump, Bauer, and Whiteleather (2003), (as cited in Gump, 2005) confirmed a positive relationship between attendance and grades, studies by Beaulieu (1984), Galicho and Friedman (1985), Wyatt (1992), and Launius (1997), (as cited in Gump, 2005), for example, have investigated the negative association, or lack of a positive relationship, between attendance and overall grade performance. A study by Gump (2005) of 300 college students at a prominent midwestern university showed that decreased absences did not necessarily increase grades. Gump increased the number of planned quizzes in his Japanese culture class,

hoping to motivate students to attend discussion sessions more often. He wanted the students to learn the material in order to do well on the exams and in the class.

Attendance did increase, and the students themselves claimed the quizzes were helpful. However, after analyzing attendance and final grades, the improved attendance did not increase grades. He concluded that attendance is simply one portion of a bigger equation. Despite his findings, he still believes attendance is an easy variable for students to control, and that cutting class can be costly. Better attendance is *related to*, but not the reason for, better grades. Vidler (as cited in Gump, 2005) found students do not necessarily do better on tests solely because they attend class, but because they are, in general, more “academically curious” than other students. He also cited maturity, studiousness, work ethic, academic background, and ability as key factors affecting student grades.

Though not a research study, findings by a high school principal (Phillipps, 1995) are enough to provoke further consideration. A high school in Pennsylvania was dealing with the challenge of improving attendance. It encouraged better attendance via the use of an incentive, a fast food coupon from a local restaurant. Over the years, as the program continued, the incentives grew larger; perfect attendance reaped rewards such as passes to amusement parks, dinners, merchandise, and gift certificates. Not only did attendance increase dramatically (e.g., more than 640 percent during the first year), but by the sixth year, other changes were noted. SAT scores improved, increased numbers of students made the honor roll, and greater numbers of students became eligible to be inducted into the National Honor Society. While definite correlations cannot be proven

due to other uncontrolled factors, improvements and changes did occur after implementing the perfect attendance program.

To summarize, the literature on resilience points to several studies that analyze the coping mechanisms of human beings. Findings indicate that without resilience, a linear relationship develops between the number of risk factors children encounter and the number of psychosocial problems they develop as teenagers. Resilient at-risk teens have been shown to have success in school and also have positive goals for the future. Resilience is categorized in a variety of ways and on a variety of levels. Generally speaking, these operate within the individual, the family, and the environment. This study focuses primarily on the resilience factors of individual attributes, positive use of time, family, and the school environment.

### Acculturation

#### Resettlement and Cultural Identity

According to Gordon (as cited in James, 1997), “Acculturation refers to changes in the individual’s behavior, social and work activities, thinking patterns, values, and self-identification as a result of contact with another culture.” It is thought to have an important effect on whether or not immigrant and refugee students experience success in their new country. While acculturation allows for a meaningful connection between the past and the mainstream culture, it can also cause stress. Acculturative, or resettlement, stress can be the result of many things. This includes language use, school attendance and peer relationships, conflicts within the family about doing things the “American way” or the “traditional way,” lack of effective social skills, school behaviors

incongruent with expectations of the host culture, worries about the fate of relatives left in the country of origin, reception of newcomers by the host society, age at arrival, severity of previous traumatic events, perceived and real discrimination, dangerous illnesses, racism, family background, spoken and unspoken expectations refugee youth have about the United States, poor school performance, the lack of a like-ethnic community (especially for the parents), and individual resiliency (Sack, 1998; Fantino and Colak, 2001; James, 1997).

Sack (1998) points out that resettlement stress drops in intensity as refugees become acculturated, and that children, on the average, acculturate much faster than their parents. This is because they want to be like their American peers who seem to have an unusual amount of freedom and autonomy. Unfortunately this baffles refugee parents, who often perceive this autonomy as a lack of respect for elders and grandparents. In her work with immigrant youth, James (1997) adds that adolescent immigrants are also more malleable and impressionable than their parents, and they quickly acculturate. These Americanized behaviors, attitudes, values, and habits are often different from those expected for children and adults in the native country.

Waters and Rumbaut (as cited in James, 1997) discuss an additional challenge for black immigrants. They must choose to identify with their parents' national origins or choose to identify with black Americans. Black immigrants have traditionally distanced themselves from black Americans. However, they also face increasing pressures in the U.S. to be identified only as "blacks," being grouped together with others simply by skin color. In contrast to other immigrants, they have been compared only to black

Americans. Many black immigrant parents are terrified of their children becoming “black Americans” because they are afraid of the downward social mobility that becoming a black American represents to them. This aspect of acculturation only complicates the development of a healthy sense of identity that is so important during adolescence. The Liberian students in my classes often talk about themselves versus African Americans. It will be interesting to see if this aspect of life in America impacts their self-identity or their success at school.

#### Length of Time in the U.S.

Matsuoka and Nicassio (as cited in Lese & Robbins, 1994) point out that length of time in the U.S. is related to refugees’ gaining understanding of American society and is therefore related to the acculturation process. However, acculturation and length of time are not predictors of scholastic success for all cultures (Rosseau & Drapeau, 2000).

Acculturation for some adolescents may be a departure from traditional values and result in more problems at school. If the history and values of the community of origin and the host country are more similar, acculturation and number of years in the U.S. may help to avoid scholastic failure.

Mitchell (2005) stresses the need for further investigation of the impact of generational status on academic achievement in a solely black immigrant population. In her review of past studies of other populations, she noted that within some groups, first-generation students had higher dropout rates than second and third-generation, but in other populations, first-generation had higher grades and academic goals than successive

generations. One possible explanation for the latter is prolonged time spent in a hostile U.S. educational environment that doesn't effectively educate minority students.

### Language Factors

English language proficiency may be a contributing factor to success or failure for Liberian refugees. Most indicate Liberian English as their first language, yet there are marked differences between that and Standard American English used in school. A study by Nero (2000) compared the Caribbean Creole English (CCE) spoken by college students at North American schools to Standard American English. There are common features between CCE and Liberian English; both evolve from life in colonial slave society. The students in the study found their common language with the teachers was not enough. Though both students and teachers spoke English, the distinct language characteristics of CCE made it difficult for others to understand. Compounding the problem is that many educators in the host country view these students' English as substandard. Labov and Dillard concur by saying, "We do not expect a child to know that the school system undervalues his or her speech system, but that's exactly what happens to many Black English-speaking children" (as cited in Sulentic, 2001, p.26).

One finding in Nero's work was that the Caribbean students' self-perception was that of being non-speakers of English and they were aware their vernacular was a stigmatized variety of the language. They said their teachers realized these linguistic differences existed but did nothing to help explain problems in class related to them. James (1997) reinforces the difficulties immigrant children and adolescents face when they do not speak the language of the host country. They may experience a culture shock

of sorts if they are not well received in their school setting based on language. Even though they may be conversational in that language, it takes time to learn the aspects of language related to cognitive and academic functioning. This gap may impede their academic performance.

Another study found that language acculturation moderated the relationship between competence and aspirations (Ibanez, et al., 2004). Academic competence (a student's perception of his or her school-related abilities) and school belonging (the extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included, and supported at school) have been shown to affect achievement in Latino adolescents. Interestingly, the *immigrant* Latino students felt school was important regardless of their sense of competence (perceived ability), whereas the *U.S. born Latino youth* reported levels of the importance of school that coincided with their levels of perceived competence. One possible explanation is that students who have not mastered English yet (e.g., the immigrant or low-acculturated Latino youth) may perceive *language* to be their main barrier to academic success. They are placing less emphasis on their overall academic ability. Once English is learned, and school performance cannot be attributed to language, the students' explanation for poor performance may become more internalized in terms of their sense of competence.

Language acculturation also moderated the association between importance of schooling and parental involvement. For low language-acculturated youth, the importance of school remained the same whether or not their parents were involved with school. For high-acculturated youth, the importance of school was much higher for

students whose parents were involved in school than for those whose parents were not. At any rate, the low-acculturated youth seem to have a sense of their own goals, competence, and self-reliance that is less dependent on the variables of high-acculturated youth.

To summarize, the literature on acculturation looked at resettlement and cultural identity, length of time in the U.S., and language factors. Resettlement stress takes many forms, and stress seems to drop as refugees and immigrants become acculturated. Conflicts may exist, however, stemming from decisions to do things the American way or the way of the native country. Length of time in the U.S. increases understanding of American society. This process seems to go faster if the history and values of the two countries are similar. Studies done on the impact of generational status on dropout rates and school achievement show varying results. English language proficiency and self-perceptions of language ability are factors in school success or failure. Self-perceptions of the importance of schooling and parental involvement, as well as perceptions of academic ability and school belonging, may also affect achievement.

In the upcoming study, I will be collecting data to provide evidence of support for the various factors discussed above. This includes: childhood trauma and its possible effect on academic achievement; resilience, including individual attributes, positive use of time, family, and the school environment; and acculturation, including resettlement and cultural identity, length of time in the U.S., and language factors. I believe all of these may play a role in explaining the school success or failure of my students.

The literature review shows much research has been done regarding trauma, resilience, and acculturation for both immigrant and non-immigrant individuals. All of these topic areas relate to my research; however, the specific objective of this study is to ascertain which factors may affect the academic success of Liberian high school students. In light of a scarcity of research on this group of refugees within the U.S., and their continued influx into the country, my hope is that this analysis fills a gap in the literature. By identifying what may be causing success or failure, educators can share their understanding of cultural experiences very different from their own. This understanding can and should lead to patience and tolerance of students from diverse ethnic backgrounds. Ideally, it will lend itself to improved efforts at classroom instruction and effectiveness. The results of this study may inform administrators who regularly make decisions about at-risk and refugee student populations and their families. The community at large can benefit by an increased understanding and tolerance of the various ethnic groups living and working among them. Chapter three provides an explanation of and rationale for the data collection methods used in this study.

### CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

The method of research I have chosen for this study is qualitative research. I have chosen it because I will be interviewing students and surveying teachers for their personal experiences, opinions, and beliefs. I will then be looking for patterns in that information to help me draw conclusions regarding my research question: What factors influence the academic success of Liberian high school students? According to Charles and Mertler (2002), qualitative research, versus quantitative research, is analyzed logico-inductively. This is a thought process that uses logic to make sense of observations. Behaviors, situations, interactions, objects, and environments are first observed. Topics are then identified and scrutinized for patterns and categories. Conclusions are drawn based on what is observed and stated verbally. Those conclusions are used to answer the research question. Qualitative data are expressed verbally and analyzed logically; quantitative data are expressed numerically and analyzed statistically. Charles and Mertler (2002) further illustrated the difference by pointing out that qualitative research is part of ethnographic research. The nature of ethnographic research is to investigate people and their interactions within social settings. In this environment, the research questions may be answered after data collection has begun, rather than before data collection, as in other types of research. Pertinent questions may come to light only after considerable data have been collected. Though qualitative data are prone to errors of subjectivity,

imprecision, and investigator bias, these concerns can be minimized if the investigator is objective and realistic in depicting contexts and events. Regarding the difference between qualitative and quantitative research, McCracken (1988) sums it up by saying, “This difference can be characterized as the trade-off between the precision of quantitative methods and the complexity-capturing ability of qualitative ones” (p.16).

In order to gather data for my study, I will do the following. I will select four students to interview. I will obtain their attendance records, grade point averages, and Basic Skills Test scores. I will interview the students. I will have four of their teachers complete a questionnaire (related to student performance and behavior in class). My ultimate goal is to compare the statistical information with the students’ own perceptions with the teachers’ perceptions to determine what, if any, generalizations can be made about my students in relation to their academic success or failure. I will select my human subjects, and collect data, as follows.

### Human Subject Selection

#### Student Subjects

I will select two Liberian girls and two Liberian boys for my study. They will be either 11<sup>th</sup> or 12<sup>th</sup> graders who have attended my high school and students I have had a class relationship with for at least one year before the study. I will choose one boy and one girl who have passed at least two or three (all) of the Minnesota Basic Skills Tests (BSTs) in math, reading, and writing *and* who have a cumulative Grade Point Average of 3.0 or higher. These would be students who are no longer enrolled in ESL classes based on having already passed at least the Reading and Writing BSTs mentioned above.

I also will choose one boy and one girl who have passed either none or one of the above tests *and* who have a cumulative grade point average below 3.0. These would be students who are presently enrolled in two ESL classes based on the fact that they have not passed either the Reading or Writing BSTs mentioned above.

### Teacher Subjects

For each student in the study, I will solicit the participation of three of their current teachers of math (ESL or mainstream math), English (ESL reading/writing or mainstream English), and social studies (mainstream only). In addition, since I have had all four students in my writing class at some point, I will document my own perceptions. I chose math and English because they are the subjects related to the state tests the students must pass. I chose social studies because these are large, mainstream, content area classes where different types of skills and social interactions are required. It may prove interesting to document differences in behavior exhibited by students when they are in mainstream classes (ELLs and non-ELL student mix) versus ESL classes (ELLs only). King, Fagan, Bratt and Baer (1987) claim that social studies classes are important because they play a role in the acculturation process. They not only provide historical facts, geography, and terminology; they promote understanding of American concepts, spirit of independence, and sense of individualism. Social studies classes teach U.S. laws and institutions, government functions, and the Bill of Rights. They give students a more realistic picture of their new culture and how they might operate within it. My objective is to gather teacher observations regarding the behavior, attitude, and performance of these four students while in their classes.

### Data Collection Process

I intend to gather data on each student in three ways. First, I will obtain attendance records, cumulative grade point averages, and the most current Basic Skills Test scores available at the end of trimester two of the 2004-2005 school year. Second, I will interview each student. Third, I will have their teachers (including myself) complete a questionnaire.

#### Attendance Records, Cumulative Grade Point Averages, Basic Skills Test Scores

Attendance records. This information will be obtained by contacting the attendance office in my high school.

Cumulative grade point average. This information will be obtained from the registrar or counseling office in my high school

Basic skills test scores. These will be obtained via our district student database and discussed in person with the district testing coordinator. The Minnesota Basic Skills tests (BSTs) are state mandated, state designed tests. They measure how an individual student is doing compared to Minnesota Graduation Requirements. The results of these tests determine if an individual student has mastered skills determined by the state to be necessary to function in adult society. The Minnesota Basic Skills Tests include reading, math, and written composition. All Minnesota public school students are required to pass these tests prior to graduation. The Minnesota Basic Skills Tests for reading and math are given for the first time in eighth grade. The written composition test is given for the first time in tenth grade. Students receive scale scores for each test taken. **A scale score of 600 or higher is required to pass the *reading* and *math* BSTs for graduates in 2001**

and beyond. (The passing level for graduates in 2000 was 590.) Students receive a holistic score of one through six for the written composition test. **A score of three or above is required to pass the *written composition* BST.**

### Student Interviews

My plan is to conduct one interview with each student, approximately one hour in length. These interviews will be held individually after school in my classroom. I will videotape, audiotape, and transcribe each interview. Prior to conducting the interviews, I plan to meet with our school district's Liberian contact, a man who will serve as my informant on matters of Liberian culture. I want to know what is culturally appropriate or inappropriate to ask my students, especially when discussing experiences that may be painful or difficult to discuss. I also plan to use the experience and resources of our school district social worker regarding the interview environment and content. She not only has regular contact with immigrant and refugee students, but also has completed her Masters work in the area of refugee mental health.

I hope to develop questions that will guide the interview but also provide opportunities for open-ended discussion. I will state that the purpose of my interview is to understand their experiences of migration as well as my students' adaptation to life in the U.S. The areas I want to include are: day-to-day life before the trauma of war, life during the civil war in Liberia, resettlement camp experience if applicable, the transition to America, school, language attitudes, and day-to-day life at this point. I want to know how they feel about living in the U.S., what challenges they face, what positive experiences they have had, and what their goals are. I realize for many of these students,

the trauma of war and resettlement is difficult to discuss. I respect that they may not be willing to do so in more than generic terms. I am hoping that my relationship with them to date provides a trusting environment where experiences can be shared. Actual student names will not be used in this study. All students will be referred to by their pseudonyms, names chosen by them.

### Teacher Questionnaires

I will create a 12-item questionnaire for each student's current teachers (English, math, and social studies) to complete. My objective is to gather teacher observations regarding the behavior, attitude, and performance of these four students while in their classes. Having taught these students myself, I will complete the questionnaire as well. I can record my own observations of their success or failure as they pertain to my writing class. Last I will combine all teacher responses for that student.

### Organization of Data Collected

Once I have gathered the above information, I will organize it in chapter four as follows. I will provide a brief description of each student. This will include each student's attendance records, grade point average, and Basic Skills Test scores (current at the time of the study). I will report my findings on each of the factors I have outlined in chapter two, based on the self-reported information given to me by the students in the interviews. In analyzing the interview data, I will look for trends or themes in responses, commonalities if they exist, something to indicate whether a potential factor is significant or not. Teacher responses to the questionnaire will be woven into those areas where they provide supporting information.

## CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In this chapter I will analyze the data that were collected in regard to each student. I will look for evidence that certain factors seem to explain why some students achieve academic success more easily than others. First, I will provide a brief background of each student, including attendance records, grade point average, and Basic Skills Test scores. This will provide supporting information about their overall performance, and indicate whether or not they are “on track” to pass the tests required for graduation. Then, I will look at trauma and consider its possible effects on scholastic achievement. Next, I will look at the various aspects of resilience, including individual attributes, positive use of time, family, and the school environment. Finally, I will examine acculturation, including resettlement and cultural identity, length of time in the U.S., and language factors.

The four students whose data appear in this study were students from Liberia who shared some similarities but also had differences. Paul is 19 years old and in 12<sup>th</sup> grade. He came to the U.S. in 2003 at the age of 17. His first language is Liberian English. He is a member of the Methodist church. Paul was born in Liberia and lived with his parents and six siblings in Paynesville, a city about 20-30 minutes from the capital, Monrovia. His mother came to the U.S. for work in about 1998-1999 while the children stayed in Liberia with their father. When his older brother died, Paul’s father decided that the

children should get out of Liberia. Paul and his five younger sisters went to a refugee camp in Ghana. Their father remained in Liberia and is still there today. Paul spent eight months in the camp before coming directly to Minnesota to live with his mother. His sisters are still in Ghana today. Paul's educational background consisted of attending various private schools in Liberia from kindergarten through seventh grade. However, the availability of schooling was inconsistent during the war. He attended eight months of eighth grade while in the refugee camp in Ghana. He was enrolled in eleventh grade upon arrival in the United States.

At the time of this study, Paul had a cumulative grade point average of 3.211. He had passed all three of the Basic Skills Tests required for graduation: reading score 625, math score 650, and written composition score 3. Paul's test scores indicate that he was functioning at grade level or close to proficiency for the grade level of the tests. He was absent only one full day and eight miscellaneous hours during the trimester.

Fanta is 17 years old and in 11<sup>th</sup> grade. She came to the U.S. in 2001 at the age of 13. Her first language is Liberian English. She is a member of the Baptist church. Fanta was born in Liberia and lived there on the farm with her mother and extended family. They lived in a village in the county of Lofa. She never knew her father in Liberia, and he left Africa in 1997 for work in the U.S. Fanta lived in a refugee camp in Guinea for four months with her mom and young male cousin. After camp, they remained in Guinea for about three years before returning to Liberia. She came to the U.S. to live with her father and stepmother, and her mother remained in Liberia. Today Fanta lives in Minnesota with these people plus a few extended family members. Fanta's educational

background consisted of two years of public school in Liberia, beginning at about age seven. She then attended school in the refugee camp in Guinea for the four months she lived there. Once back in Liberia, she had approximately one more year of school before coming to the U.S. Upon arrival in the U.S. at age 13, her educational level was that of approximately third grade. After a brief stop in Connecticut, she came to Minnesota and was enrolled in the eighth grade.

At the time of this study, Fanta had a cumulative grade point average of 3.167. She had passed two of the three Basic Skills Tests required for graduation: reading score 600, and written composition score 3. She had not passed math (score of 537). Fanta's math score indicates she is significantly below grade level for math, though she is functioning at grade level or close to proficiency for the grade level of the reading and writing tests. She was never absent a full day during the trimester, only for six miscellaneous hours.

The third student, Mark, is 16 years old and in 11<sup>th</sup> grade. He came to the U.S. in 2004 at the age of 15. His first language is Liberian English. He is a member of the Pentecostal church. Mark was born in Liberia and lived with his parents and seven siblings in Monrovia, the capital. They never lived in a refugee camp, remaining together in Liberia until coming to the United States. His father came to the U.S. in 2001, and the rest of the family followed in 2004. Today all ten of them live together in Minnesota. Mark's educational background consisted of attending various private schools in Liberia from Kindergarten through ninth grade. However, availability of schooling was inconsistent during the war. When he arrived in the U.S., he was enrolled in tenth grade.

At the time of this study, Mark had a cumulative grade point average of 1.805. He had passed none of the three Basic Skills Tests required for graduation: math score 537, reading score 593, and written composition score 2. His math score indicates that Mark is significantly below grade level in math. His reading and written composition scores indicate he may be approaching grade level in these areas. He was absent two full days and ten miscellaneous hours during the trimester.

The fourth student is Comfort. She is 19 years old and in 12<sup>th</sup> grade. She came to the U.S. in 2001 at the age of 15. Her first language is Grubu, one of many tribal languages spoken in Liberia. Her second language is Liberian English. Comfort is a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. She was born in Liberia and lived with her parents and four siblings in Monrovia, the capital, until the war separated them from their mother. Comfort lived in a refugee camp in Ghana with her father and siblings for about seven years before they came to the United States. She is currently estranged from her father, unaware of where he lives. She has also lost contact with her youngest sister who lives with an aunt in the U.S. Comfort lives with, and supports, her two younger twin sisters in Minnesota. Her memory of how long and when she was in school is clouded by the fact that her only school years were when she was very young. Prior to going to the refugee camp at approximately age eight, she attended public school for two to three years. She remembers going to kindergarten and briefly to elementary school. She did not go to school in the camp, so she had no formal education between the ages of about eight and fifteen. When she arrived in the U.S., she was enrolled in ninth grade in Maryland. Tenth grade was completed at two different high schools in

Minnesota. Eleventh and twelfth grades were spent at yet another high school in Minnesota.

At the time of this study, Comfort had a cumulative grade point average of 2.371. She had passed none of the three Basic Skills Tests required for graduation: math score 540, reading score 565, and written composition score 2. Comfort's scores indicate she is significantly below grade level in math and reading. Her writing score indicates she may be approaching grade level in that area. Indications are it will take her some time to "catch up" academically and be able to pass the tests required for graduation. She was absent three full days and 11 miscellaneous hours during the trimester.

I will now move on to analyzing the various factors that may affect the academic success of the students described above.

### Trauma

All four students experienced various types of trauma while living in Liberia. Despite this, all four of them seemed to be healthy. Physically, they reported having no major problems, and emotionally, they appeared confident and positive in their efforts to make better lives for themselves. During lulls in the fighting in Liberia, the main trauma they all experienced was being beaten in elementary school with sticks, or canes. This occurred for a variety of reasons including not doing their homework, not spelling a word correctly, being lazy, and breaking school rules. One student said that other girls often picked on her, starting fights and hitting her, and this still made her fearful today. Trauma during the war was very different. All four students at some point during the war were forced to leave their homes and live on the run. This involved taking minimal

belongings with them, sleeping outside or in abandoned buildings, often walking for days (sometimes with no shoes), hiding in the bush when soldiers approached, and dealing with the scarcity of food and water. They often had to eat uncooked food, hurrying to avoid danger.

Only one person was separated from her mother because of the war (and still has no contact), and another said the risk of getting mixed up and losing track of family was great. If people walked too slowly, or were lazy, they would be left behind. One boy said the rebels would often burn down the homes of citizens who had worked their whole lives to pay for them. All four students heard gunshots and saw bullets flying through the air. Three of the four saw people killed in front of them. Only one person had family members (aunts and uncles) killed during the war. All of them encountered dead, diseased, or starving bodies in the streets, often being too young to really understand what was happening. One boy said he thought the people were sleeping, and his mom told him to keep walking. One girl was afraid because she witnessed many people dying of cholera in the refugee camp hospital. She was briefly quite ill herself with an unnamed sickness. She felt she had died and come back to life.

All four students and their families were threatened by rebel soldiers; the soldiers wanted their food, supplies, or personal property. One girl said she saw soldiers rape young girls who would not comply with requests for sex. They all said they had to remain silent, never complaining, never showing emotion, and always giving neutral answers to questions about who they were and where they were going. They were not allowed to close their eyes when being forced to watch unpleasantness. One boy said it

was difficult to trust anyone because many of the soldiers were young boys, recruited to turn against the people with promises of food and protection. Another boy spoke of witnessing rebels who cut off people's heads, split open their bodies, and lined up the intestines in the street. They often would make the young boy soldiers eat the intestines as a form of good luck or protection from evils. He said the soldiers were often under the influence of cocaine, given to them by the rebel leaders in order to dull the emotional pain of killing.

This same boy experienced another difficult situation. He and his family were traveling with a neighbor, a good man who was helping them make their way. The soldiers told the women and children to go in one line, and the "dads" in another. The man was taken from them and killed somewhere, never to be seen by them again. One girl told of how the rebels held a gun to her older brother's head while her mom watched. The soldiers wanted the mother to order her child to hand over the family's food they had retrieved from the United Nations drop-off point. The family surrendered the food, and the rebels did not kill her brother. One of the four said he thought he would die during the war, but three others said they did not believe this. Three of the families spent time in a refugee camp, being separated from some of their family members. One boy had what was perhaps the most upsetting experience of all. His older brother died during the war, but not by bullets or rebel soldiers. His brother was poisoned by his aunt, his mom's sister, just after graduating from high school. His aunt in Liberia was jealous of the family because their mom (her sister) in America was sending money to them. The aunt

wanted some of this money for her own children. Out of spite, she killed her nephew. It was at this time that the family made plans to move to the refugee camp in Ghana.

Of the three students who spent time in refugee camps, none of them was mistreated. Comfort and Paul were in the camp in Ghana, and Fanta was in the camp in Guinea. Overall, each had a good experience; Fanta actually said she “had a blast” there. They left their homes behind, but they were safe from the ongoing dangers of war. They paid for certain supplies and services, like water and school (optional), so money was important. Fanta and Paul attended school in the camp, Comfort did not; Fanta and Paul had parents in America who were sending money to support them; Comfort did not. Fanta’s family was given supplies to build their own house, but the others were given existing housing. Families shared their living space with others. They had curfews at night but had a fair amount of freedom in the daytime to play or go outside. In the camp in Guinea, Fanta’s mother was able to leave the camp and go into the city as she pleased.

As the above information suggests, even though these four young people experienced trauma and atrocities during the war, they could still function, even the ones who had seen the worst.

### Resilience

The factors that seem to be related to resilience can be organized into four categories: individual attributes, positive use of time, family, and the school environment. I will summarize my findings in regard to these categories below.

### Individual Attributes

I looked through the interview transcripts for personal characteristics associated with resilient at-risk students: positive attitude, respect for others, intrinsic motivation, coming to class prepared, internal locus of control, high educational goals, religious beliefs, and bicultural identity. These combined traits have been shown to reinforce resilience, in part, by eliciting positive responses from those who come in contact with these students.

Student one, Paul, exhibited a high degree of resilience based the list of traits that promote it. His *positive attitude* was evident in comments like, “For me, there is nothing difficult. Life is good.” He knows the environment and circumstances he comes from, and wants to be more than the average person from his country. He said he is rarely sad; he is happy all the time. He does not anger easily and has a good sense of humor. His teachers said he has a positive attitude and is easy going. Paul shows his *respect for others* by being nice to them. He is slow to judge them. Race and ethnicity do not matter to him. He is not sure why people like him, but they do. Students treat him well. He said they respect him because he stands up for people and what is right. Friends call him “the pastor.” His teachers said he is never insubordinate and is respectful and supportive of them. He is well behaved and kind. They believe he is well liked and respected by the other students because he is quiet but personable. He respects his fellow students and often helps them in class. There appear to be no conflicts between him and other students. An example of Paul’s *intrinsic motivation*, or internal desire to succeed, is his statement that he wants to attend college for his own reasons, not only those of his

parents. His teachers said Paul seems to appreciate the opportunity to learn and improve. He *comes to class prepared*, and his homework is always done on time. In addition, he pays attention, stays on task, and works hard in class.

Paul demonstrates his *internal locus of control*, or self-responsibility, in many ways. He takes responsibility for his behavior and apologizes if he acts badly. He believes he has good problem-solving skills but is not afraid to ask for help. If he fails at something, he becomes angry with himself, not others. Failure hurts him, and he tries to find out what he did wrong. He encourages himself and says he will do better next time. If it is regarding class work, or a test, he asks the teacher for explanation. Paul has *high educational goals*. Education is important to him, and he worries about his grades. He is not happy simply to pass a class; he wants A's and B's. He wants to attend a four-year college but hasn't decided his field of study, possibly medical school. Paul's *religious beliefs* are strong. He attended Christian schools in Liberia, and said that having a religious faith is important to him. When he struggles, he reads the Bible and prays. He attends church and is an usher. Paul is developing a *bicultural identity*. He is friendly with many people of other races and cultures in class and during extracurricular activities, like track. He is comfortable among multicultural groups. At this time, however, he does not socialize with them outside of school.

Student two, Fanta, also exhibited a high degree of resilience based on the listed traits. When interviewed, Fanta said she has a *positive attitude* about most things. She said that though she often feels sad, she is a friendly, caring, and open-minded person. In general, she does not anger easily. She has a good sense of humor and likes to tell

stories. Her teachers said she gets along well with them. They described her as fabulous, enthusiastic; she has a good attitude, a good sense of humor, and a sweet demeanor. In terms of *respect for others*, Fanta's teachers said she is respectful of both the teachers and students. She is never insubordinate and has outstanding behavior. Though she is a bit shy of some social interactions, she is pleasant and respectful to most students. There were no obvious conflicts with anyone in class. An example of Fanta's *intrinsic motivation* is her love of writing poetry. This serves as both a form of expression and a comfort to her when she is sad. Sometimes she shows her poems to her friends and wonders if they guess the poem is about her. Many things motivate her. Figuratively speaking, she wants to "be at the front, not the back" of the line in life. She does not want to be like others, she wants to be "more extra" by herself. She wants her name in society as a girl who is really serious, not one of those girls who just has babies and does not care about school. She is different from her friends, so they say she is boring. However, she does not care what they say. She has a strong belief in herself and her ability to succeed. She has her own reasons for wanting a higher education despite the fact that her parents want this too. She has dreams of a better life. Fanta *comes to class prepared*, and her homework is always done on time. In addition, she stays on task and works hard in class.

Fanta demonstrates her *internal locus of control*, or self-responsibility, in many ways. If she acts badly, she tries to take responsibility for it – apologizing or getting past the problem in a positive way. She does not like people to be mad at her over a problem between them. She said when certain Liberians complain about being discriminated

against, it is usually because of their behavior. They do not act responsibly and blame others for their problems. She is not interested in going to other people to talk over her problems. She usually holds things inside, occasionally expressing her pent-up anger inappropriately. When she fails at something, she gets really angry with herself and worries a lot. She tries to figure out what went wrong so she can do better next time. She just keeps studying. Her teachers said she stays after school when necessary to get help with her homework. One particular concern she has is the math Basic Skills Test, the only remaining test she needs to pass for graduation; she desperately wants to pass. Occasionally she becomes intolerant of other people's actions that she finds irritating. In class, however, she usually keeps her comments to herself. One of her teachers said Fanta is savvy enough to know who to stay away from. At this point, she does not believe she has the skills to overcome most of the problems in her life; this worries her. Fanta definitely has *high educational goals*. Getting A's and B's is more important to her than simply passing the class. When asked about getting C's on her report card, she said, "Oh please, I don't like any of those!" She wants to continue her education after high school and has started to look at schools. She is considering being a detective. She wants to have more schooling but said her dad would make her do this even if she did not want to. She wants to be educated so she can be independent. She thinks it is nice if the man in a relationship provides for his wife, but she does not want to depend on any man. She claims she is different from her friends who just come to school to fight, not to learn. Though she goes to church occasionally, Fanta said a *religious belief* is not very important to her. She loves God but it is not "a serious thing" in her life. When she is

sad, she finds comfort in writing poetry, not in turning to religion. Fanta is slowly developing a *bicultural identity*, though she is still most comfortable with her own group of Liberian friends. She is friendly with a few people from other races and cultures in class, but she does not socialize with them outside of school.

Student three, Mark, exhibited a moderate degree of resilience based on these traits. Though he has a very *positive attitude*, he is much shyer than Paul and Fanta. He is less interactive than they are with people he does not know. He had a couple of negative experiences in class, feeling like an outsider because he is black and from Africa. He considers himself a nice person who tries to be good. His teachers said he is shy and keeps to himself, but they claim he has a good attitude in class. He says that even though he is shy, when he is with just one other person, he is easy going. He can make that person laugh if they have problems or are worried. He has no major stress in his life right now and no conflicts with anyone. One thing that makes him sad is when his dad incurs debt and cannot pay a bill. He wishes he could help him. Mark is *respectful of others*. Even when people are mean to him, he is nice to them. He says teachers treat him well because he is a good and respectful person in class. He does, however, disrespect African kids who come to the U.S. only for work and money. He is never insubordinate and is respectful and polite to his teachers. He treats people respectfully unless they disrespect him; then there could be a clash. He is social with other ESL students but not particularly with mainstream students. Most people like and respect him, but a few are neutral. His ESL teachers reported that in his ESL classes, people occasionally tried to engage or annoy him. He avoids those students he does not

like. Mark is *intrinsically motivated* to do well. He is becoming more serious now, studying more than ever before to achieve his goals at school. He wants his future family and kids to have good things. He wants these things for himself, not just because his father wants them for him. He does not want to simply work and make money. He believes he has opportunities to succeed, and hard work motivates him. Mark usually comes to *class prepared*, and his homework is usually done on time. He stays on task most of the time, only needing the occasional reminder to put the newspaper away or stop talking to friends.

Mark exhibits an *internal locus of control*. He copes with failure by telling himself he has a problem to face or solve, and he must get over it. With that attitude, it can be solved, and he just tries to find ways to work things out. He referred to his failing last year's Basic Skills Tests, as an example, and said he will try again in the future. He does not see mistakes as marks of failure, only opportunities to try again later. He has the skills necessary to solve most of life's problems or knows who to ask for help. Mark has *high educational goals*. Even though he did not study much in Africa, he now studies every morning before school. He came to the U.S. to finish high school, go to college, and make a better future for himself and his family. He has not made any job decisions yet but is thinking about his future. He wants a higher grade point average, and feels it is not good enough simply to receive a passing grade. One of his teachers said his grades showed improvement over time. He thinks those fellow Liberians that do not take school seriously will regret it someday when their jobs are limited. Having a *religious belief* is important to Mark. He goes to church every Sunday and believes that religion gives him

spiritual strength. His Christian religious practices in Liberia were the foundation for his beliefs today. His family always prayed together in Liberia, and they also prayed with other families in the same community. There were community prayer days when everyone got together. This promoted a strong feeling of togetherness for the Liberian people. His family still prays together every evening, as they did in Liberia. Mark has not developed much of a *bicultural identity* yet. He mixes minimally with students of other races and cultures while in class. They only occasionally exchange greetings with each other in the hall. His friends both in and out of school are primarily Liberian. He is gradually embracing American culture as he learns more about it.

Student four, Comfort, also exhibited a moderate degree of resilience based on the list of traits. She is extremely shy with people she does not know. There is minimal interaction between her and strangers unless necessary. She is nice to everyone because she does not want to get into conflicts with anybody. She does not get mad easily, but *does* get angry when people ignore her. She thinks she has a good sense of humor and can make people laugh. They like her because she smiles all the time. Her teachers said that she is quiet, nice, and is not afraid to ask questions. She does not mingle much with other students, especially in mainstream classes; she prefers to keep to herself. Occasionally in ESL classes, she talks too much to her friends. Other than the usual challenges, there is currently no major stress in her life. Comfort is *respectful of others*. She likes to share with people, whether or not they know her. Her teachers said she is never insubordinate and is respectful toward them. She is intolerant of rude, disruptive behavior in her ESL classes and sometimes yells at people. Conflicts, however, are short

lived. Mainstream students are nonchalant toward her, but ESL students are friendly and enjoy working with her. In terms of *intrinsic motivation*, Comfort is a very determined young woman. In addition to whatever personal goals she may have, she is guardian to her two younger twin sisters who live with her. She does this simply because she loves them and they would have nowhere else to go if she did not provide for them. They have very little else but each other and a few good friends. Despite her incredible academic challenges, she continues to come to school and put forth her best effort. She does not spend much time considering her limitations. She believes deeply that she has the same opportunities for success as anyone else. Comfort is usually *prepared for class*, and usually turns her homework in on time. In addition, she stays on task during class.

Comfort demonstrates her *internal locus of control* in many ways. She feels responsible for herself, not dependent on others to take care of her. She believes a person should first get on their feet; then others will take them seriously and help out. She believes people should work to make better lives for themselves. She tries to avoid trouble at school. If she sees it coming, she walks past, looks the other way, or gets someone to help. She survives personal failure by first getting upset and then trying to learn from her mistakes, telling herself she can do it. She feels she has the skills to solve problems in her life. *High educational goals* are important to Comfort. She is grateful for her education and likes getting good grades. She says if people only want a passing grade, they are not learning anything. Her plans include being a chef someday. Having a *religious belief* is very important to her. She goes to church every Sunday but is not involved with other church activities. When she first came here, she thought she would

not be able to be strong, to get on her feet, to do things for herself. Once she started going to church, she started praying a lot. This helped things go more smoothly for her family and her. Comfort has not developed much of a *bicultural identity* yet. She knows people of other races and cultures at school, and does have some American friends. However, she does not socialize with any of these people outside of school. She is also open to learning and doing American things. She claims it is hard to make new friends because some people do not want to talk to people if they are black. She is okay with this, however, and finds other people who do want her friendship despite cultural differences.

#### Positive Use of Time

To see how resilient students positively spend their time, I looked for evidence of these students being involved in school activities, outside organizations, homework, hobbies, and other self-fulfilling activities. Three of the four were involved in one or more school activities. For example, Comfort, Paul, and Fanta all belonged to the Diversity Club for one year. Paul is currently a successful member of the high school track team. All four students attend church. Three of the four mentioned making homework a priority, with Paul and Fanta spending extraordinary amounts of time on their studies. This was usually done when their friends were out socializing and having fun. One student, Fanta, has participated in an environmental work program for the last two summers. She said it was a wonderful opportunity for hard work, meeting people, and sharing her culture.

All four claimed to have hobbies. For example, Paul plays soccer and likes to cook African food. Fanta's favorite hobby is writing poems. She loves writing poetry and has been published in the school paper and yearbook. She even entered a writing contest. Fanta also enjoys cooking African food. Mark and Fanta both enjoy reading and filling out practice applications for various things, like jobs, both online and on paper. Their dads taught them this at first, but now they do it on their own. When they do not know the words or definitions, they use a dictionary. Mark's other hobby is playing basketball. Comfort likes going to movies and the park and cooking African food for her friends. Three of the four students cited self-fulfilling activities that gave a real sense of helpfulness to their lives. Paul is a peer mediator and new-student buddy at the high school. Mark volunteered at an elementary school parent night, helping to serve food. Comfort is living on her own (no parent or other guardian there) and caring for two younger sisters. She says this encourages her to be strong because if the girls did not have her, they would not have anyone to provide for them. She says if they were not here, she would feel down and as if she could not do anything. All four students said their favorite thing is to hang out with their friends and family. They all get a lot of sleep at night. All four students are alcohol, drug, and smoke-free. All of them are currently unemployed, having the luxury of focusing on their schoolwork.

### Family

In assessing the family-related data collected from my students, I looked for evidence of high parental expectations, caregiver support, and parents' educational background as they relate to academic success.

High parental expectations. Three of the four students in the study had parents with incredibly high expectations for their educations. For example, Paul's mom expects him to follow a fairly regimented routine of going to school, participating in sports, coming home to eat, doing homework, and going to sleep early. She will not allow him to be employed, feeling this would conflict with time for schooling. She wants him in school every day. When he expressed concerns about his ability to succeed in an American high school, she reassured him he would be okay. His mom has attended school conferences in the past, and his teachers say good things about Paul to his mom. Both Paul and his mom want him to continue his education after high school. Paul's father is in Liberia but they are in contact.

Fanta lives with her father and stepmother. Her father is very strict about Fanta's need to study hard, and he limits what he considers distracting social activities (e.g., Fanta's spending time with young men he doesn't know, or others he doesn't trust). He reminds her often she did not come to the U.S. merely for clothes and hairstyles. He says she has to take advantage of educational opportunities, as well as the textbooks, materials, and technology that was not available to her in Liberia. Sometimes she gets angry at her dad's attempts to keep her from having fun. Even though she hates this attitude of his, she appreciates it at times when she is able to sit and read. Her parents want her in school full time rather than working a job right now. Both her parents have come to school conferences and are always concerned about her performance. She wants to continue her education after high school, and her parents want that for her also. She

feels the job market is good in the U.S. for educated people. Fanta's birth mother is in Liberia but they are in contact.

Mark's mom and dad want him to finish high school, go to college, and do well in life. His dad seems to understand the challenges his son faces, and he continues to encourage him. He tells Mark never to give up, to keep doing it no matter how hard. Mark knows that children in the U.S. must learn things in order to earn their way; the family cannot protect them forever. Mark's father has come to school conferences, and always wants his teachers to keep pushing him academically. The fact that Mark is getting an education here provides an example and incentive to family back in Liberia. The family also appreciates the school resources and materials available to enhance education for their children.

Comfort is not living with or in contact with either her mother or father. Therefore, they provide no support in terms of encouraging her education. Once Comfort came to school conferences by herself, just to ask her teachers about her progress.

Caregiver support. Though three of the four students indicated their parents as their primary caregivers, all four of them have other people in their lives that serve as role models, giving them attention and support. Comfort, who has no contact with her parents and is *herself* the caregiver to younger siblings, does have two female friends. She calls them her godmothers, and says they are there for the girls to do fun things with or if they need help. She views them as family and knows they believe in her. All four students have teachers, church representatives, and extended family members who care very much about them. Paul is involved with school sports and has coaches who give him support

and encourage him. The school guidance counselors for these students also provide support when necessary.

Parents' educational background. I looked at my data to see which students' parents had at least a high school education, a factor related to resilience. In three of the four families, at least one parent had a high school degree or higher. Fanta's father has a college degree, and her stepmother has taken coursework to be a Medication Aide (Fanta's mother dropped out of high school.). Paul's mother does not have a college degree but was a teacher in Liberia and is a Certified Nursing Assistant in the U.S. (I am unaware of his father's level of education.). Mark's father completed high school (His mother's education level is also unknown.). Comfort's mother dropped out of high school, and I have no information about her father.

### The School Environment

There are four aspects of school that indicate a relationship to resilience. These are classes, extracurricular activities, teachers, and attendance.

Classes. All four students seemed to like school, in general. The teachers surveyed indicated that all four showed progress in their classes. According to their teachers, two of the four, Fanta and Paul, actively participated in pair or group work. Fanta and Paul, however, said that may be true now but was not so in the beginning . Fanta says she is hesitant to pick a group when the teacher asks her to. She feels as if the white kids will think she does not know how to do the work and is intentionally trying to work with the smart people. The other two, Comfort and Mark, were comfortable in pair or group work in their ESL classes but not in mainstream classes. This may be due to being shy and

quiet. Mark said when he first came to the high school, he had a bad experience in gym class. His teacher told everyone to pick a partner. No one picked him, and he was alone. His teacher selected a partner for him. He said there were other black kids in the class who were chosen as partners by the white kids, but never *him*. He thinks it is because they think he speaks foreign. He also said that when playing basketball, many of the players would not give him the ball until he got it himself. All four students expressed occasional discomfort in mainstream classes. Sometimes they did not understand the teachers, or they were afraid to talk because people would laugh at them for their accents or cultures. Two of the four, Paul and Fanta, said this discomfort passed as they became more confident. They all had classes they liked and did not like, and said school was hard at first but they got used to it. Two of the four, Fanta and Paul, said they had to study very hard just to compete with American students. Fanta expressed more fear about this, saying she is afraid to look stupid simply because she is trying to catch up on her education. She said that sometimes when ESL kids want something explained at a lower level for them, certain teachers “condemn” them, do not want to work with them, and wonder why they are asking questions about such easy things. She also said that the white students work with other whites, and black students work with blacks. The Liberian kids pray they will have another Liberian in class to talk to because it is very lonely. Mark did not study much in Africa so is finding it difficult to make the change to studying every day.

Extracurricular activities. Three of the four have been involved in at least one extracurricular activity, primarily the Diversity Club, at some point. Only one of the

four, Paul, is involved in extracurricular sports. He is on the track team and has received awards and commendations for this. Mark has never been involved, and Comfort quit Diversity Club after one year. She had hoped it would provide social enjoyment and bonding, but found the verbal feuding among the Liberian members to be discouraging. Teachers. All four students have had at least one staff member who has taken a personal interest in them at some time. Despite this, two of the four said they noticed unfair treatment of them at times. Comfort said some teachers hold a double standard for enforcing the dress code. The black girls seem to be written up more often than the white girls. Overall, though, all four students felt the staff and administration treated them well. Paul said he felt blessed that the staff would take time to talk and laugh with him.

A teacher-completed questionnaire produced the following overall comments on each student in the study. Comfort's teachers said she was hard working despite her challenges. They viewed her as confident, self-reliant, polite, and eager to learn. Mark's teachers said he was hard working and did his work. They saw him as mature with a pleasant personality, perseverant, polite, and quiet. One teacher said Mark was terrific and his grade showed comprehension and improvement. Fanta's teachers were extremely complimentary. They said she was self-confident despite newcomer challenges, believed in herself, had a good chance for success, treated people well, and was nice, polite, and optimistic. She smiled a lot and said hello, worked hard, was delightful, liked poetry, was a wonderful person, and was responsible and motivated. Their respect for her continues to grow, and they enjoyed building a relationship with her. Paul's teachers were also extremely complimentary. They were touched by his gentle ways and positive

attitude. He was a hard worker, treated people with respect, embraced America, was building a support network of peers and adults, was levelheaded, responsible for his actions, had a great attitude, and was a good student. His English teacher said he wished more native English speakers had Paul's heart, attitude, determination, desire, and wisdom. He said it would make teaching "unspeakably enjoyable."

Attendance. In reviewing the attendance for the four students, none of them had significant absences during the trimester of the study (57 days). Paul was absent only one full day and eight miscellaneous hours. Fanta was never absent a full day, only for six miscellaneous hours. Mark was absent two full days and ten miscellaneous hours. Comfort was absent three full days and 11 miscellaneous hours. With so few absences, no correlation between absences and grade point averages can be established. Being at school may have contributed to their overall success in passing classes, but it does not appear to have significantly affected their grade point average or Basic Skills Test scores.

In conclusion, resilience appears to play a critical role in academic achievement for at-risk students, including Liberian refugees. At-risk students run the risk of performing poorly or dropping out of high school. Resilient students are those who have developed characteristics and coping mechanisms that help them to succeed. They have a set of personality characteristics, support systems, and environmental factors that promote academic success regardless of their backgrounds and circumstances.

## Acculturation

The data collected in relation to acculturation will be divided into three categories: resettlement and cultural identity, length of time in the U.S., and language factors.

### Resettlement and Cultural Identity

Leaving one's home and resettling in a new country can be very stressful for children and adolescents. They leave behind a familiar language, culture, community, and social system and must work to adapt to those of the host country (James, 1997). One source of resettlement stress for those arriving in a new culture is the lack of a community that represents their racial or ethnic group (i.e., a like-ethnic community). All four students in the study were fortunate enough to resettle in an area of the United States that has a large Liberian community. Though the amount of contact they had upon initial arrival may have varied, they could be assured that people of their culture were not far from reach. Two of the four, Paul and Mark, had similar experiences upon arriving from Liberia. Initially, they were treated well, taken places, entertained, and visited regularly. Within a few weeks, the attention stopped. Now they see these people and say hello, but they do not get together. The other two, Fanta and Comfort also had similar experiences. When they arrived, their contact with Liberians was limited to family and immediate friends who visited. Comfort said she often went home and to bed because she felt alone. Eventually she met people who were nice. Non-Liberians from church took her out to dinner and encouraged her to attend church. Fanta said her dad's friends were nice, and she felt comfortable in the community. All four of them said that Liberians were more

supportive of each other in Africa than they are here. People from the same community in Liberia would spend time together, give each other encouragement, and share food with others. Now people stay to themselves and are more competitive. Comfort thinks Liberians should go out and be reunited with each other but they do not; this makes her sad. Fanta said families helped each other and shared their lives more in Africa than in America.

Another acculturative challenge is presented by the change in peer relationships among Liberians at school, especially the girls. All four students commented on the amount of physical fighting and arguing that occurs among the girls. They say there is competition to be accepted based on clothes or hair or speech. Many of the Liberian girls want to appear “American,” and they make fun of those who do not dress or act like they do. Former friends now argue and groups of friends are divided. There is also intense competition for boys. If a girl has a boyfriend, he might give her money, clothes and, ultimately, status. There are more possessions to be had in America, and the four students say Liberians have become jealous and possessive of “things.” Behavior and clothing has changed for some boys also, who want to identify with American rappers and wear their saggy pants to look cool. They think being “American” will solve all their problems and make them famous without having to study or work for it. Though the students in this study were aware of these dynamics, they do not participate in the above behaviors or conflicts. They try to stay focused on school and act as independently as possible.

The last type of resettlement stress identified by all four students was the comparison between Africans and African Americans. Interestingly enough, they all had very negative opinions of this culture and do not identify with it. They also resent those Liberians who are abandoning traditional ways for black American ways simply to fit in. As James (1997) points out, black immigrants are facing increased pressures in the U.S. to be identified only as “blacks,” meaning they are being compared only to black Americans instead of to other immigrant groups. The perception of all four students and their families is that the behavior of black Americans is something to be avoided. One can only guess where their perceptions stem from.

For example, Comfort said she resents that African Americans do not want to be identified with their African heritage. When the African Americans are together in a group at school, they will not acknowledge the Africans; they act like they do not see the African students. Comfort believes the experiences of black Americans are not like hers because they have not had to live on their own; they think they can live with mom and dad forever. Mark said that when he first arrived in the U.S., his uncle’s advice was to *not* be like black Americans. Mark said these kids get into a lot of trouble, grow up, and then start dealing drugs. They befriend others and try to get them smoking, cursing, and doing drugs. They grow up doing what they want, having unlimited freedom. They do not learn from their parents, do not have a background of people helping and training them in how to be good. He said the African Americans curse a lot to women, even to their moms.

Fanta thinks black Americans are really loud and they use bad language. These two groups keep to themselves, not mixing much even for dating purposes. She said their lives are different from hers even though they are both of African descent. Their parents are different; some do not care if their kids even come to school. African Americans “walk all over” their parents, telling them they do not care what they say. She feels her opinions represent those of most Liberian parents on this subject.

Paul had trouble articulating his opinion on African Americans at first. He said they are okay but have their issues too. They like fighting, and they smoke a lot of cigarettes and weed. He does not want to be close to that. A woman his mom works with once said, “Oh, we suffered to be free, and then you guys came here and are just enjoying this.” Paul said that he has had suffering of a different kind, but he did not belabor his frustration with this comment. One time on the track field, an African American fellow track team member told Paul that Paul’s track success meant nothing to him (i.e., the African American). Paul just ignored the comment. In any case, this aspect of acculturation does complicate the development of a healthy sense of identity during the important years of adolescent (James, 1997).

#### Length of Time in the U.S.

In reviewing the length of time each student has been in the United States, I found no correlation between that and their academic achievement. I did note, however, a possible relationship between their academic success and the length of time their *parents* had been here. For example, Paul has the highest grade point average and has passed all his tests for graduation. His mother has been here since 1998. Fanta has the second

highest grade point average and has passed two of the three tests required for graduation. Her father arrived here in 1997. Mark has the lowest grade point average and has passed none of the tests required for graduation. His father came to the U.S. in 2001. Comfort has the second lowest grade point average but has passed none of the tests required for graduation. She and her father came to the United States together in 2001. Maybe the parents who came here earlier paved the way for an easier acculturation process for their children. The fact that the U.S. and Liberia have common histories and cultural values versus those of the U.S. and other immigrant groups may have contributed as well. This may be one connection between a student's adjustment to a new country and their academic success.

#### Language Factors

All four students have experienced frustration over their Liberian English not being understood in America, but none of them seemed to let this affect their self-confidence for long. Comfort, for example, speaks Grubu as her first language and Liberian English as her second. Her accent is noticeably more difficult to understand, compounded by the fact that she speaks quietly. She said people sometimes ask her to repeat herself. This happens in school, stores, and other outside places. At first this made her angry, and she wondered why people did not understand her. Now she tries to not let it disturb her because she knows it is her accent they struggle with. She said she speaks up more often now in class than when she first arrived. However, sometimes in class, even when others understand her, they laugh. Comfort's teachers said they could

understand her unless she spoke quietly or was upset. She seemed to usually understand class instructions but occasionally needed help or explanation.

Mark also speaks quietly and is often difficult to understand. He said people ask him to repeat a lot. This happens in class when he is talking to students or teachers. They say, "You say, *what?! What* did you say?" This also occurs in the store when he goes to buy something. He is asked to repeat a couple of times. When this happens, he feels funny and then tends to be quiet next time. He just stays calm and walks off. In class, he only talks when the teacher asks him a question. He does not get mad though. He also has trouble understanding white people if they talk too fast, especially the girls at school. He is getting better at understanding white people when they are talking to him on the telephone. His teachers say his quiet speech and lack of articulation present a challenge in a classroom of loud students. They usually understood him but often had to concentrate to do so. They said Mark seemed to understand their class instructions.

Fanta said the place she is most often asked to repeat herself is in school, mostly by the teachers. Her American friends do not ask her to repeat. Requests to repeat happen only about ten percent outside of school. She is embarrassed when asked to repeat because she is quick to become shy and does not like too much attention. When the teachers ask, "What did you say? Can you repeat that?" all the students look at her. It makes her feel stupid and she does not know why teachers do that. She tries to be reasonable and not blame them; she knows it is her accent they do not understand. At first, she had trouble understanding Americans, especially in Biology class. Most of the white kids had the material in junior high, and the teacher would move quickly from

point to point. She has to change her accent sometimes for people to understand her. There are times when she and her friends do not want to be understood. She said it is when they speak in “the deep part of our language.” It bothers her that some Liberians are not proud of their language. When black Americans come around, the Liberian girls change their accent, then switch back when the Americans have gone. Her teachers said they almost always understood her but occasionally had to ask her to repeat. They said she seemed to understand their class instructions.

Paul said people sometimes ask him to repeat himself, mostly in class and sometimes after school during sports. The frequency of this is reduced now compared to when he first arrived. Requests to repeat occur minimally in public; he could only think of two times at the bank. He never gets angry over this, as he knows it is because they have trouble with his accent. He asks others to repeat themselves at times, too, so he understands the dilemma. One remaining challenge for Paul is listening to movies shown in class. He often has trouble following the fast-spoken English, and then has trouble doing the corresponding worksheet. He said this might be partially due to the fact that he does not watch a lot of T.V. His teachers said Paul’s speech was clear and articulate. The only difficulty they had was when he spoke too quietly. He seemed to understand their class instructions.

I found it interesting that all four students felt school was important and that their overall academic competence (self-perception of abilities) was high. They were extremely self-confident about their abilities regardless of their actual grade point average or success with Basic Skills Tests. Perhaps this is due to the findings of Ibanez,

et al. (2004) in their study of immigrant Latino youth. The explanation may be that Liberian students, similarly, view only their language and accents as possible barriers to school success. Once they master those nuances, they assume their performances will improve. To them, their academic ability was never in question.

I found similar results when looking at language acculturation as it pertains to the importance of school and parental involvement. All four students felt school was important regardless of whether or not their parents were involved with school. Though three out of four parents occasionally attended parent-teacher conferences, this had only a minor influence on the students' perception that school was important. They still had their own goals, sense of self-confidence, and the determination to succeed.

In conclusion, acculturation, in its many aspects, plays an important role in the school success of immigrant and refugee students. Children and adolescents experience conflicts and adjustments as the result of uprooting from one culture to another. Many of these conflicts and adjustments place them at risk for psychosocial problems, school failure, and other risk-taking behaviors if not acknowledged (James, 1997).

## CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

### Overall Findings

As I end my study, I am amazed at how the reality of my findings varies so much from my initial projections. In considering the factors that might influence the academic success of Liberian high school students, I began too simply. I thought one or two factors, such as the war trauma they experienced, or the amount of education they had, could explain variations in their performances. What I found instead was that a number of variables come into play.

My initial idea, that years of education in Africa could solely explain academic performance, was not a reliable hypothesis. Mark had ten years of schooling, Paul had nine, and Fanta and Comfort each had three. However, the actual length of time, and the quality of schooling, cannot be verified. These numbers are being reported by students who were mere children at the time the war in Liberia began. The war brought school to a halt, and a regular schedule was replaced with an on-again, off-again wartime schedule. Their memories are vague and records are not available. The only ongoing school was in the camp, and only for a fee. It is impossible to equate grade levels and curriculum between schools in Liberia, Ghana, and Guinea with those of the United States at that time.

Also, if only the years of education were determinants, how would it explain the variation between Fanta (having passed two of the three Basic Skills Tests) and Comfort (having passed none of the same tests)? They each had the same number of years of education in Africa - three. The only variable that might provide some insight is that Paul and Fanta, who have passed the highest number of Basic Skills Tests, were both enrolled in school just prior to their arrivals in the U.S.

I believe it is much more complicated than that. In the end, I narrowed the focus of my study to the factors of trauma, resilience, and acculturation. I will now summarize my findings and their possible impact on the school success of the four students in my study. I will begin by quickly reviewing their grade point averages (at the time of the study) and the number of Basic Skills Tests they had passed. Though academic success can be measured and defined in many ways, the ultimate measure for these students is their ability to graduate. To graduate, they must receive passing scores on Basic Skills Tests in math, reading, and written composition.

If I ranked the students by their grade point averages, the order from highest to lowest would be: Paul (3.21), Fanta (3.16), Comfort (2.37), and Mark (1.80). A better measure than grade point average alone is their success with Basic Skills Tests. If I ranked the students from most to least tests passed, the order would be: Paul (passed all three tests), Fanta (passed two), Mark (passed none), and Comfort (passed none). I will examine how this might be explained.

I agree with many of the researchers who found that a combination of factors affects a student's ability to do well in school. Although I only focused on four students,

the findings in this study indicated that, generally speaking, the students who achieved higher academic success shared the same characteristics. They have not been adversely affected by previous trauma; they are highly resilient based on various traits; they have positive attitudes and outgoing personalities; they are incredibly self-confident and motivated to succeed; they take responsibility for their behavior and achievements; they are comfortable in settings where they interact with a variety of people; they have a religious belief to some degree; they use their school time and free time productively; they have parents who not only support their educational goals but are educated themselves; their overall school experience is positive; and they have minimal acculturative stress.

For example, all four students in this study have experienced incredibly traumatic events during the war. Despite that, they have not been negatively impacted in regard to their ability to function and to survive in school. They are alive and healthy and have many personal and educational goals. None of them are in trouble at school, and none of them smoke, drink, or take drugs to cope with stress. At the time of the study, they were all enrolled in school and passing their classes. I found this amazing considering their limited or interrupted educations in Liberia. In regard to personalities, Paul and Fanta, the two top achievers, are both fun and outgoing and talk to just about anyone. They display appropriate behavior, show respect for others, and are well liked by their peers and teachers. Mark and Comfort, the two low achievers, are very shy. They are nice people, as well as respectful, but they worry about being judged. They keep to

themselves and stay quiet in order to avoid stress and conflict. They made more claims of racism toward Liberians on the part of teachers, administrators, and fellow students.

The self-confidence and intrinsic motivational levels of both Paul and Fanta is noteworthy. Despite defeats, despite their lack of education, they totally believe in their ability to work hard and be successful. Though all four students claim to want good lives and a good future, these two are particularly driven to do what it takes to succeed. All four students show an internal locus of control and readily take responsibility for their behavior and the outcomes in their lives. Only Paul and Fanta could be considered to have a bicultural identity, with Paul having more interactions with various groups of people than the other three. He is quite comfortable with other races and cultures, and his school activities place him in those environments more frequently. Though all four students attend church, only three of the four claimed their religious beliefs to be significant. Fanta, one of the high achievers, turns to self-reflection and writing poetry as her “faith,” of sorts.

All four students make positive use of their time between school and home. The two high achievers not only fill their time with friends and family but have fairly regimented schedules (monitored by parents) that revolve around school-related activities. Paul and Fanta participate fully in the school day, followed by lots of time studying and doing their homework. Their teachers said they were *always* prepared for class and always had their homework done. Mark and Comfort’s teachers said they were *usually* prepared for class and *usually* had their homework done. Paul is a peer mediator and a new-student buddy at school. He participates in track after school, goes home to

eat, studies, and goes to sleep. All four fill their time with church and enjoy hobbies such as writing, cooking, going to movies, and playing basketball. However, Mark and Comfort's extra time does not revolve much around school-related activities. Though Mark volunteered once in a community activity, and Comfort was briefly in the Diversity Club, these were short-lived activities. Comfort meaningfully uses her time to be the caregiver and provider for her two younger sisters. This takes up most of her free time.

Three of the four students live with their parents and receive constant support and encouragement from them. Comfort has no contact with her parents and lives only with her two younger sisters. She does have two "godmothers" who love and support her. Paul, Fanta, and Mark have parents with a high school or college education. Mark's dad constantly encourages him to pursue further education. Paul is the only student that knows he wants a four-year college education, but the other three claim to want additional schooling after high school. Though there are aspects of school that can be challenging, all four students enjoy being at school and feel privileged for the opportunity to learn. Only Paul is in extracurricular activities at this time. They all have good relationships with their teachers; they all have at least one teacher or counselor who takes an interest in them. All had excellent attendance and still had varying degrees of academic success in terms of grades and test performance. Therefore, attendance does not seem to be related to grades or Basic Skills Test scores in this case.

The acculturation process can definitely impact school success for many students. However, the process for these four students seemed to go fairly well. Though there were certainly adjustments to endure, I think these were easier for this group of students

than for some immigrants and refugees. First, they have the support of a large group of people in their community that is from their country of origin. All the students were first welcomed to the U.S., to some degree, by other Liberians. Second, Paul, Fanta, and Mark all have parents who were living in the U.S. for some time when the children arrived. The parents already living here could prepare their children for the cultural changes they would encounter. In contrast, Comfort's father arrived when she did; they had to learn the culture together. Comfort did not have the benefit of anyone's previous experience, and this may be one reason she struggled socially and academically. Third, important resettlement issues for all four in this group seemed to be the change in relationships with their Liberian peers, and the comparison of African Americans to Africans. These areas of conflict are something the students have observed and are working through. This may have affected their comfort level at school, particularly for Mark and Comfort whose friends are primarily Liberian. If there is dissention among Liberians, and these students do not have friends from other cultures, it limits their peer group to a smaller number. Fourth, length of time in the U.S. did not seem to make a difference in academic achievement for anyone. Comfort still had the lowest scores, even though she had been in the U.S. as long as Fanta. This could, again, be due to the fact that she had no adult figure here beforehand to make her adjustment easier. I also think the acculturation process was easier for these students because the history and values of the U.S. are similar to Liberia. Fifth, regarding language acculturation, all four students have experienced frustration because people do not understand their Liberian accents, mostly in school. Comfort experienced this the most because of her strong

Grubu accent. Mark and Comfort speak softly, and do not articulate, and many of their teachers had to strain to understand them. This experience was only temporary for Paul and Fanta once they became confident to speak up in front of others. At times, all four have been frustrated by not being able to understand their teachers or the movies they watch in class. These language factors may have negatively affected Comfort and Mark the most. Their hesitation to speak up may have limited their interactions with teachers and other students. For Paul and Fanta, it was interactions with teachers and students that boosted their confidence and increased their social contacts. These positive interactions in multicultural settings promote academic resilience for some groups. Regardless of their real or perceived language and academic abilities, all four students are still confident individuals and believe their high school education is important.

Generally speaking, the findings of my study point to the following as they pertain to the academic achievement of Liberian high school students. The prior trauma that these four students had experienced during the war in Liberia had no significant effect on their ability to succeed in high school. All four students showed evidence of having resilient personalities, but those who exhibited higher levels of particular *individual attributes* seemed to perform better academically as well as socially. These attributes are: a positive attitude and temperament, respect for others, strong intrinsic motivation, coming to class prepared, internal locus of control, high educational goals, a religious belief, and a bicultural identity. In addition, the resilience traits of *positive use of time* (spent on hobbies and other self-fulfilling activities), *family* (support from educated parents with high educational goals for their children), and school (enjoyment

of classes, teachers, and extracurricular activities) were significant. *Attendance*, in this study, did not have an influence on the achievement levels of the four students.

Acculturation was the last factor considered in school success. While the challenges of resettlement and cultural identity, length of time in the U.S., and language may all hinder a newcomer's academic achievement, their effects here were minimal. All four students had a like-ethnic community to associate with upon arrival. Their primary challenges were adjusting to the changes in peer relationships among Liberians and sorting out their identities as compared to African Americans. Paul and Fanta met these challenges successfully. They both have a strong sense of their own identity that is not based on what other people think. They distance themselves from students who cause trouble. Comfort and Mark, even though they distanced themselves as well, seemed more upset with the divisions among groups of people they thought should be harmonious, mainly their fellow Liberians. Even though they stated this was not an issue, their school enjoyment may have been decreased due to regularly witnessing conflicts among their group. Length of time in the U.S. was not a variable in school success. It was not the length of time, but the existence of a family member already living in the U.S., that decreased the acculturation stress. This made the adjustment to the U.S. easier. Language acculturation was more of a challenge for Comfort and Mark, who were shy and hesitant to speak up. To a greater degree than Paul and Fanta, they were embarrassed in class if called on, and resented being judged by their language. This may have limited their participation, interactions with others, and development of confidence in multicultural settings.

### Limitations and Suggestions for Further Research

When reflecting on limitations this study may have had, I noted the following.

The focus of the study was too broad and examined too many factors. Even if the number of participants had been less, the amount of time needed to adequately investigate each topic would have been great. Perhaps with fewer factors and more participants, the resulting data could be generalized in a different way. However, one must remember that when doing qualitative research with any small group, the results cannot be generalized to the entire population. The data explained a lot for these four students, but other students in other circumstances may have provided different information.

If doing this type of study again, I would schedule the interviews for the beginning of the school year rather than the end. It took longer than I anticipated to obtain the participant and human subject approvals, to develop the interview questions, and to schedule and conduct the interviews. Once done, it took many hours (approximately 20 per two-hour interview) to transcribe the interviews, do follow-up work, and analyze the results. One example of this was my needing time to verify the spelling of city and county names the students provided. For example, Fanta said she lived in the *village* of Lofa, which she spelled L-A-F-O. In fact, she lived in an unnamed village in the *county* of Lofa, spelled L-O-F-A. I felt very pressured for time because the school year was ending soon; I would then have no access to the students over the summer for data verification.

This leads me to the recommendation that post-interview sessions be held with each student. This would have been helpful to clarify information or ask follow-up

questions regarding the interviews. For example, the students' Liberian accents often made it difficult, or impossible, to understand what they said on the tapes. It is also difficult for the researcher to see the big picture while immersed in the minutia of the study. Once I completed my work, I realized where I had gaps in data. If the study results were completed while there was still access to the participants, the student summaries could be discussed with them and read through for necessary corrections.

If doing this study again, I would schedule longer interviews. Initially, I thought one hour would be more than enough time for refugee high school students doing this type of thing for the first time. One hour was way too short; most of the interviews were close to two hours. I was not expecting the students to be so comfortable and self-revealing. They all seemed very pleased about being in the study, honored to be included. There are several reasons I think they were open with me. For one, they already knew me and had a trusting relationship. I explained the study purpose and procedures in great detail before starting and asked them to choose their own pseudonyms for the interviews. On the day of the interview I brought food and drinks for them and placed spring flowers on the table. We talked personally before turning on the video camera. More than once I reiterated they could withdraw from the study if they were not comfortable participating. I reassured them that whatever they shared in the interview was not going to be used to harm them or get them in trouble. I acknowledged their fear of revealing the truth, but conveyed how important the truth was to my understanding of their lives. I think they talked so much because they rarely have the opportunity to do so. Here they had a person who would sit and listen to them, a person

who asked them about their past, their feelings, their family, and their dreams. Their lives are full of events and feelings that most people never hear about.

I did have two interesting discrepancies in information. A week after the interview, Fanta came to me and said she had lied about her mother. She told me her real mom is not in Liberia but here in Minnesota, married to her dad. Since then, however, her friends at school have told me that her real mother is still in Liberia. The other discrepancy I noticed was in regard to Comfort's educational background. After her interview, I reviewed the papers in her school file. These were completed at the time she enrolled and was tested. The intake coordinator noted that she had completed grades 4-7 in the refugee camp in Ghana. This information came from Comfort herself. However, in the interview, Comfort told me she did *not* go to school in the camp. She said she had not been in school since those first early years in Liberia. For various reasons, my instinct in both cases is that the girls told me the truth in the interview. In Fanta's case, she may have subsequently experienced some sort of guilt or fear that prompted her change in story. This was a good reminder to me. When dealing with refugees, there are certain things to remember. One is that they often come from environments where survival was the priority. They did whatever it took to protect themselves or others. Often this meant distorting the truth. That instinct still protects them today. They may worry that what is said to "strangers" could harm them or their families. They fear getting in trouble with immigration or the law. Even within the safe environment of my classroom, there was distance between us. Self-revealed information of a personal nature cannot be quantified; it is only as accurate as the person and the day.

I had originally planned to meet with the school district's Liberian contact before interviewing the students. I wanted to make sure the interview questions were culturally appropriate. This person was unavailable for an extended period, so I was not able to do this. My advisor and I reviewed the questions; they were respectful and appropriate.

Suggestions for future research with Liberian students would be the following. Include the student's parents in the study. I think it would be interesting to compare parental perceptions and expectations with those of their children. This could be in regard to school, jobs, gender roles, or individual and family-related behavior since arriving in the U.S. Additionally, it might prove valuable to study the non-resilient, at-risk Liberian students. These are the kids who seem to follow trouble - those who fail classes and/or drop out, have no family support, have chronic absenteeism, get into trouble at school (e.g., insubordination, fighting, cheating, drugs, weapons), exhibit poor social skills, and seem unable to adjust to the rules and behavioral expectations of the American school system. These students continue to be a challenge for their teachers, their schools, and their communities who are unsure of how to effectively deal with them.

#### Implications for Educators

There is so much to be learned from the lives and experiences of Liberian refugee students. Teachers, administrators, and the community at large need to increase their understanding and tolerance of this population in order to serve them effectively. Immigrant and refugee students and their families are here to stay. The time has passed for angry prejudice, for sitting back and repeating that they just "do not fit in." The time is here to become educated as individuals and groups. Schools need to develop and

provide effective intervention programs and strategies for at-risk students. There are programs in existence that have been shown to promote success for these students and those around them.

Teachers, specifically, can begin by educating themselves on the history of Liberia and its historic relationship with the United States. They should learn about the civil war that began in Liberia in 1989 and how the war changed life for the people. Many Liberian families maintained a much higher standard of living in Liberia than they do in the United States. Many had bigger houses, more property, and successful businesses. Some were teachers themselves. Life in the U.S. has meant a drop in status and a difficult financial adjustment for many people.

Teachers can help their Liberian students in class in many ways. One is by realizing that though they dress and act like American students, they are not. When they first come to class, they are terrified, afraid to be noticed and pointed out and afraid to be ignored. They are often significantly below grade level due to the war interrupting their educations in Liberia. They may need more explanation on seemingly easy subjects. If this cannot be accommodated in class, suggest ways to find additional help. Some of them have had experiences in class where the teacher has unkindly made fun of them and their inability to be understood. It is helpful if the teachers slow down their own speech and look directly at the students when they talk. This makes it easier to understand American English. Watching movies is a challenge for many students for similar reasons. In social studies, for example, Liberians often do not know the historical background of the subject of the movie. The American English spoken in the movie may

be difficult to follow and understand. If there is a worksheet to do, the student may have trouble because they were not able to adequately obtain the answers from the movie.

Refugee students are often intelligent, sensitive individuals who simply cannot express themselves well in class. They are shy, and quiet, and have a different English accent than Americans. They are nervous to speak up in class or ask for help when they need it. Like any teenager, they do not want anyone to laugh at them.

One suggestion, until a teacher knows the student and their confidence level, is to *not* ask them to pick their own partners or groups in class activities, including gym. They are aware that others often do not want to work with them, and they are hesitant to join a particular group. They often wait for the teacher to assign them. Teachers should mix up the groups so that white students are working together with those of different races and cultures. This helps Liberians and other refugees to feel involved in class. Be aware that there are distinct cultural differences, and occasional tensions, between African Americans and Africans. Though they share race, they view themselves as very different from each other. They are not necessarily the same people simply because they have the same skin color. Likewise, not all Liberians are the same. As with any group of people, Liberians bring a variety of life experiences, personalities and temperaments, educational abilities, and family backgrounds to the classroom.

One of the best ways for American students to learn about the lives of immigrants and refugees is to hear their personal stories. As Americans, we have been geographically isolated from the kind of lives that most refugees live. Most American students have no concept of what life “on the run” during a civil war entails. The best

way to increase understanding and tolerance is to bring personal meaning to a situation. If American students could hear the stories of war and atrocity and survival their refugee students have endured, they might have a newfound respect for them. They might realize that many Liberians are fun, intelligent, and valuable adolescents who deserve respect. The sharing experience might cultivate some new friendships and increase opportunities for cultural exchange. There will be those Liberians who are shy and private and will not want to discuss the war. It is too personal and painful for some to share. However, there are others who, if given the opportunity in a safe and respectful environment, will share their experiences. The better writers can express their stories on paper, but many are more at ease just talking conversationally.

#### Current Status of the Four Study Participants

Since collecting data for this capstone, I have had the opportunity to communicate with all four students. Paul will graduate from high school this year and has been accepted at a highly rated, four-year, midwestern university. He is also applying for an athletic scholarship. Fanta has completed all of her high school credits but is uncertain if she can graduate this year; she still has not passed the Basic Skills Test in math. She is very upset about this since she assumed she would pass and has been making post-secondary plans. Mark is doing incredibly well. Over the last year, his grades, study habits, and attitude toward school have improved remarkably. In the summer of 2005, he passed the Basic Skills Test of written composition and has now passed the math test. He made the "B" Honor Roll for the most recent trimester, and has asked the track coach if he can try out for next year's team. He will return to high school in the fall to complete

his course requirements. He must also pass the one remaining test, in reading, in order to graduate next year. Comfort did not return to school this past fall. She dropped out and is doing machine work at a large technology company. She is still living with and caring for her younger sisters.

## APPENDIX A

### Student Interview Questions

## Student Interview Questions

I have grouped my questions by topic, beginning with the easier questions and ending with those more difficult to answer. My hope is that the student and I will have established rapport and trust by the time I ask the more personal questions.

These are banks of questions. Depending on how the interview goes, I may not ask each question of each student. These questions have been reviewed and approved by my primary advisor. They are intended to cover the following areas:

### **Background Information (including resettlement camp) (BGI)**

#### **School (SCH)**

#### **Use of Non-Standard English (NSE)**

#### **Acculturation (ACC)**

#### **Stress and Resilience (STR)**

### **Background Information (including resettlement camp) (BGI)**

- Please state your name, first name only, please.
- How old are you?
- What is your birth date?
- Where were you born?

#### **If answer is Liberia:**

- In what year did you come to the U.S.?
- Between the time you lived in Liberia, and the time you came to the U.S., did you live in any other countries? Which ones?

#### **If answer is NOT Liberia:**

- How old were you when you moved to Liberia? (If doesn't remember: What year did you move to Liberia?)
- In what year did you come to the U.S.?

- Between the time you lived in Liberia, and the time you came to the U.S., did you live in any other countries? Which ones?
- Before you came to the U.S., were you ever separated from your family?
- How did this happen? For how long?
- Who did you come to the U.S. with?
- Are you still together?
- Where are they now?
- In Liberia, how many people were in your immediate family? What number were you? Who were they? Boys? Girls?
- Did you live together?
- Were your parents married?
- Did they get along well or did they argue a lot?
- Did you live in a house or apartment?
- Did you live in the city or the country?
- Who took care of the children? Parents? You? Others?
- What responsibilities did you have?
- Where did you get your food and water?
- Was it ever difficult to find food and water?
- Did you ever have to steal anything to help your family? What was it?
- Was your family poor, live comfortably, have more than the average family?

**Camp:**

- Did you ever live in a resettlement (refugee) camp? For how long?
- How were you treated there?

- What did you think about while staying in the camp?
- Did you go to school in the camp?
- Do you still think back on your time in the camp?
- What do you remember most?

### **School (SCH)**

- Did you go to school in Liberia? For how long?
- Describe your school – the students, the teachers, the classes, the activities, the rules, etc..
- What did you like about your school?
- What didn't you like about your school?
- How was school in Liberia different from school in America?
- Did you receive a better education in Liberia or in the U.S.?
- What is difficult for you as a teenager in a Minnesota high school?
- Do you participate in any after-school activities at the high school? Anywhere else?
- Do you like coming to school every day? If you don't like it, why do you come?
- If you have missed any days of school this year, why were you absent?
- What would make school a better place for you?
- What's more important to you, passing classes so you can graduate or getting high grades? Explain.
- What have been your favorite classes?
- What classes haven't you liked?
- Is reading easy or difficult for you? Give examples.

- Is school easy or difficult for you? Explain.
- What's your favorite thing to do outside of school?
- How do your parents/family feel about meeting teachers or coming to the high school?
- What would make them more comfortable doing these things?
- Do you now try to involve your parents/family in your school life or not?

Explain.

- What do your parents/older family members think about the value of a school education?
- Would your parents/family prefer that you were working full time or helping at home (rather than being in school)?
- Do you really want more schooling after high school, or is this what your family wants for you?

### **Use of Non-Standard English (NSE)**

- When you speak, do people ask you to repeat yourself a lot?
- Where does this happen (school, grocery store, telephone, etc.)?
- Why do you think they don't understand you?
- How does it make you feel when you're asked to repeat things?
- Do you speak very often in your classes? If not, why not? If yes, which classes, why?
- Do you ever try to speak English more like an American in order to fit in? When?
- Do you ever feel that your language keeps you from succeeding?
- Do you ever feel that your language gives you an advantage?

**Acculturation (ACC)**

- Do you have friends here in the U.S.?
- Do you have any American friends?
- Have you found it hard to make friends in a new country?
- Is it ever hard to know what to say to new people?
- What is your impression of African Americans (people of African descent born in the U.S.)?
- How do they treat you? Why do you think that is?
- As a group, how do Liberians feel about each other?
- Is that the same as when you lived in Liberia, or have things changed because of living in the U.S.?
- What are the expectations for women in Liberian culture?
- Is this the same as in Liberia or different now that you're in the U.S.?
- What are the expectations for men in Liberian culture?
- Is this the same as in Liberia or different now that you're in the U.S.?
- What do you think men and women's roles should be (independent, dependent, etc.)?
- Do you think it's a woman's responsibility to work and earn her own money?
- Do you miss Liberia? What do you miss?
- Do you want to return to Liberia some day or remain in the U.S.?
- What do you like about living in the U.S.?
- What do you not like about living in the U.S.?
- As a young person, what were you told about Liberia's relationship with the U.S.?

- Before you came here, what did you think of the U.S.? Has that changed now that you live here?
- Did you want to come to America? Why or why not?
- Did you feel welcomed when you first arrived?
- How did the non-Liberian people in your neighborhood or community treat you?
- Are you and your family supported by the other Liberians in your community?
- How do the students at the high school treat you?
- How do the teachers and administrators at the high school treat you?
- Have you had a chance to teach anyone else about your culture?
- What makes you proud to be a Liberian?
- Is the rest of your family in America proud to be Liberian?
- In what ways do you preserve your Liberian culture? How do you keep it alive?
- Are you ever afraid to express things from your culture in front of others (e.g., clothes, dance, food, religion, ways of talking, etc.)?
- Are you open to learning things about the American way of life?
- Do you think your parents/older family understand what it's like to be a teenager in America? Explain.
- Do you feel accepted in America?
- Do you have opportunities to succeed here?
- What are your thoughts on the war in Liberia?
- Did the war in Liberia ever make you feel hopeless? Why or why not?
- Is AIDS a problem in Liberia?
- Do you know anyone who had, or currently has, AIDS?

- How do you feel about people with AIDS?
- Has the move to America been easier for *you* or *your parents/older family*? Why?
- (Do you?) Does your family receive welfare, child support, or any financial assistance?

### **Stress and Resilience (STR)**

- What are your thoughts on the war in Liberia?
- Did the war in Liberia ever make you feel hopeless? Why or why not?
- Is AIDS a problem in Liberia?
- Do you know anyone who had, or currently has, AIDS?
- How do you feel about people with AIDS?
- Has the move to America been easier for *you* or *your parents/older family*?
- (Do you?) Does your family receive welfare, child support, or any financial assistance?
- Do you feel accepted in America?
- Do you have opportunities to succeed here?
- Did you want to come to America? Why or why not?
- Were you ever beaten in school? For what?
- Did you think it was fair for you to be beaten?
- When you were beaten, how did you get through the pain?
- When you were younger, did you ever think you would die?
- How did you deal with that?
- What happens when you fail at something? (Do you get upset, give up, try again, try to understand what happened?)

- Was that the same in Liberia? Did you react the same way?
- I've noticed that some Liberian students here at school don't get along with each other. Why do they dislike each other?
- Do you have problems with other Liberians?
- How do you deal with the conflict?
- When you have problems, do you have someone to talk to? How does this person help you?
- Have you ever seen someone get killed?
- Have you ever killed anyone?
- Is there anything you want to tell me about those experiences?
- Do you ever feel alone, as if there were no one to turn to?
- Is there a teacher, or other **non-family member**, who believed in you and had high expectations for you? If so, tell me about that person.
- Is there someone in your life who is very important to you? Who? Why are they important to you?
- Are you a religious person?
- Does this faith give you spiritual strength? Explain.
- Is your family important to you? Why or why not?
- Is your family part of your life right now? If not, why not?
- Do you experience any prejudice or discrimination? What kind and why?
- Is any of this discrimination directed more toward males/**females** than females/**males**?
- Do you ever feel sad? Why?
- Do you sleep well at night or do you have trouble sleeping?

- Are you a positive role model for others? In what way?
- What challenges have you overcome that you are proud of?
- Do you currently feel stress because of problems in your family?
- Can these problems be solved? If not, how do you find strength to deal with them?
- Do you spend as much time now with your family as you did in Liberia?
- Do you ever talk to others about your worries, or do you keep them to yourself?
- Do you drink alcohol or use any drugs?
- Does your use of alcohol or drugs interfere with your life?
- Do you get angry easily?
- When you behave inappropriately, can you admit it, or is that too hard? Is it easier to blame others?
- Do you work?
- Are you the only one in your family who works? If yes, how do you handle this responsibility?
- In Liberia, would you say your family was poor, had enough money to live comfortably, or had more than the average amount of money?
- Were your parents married to each other? Are they still married?
- Did your parents live together when you were young? If not, were they divorced or just living in separate places?
- Did they seem to get along or did they argue a lot?
- Were you healthy as a child?
- Are you healthy now?

- Do you think you have a good sense of humor (make people laugh or find things funny)?
- What inspires you, what motivates you to keep going, to keep trying until you succeed?
- Do you have the skills to solve problems in your life?
- Do you ever feel afraid? What fears do you have?
- Have you thought about your future profession or job, after you finish school?
- Is there anything else you'd like to tell me about yourself or your life?

## APPENDIX B

### Teacher Questionnaire

## Teacher Questionnaire

**Please return the completed questionnaire, sealed in this envelope, to my school mailbox no later than Tuesday, May 24, 2005. Thanks! Jane Lang**

- Teacher's name \_\_\_\_\_
- Please complete the questionnaire for student  
\_\_\_\_\_
- Your answers and comments should reflect this student's performance and behavior during \_\_\_\_\_ in your \_\_\_\_\_ class.
- In the questions below, the student will be referred to as "X."

1. Generally speaking, (I don't need exact numbers), how was X's attendance in your class (consider absences and tardiness)?

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2. What grade did X receive in your class? \_\_\_\_\_
3. Did X usually complete his/her homework by its due date?      \_\_Yes \_\_No
4. Was X able to understand directions and stay on task during class?      \_\_Yes \_\_No
5. Did X seem to be learning and progressing throughout the trimester?      \_\_Yes \_\_No
6. How many times was X sent to the office for insubordinate or disruptive behavior? \_\_\_\_
7. Did X actively participate in pair or small-group activities?      \_\_Yes \_\_No
8. Were you able to understand this student's spoken English?      \_\_Yes \_\_No

Comments:

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9. Describe X's attitude and behavior toward you in your class.

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10. Describe X's attitude and behavior toward the students in your class.

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11. Describe the other students' attitudes toward X in your class.

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12. What else would you like to say about X?

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