**Do impoverished youth need a mentor and/or role model to reach their full potential?**

Persuasive Communication

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**Thesis Statement:**

Since most youths are resilient, having a positive role model or mentor may not be mandatory to reach their full potential. However, impoverished children, many of whom are minorities reared in an unhealthy environment (being exposed to social adversity – hardships), could have a steeper ladder of success to climb because of their starting place, which would make having a mentor or role model essential.

**Introduction:**

Every child deserves an opportunity to reach their full potential! Children born into poverty, many of whom are people of color, have a better chance of overcoming obstacles to achieve success by cultivating resilience, seeking out mentors or role models, and pursuing educational opportunities (Koch, 2022).

Although most young people are resilient during their formative years, their environment often influences their worldview and approach to life. For example, children who grow up in environments where their parents did not finish high school or attain a college degree are less likely to graduate from high school or attend college (Fry, 2021; Lindstrom et al., 2022).

Since most young people are resilient, they may not require a positive role model to achieve success. However, research has shown that a role model can make a difference in helping underprivileged youth become successful adults (O’Brien, 2024; Bredella et al., 2019).

Many underserved children may not acquire the necessary tools or be exposed to an adequate support system to become successful, which includes a positive mentor or role model to help them overcome such a dire start. Furthermore, children born into poverty are less likely to reach their full potential, as evidenced by the higher high school dropout rate among those raised in impoverished environments (Reesa & Andrews, 2022, p. 426). There may be many ways to compensate for children growing up in impoverished circumstances to achieve success, one of which is learning to be resilient.

**There are primarily two schools of thought regarding resilience and or resiliency.**

There are primarily two schools of thought regarding resilience. Some believe it is innate, while others argue that it is learned; however, nearly everyone agrees that it is essential for youth, particularly those from impoverished backgrounds, to reach their full potential. Resilience is a concept that emerged as researchers sought to understand why some children faced with adversity can overcome risks, avoid adverse effects, and thrive and succeed in life (Hurd et al., 2009). Furthermore, research shows that various schools of thought and myriad definitions of resilience or resiliency exist. As stated by King et al. (2012), “Although there are varying definitions of resilience, it is best understood as a dynamic process that integrates many systems within an individual, as well as in the individual's environment, leading to positive adaptation in the face of adversity” (p. 1). Resilience is a two-fold dynamic process, referencing systems within an individual and the environment to which the individual is exposed. This raises an interesting point that substantiates resilience as neither innate nor developed but rather a combination of both, as supported by the following statement.

The concept of positive adaptation despite adversity has existed practically since humans began reflecting on their behavior. Resilience, an English word derived from the Latin for “springing back” or “jumping back up,” acquired an additional preventive meaning sometime in the last century, partly because it helped shift the focus of research from pathologies to opportunities for supportive action. The desire to support resilience naturally leads to a search for ways to help families and communities enhance the resilience of their members.

Research has shown that much of what appears to promote positive adaptation despite adversity originates outside the individual — in the family, community, society, culture, and environment. Further research has led to the concept of resilient reintegration, whereby confronting adversity can lead some to a new level of growth. In contrast, for others, it can reveal that resilience is an innate quality that needs only to be awakened appropriately (Fleming & Ledogar, 2008). Furthermore, there is also a need to acknowledge the impact of the opposite of resilience, non-resilience.

Although limited research has been conducted on non-resilience, the contrast between non-resilience and resilience is as follows. Non-resilience refers to the inability to recover quickly from adversity or adapt easily to change; it describes something that is not elastic or flexible or someone who struggles to bounce back from difficult situations. In contrast, resilience refers to the ability to recover quickly from adversity and rebound from challenging situations.

Determining whether resilience is innate or developed in children who endure life challenges requires more in-depth research. Nonetheless, it is evident that, regardless of how children increase their level of resilience, it should be a topic of further discussion. Resilience is one of the key indicators that suggests children, especially those raised in impoverished situations, will have a better chance of becoming successful adults. In addition to being resilient, impoverished children are more likely to reach their full potential if they have a positive role model.

**Good mentors and or role models play a key role in constructive youth development.**

Seeking good role models and/or mentors can play a crucial role in the development and future of adolescent youth, and effective role models can be instrumental in promoting positive and constructive youth development (O'Brien, 2024). If there are good mentors and role models, there must also be bad ones. Although this research will have limited references regarding poor role modeling and mentorship, acknowledging their existence is important. For the sake of discussion in this research paper, the simple distinction between the two is that good mentors and role models help equip youth to become successful adults with impeccable character by modeling good behavior and providing sound advice (Birhan, 2021).

Furthermore, whereas good role models consistently set good examples by displaying ethical and appropriate behavior, negative role models may exhibit destructive, unethical, or unprofessional behaviors, thereby setting a bad example. Also, good role models and mentors support their understudies by modeling behaviors they can emulate, providing guidance, and offering opportunities for personal and professional growth. Conversely, bad mentors or role models can negatively impact a mentee's or follower's personal and professional development through destructive behaviors, a lack of support, or by setting poor examples, potentially derailing careers or stifling growth.  “A mentor helps a mentee reach both personal and career goals by functioning as an adviser and role model while providing support and sharing knowledge” (Bredella et al., 2019, introduction).

The necessity of positive role models cannot be overstated. Research suggests that the presence of role models is associated with more favorable outcomes for adolescents.

Additionally, research supports that nearly every child who does well has had at least one stable and committed relationship with a supportive adult (Hurd et al., 2009; Walsh, 2015). Creating an environment in which impoverished young people not only survive but learn to thrive can be more easily achieved with adequate role models to learn from. While mentors or role models may not be essential for helping all impoverished youth reach their full potential, research indicates they are beneficial for most, if not all.

Youth Development is a process, not a goal. People continue to develop throughout their lifetimes. Therefore, promoting youth development is an enduring, overarching purpose, not a goal that is ever finally achieved (Hamilton et al., 2004, p.4). “When young people experience environments that nurture their needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness, their resilience, concentration, confidence, and ability to connect with others grow; however, when these basic needs are unmet, youth experience “alienation and ill-being” (Jones et al., 2012, p.21; Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 74).

Good role models are essential to helping youth reach their full potential, and oftentimes during those crucial formative years, youth have more than one giving them advice and counsel.

**Youth Development Environments Matter: It Takes a Village to Raise a Child.**

The phrase “it takes a village to raise a child” originates from an African proverb and conveys the message that it takes many people (“the village”) to provide a safe, healthy environment for children, where children are given the security, they need to develop and flourish, and to be able to realize their hopes and dreams (Reupert et al., 2022).

Environments matter during a youth's adolescence and formative years; “Children in poverty is a major factor influencing the development of children” (Sameroff & Seifer, 2021, Abstract). Creating cultures that support youth in surviving and thriving will undoubtedly have a direct impact on their future success or failure. The efficacy and consistency of tried-and-true youth development principles are required more than ever during these unprecedented times. Today's youth are growing up in a world of both opportunities and challenges. To help support youth as they leverage opportunities and face challenges, families, educators, community organizations, and policymakers may turn to the principles and practices of positive youth development (Ardoin et al., 2022).

Youth development has traditionally been and is still most widely used to mean a natural process: the growing capacity of a young person to understand and act upon their environment. Despite the rapid and massive changes, children's needs have remained essentially unchanged. They still need protection, guidance, support for development, and preparation for adult life; they need a higher level of development than ever before (Comer & Haynes, 1991, p. 8). Children’s needs remain relatively consistent, underscoring the importance of exposing adolescents to positive, effective youth development methods that can set them on a successful journey. Adolescence is a critical stage of human development, laying the foundation for children to reach their full potential (Lawrence & Adebowale, 2023; Backes & Bonnie, 2019). Therefore, those precious formative years must be recognized and utilized to build our youth; it takes a collaborative effort to do so.

Those who grow up in an environment with an adequate support system influenced by solid adult role models have a better chance of reaching their full potential (Lindstrom et al., 2022).

Undoubtedly, parents play a crucial role in raising their children. Furthermore, “When children are born, they depend on other grown-ups—grandparents, neighbors, teachers, ministers, employers, political leaders, and others who touch their lives directly and indirectly. " Each of us plays a part in every child’s life: 'It takes a village to raise a child' (Clinton, 2006, p. 5). Most adults recognize, embrace, and acknowledge that they are role models and play a significant role in shaping the youth they interact with, as well as those who may be watching from afar.

Adults are responsible for creating a culture that fosters the development of all children, enabling them to reach their full potential. ‘Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old, he will not depart from it” (Proverbs 22:6). Since all adults do not embrace being role models, as a famous former basketball player and current National Basketball Association (NBA) commentator Charles Barkley once said, “I am not a role model.”

One could argue that whether adults accept themselves as role models is a topic of debate. Nonetheless, the need to help young people, especially those from impoverished backgrounds, become successful adults remains a focal point for the betterment of society. Theodore Roosevelt once said, “We cannot always build the future for our youth, but we can build our youth for the future.” Positive youth development is a tool designed to help young people reach their full potential by becoming successful adults. A Positive youth development environment can help foster youth toward success.

If and when youth realize that their path is leading to a place of self-destruction, how do they know what course of action to take as youngsters growing up in this oftentimes tumultuous world without a steady hand or role model to guide them? At some point during the youth's formative years, perhaps because they are resilient and/or have a good mentor, regardless of their environment, those who aspire to be successful decide to get on track to achieve their goals. Those whose families have a history of not completing high school or attending college often decide that they will be the first in their family to achieve this goal. Education can be a way to help children break the poverty cycle.

**Many impoverished youth parents did not attend college; however, education can be a tool to help youth escape poverty.**

“Education is the basis for poverty eradication and economic growth” (Liu et al., 2021). If education is not the sole determinant of poverty eradication, it is undoubtedly a tool for minimizing it. Poverty is a persistent problem in developing countries, attracting the attention of developed countries worldwide. More than 700 million people, or approximately 10% of the world's population, continue to live in extreme poverty, struggling to fulfill their most basic needs, including access to healthcare, education, water, and sanitation (United Nations, 2019).

Education can improve health and productivity. Individuals with a good education will possess fundamental knowledge and skills, enabling them to pursue a job that can lead to increased productivity and higher income. Then, education can break the vicious circle of poverty and social marginalization, thereby improving the quality of life and social welfare (Ustama, 2009; Arsani et al., 2020).

The relationship between poverty and education is not simple. However, as is well published in all emerging and developed countries, (literacy) education provides people with a healthier life and more informed decisions about their lives, their children, their livelihoods, and how they live. Education plays a crucial role in the lives of children, offering opportunities to develop mentally, physically, and socially (Jemeli & Fakandu, 2019; ChildFund, 2019).

Perhaps the key to helping people make the leap from poverty to sustainability lies in a program such as Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID), which is designed to prepare first-generation students for college attendance. AVID is a college preparatory program operating in nearly 5,000 high schools across the United States, serving approximately 20% of all public high schools in the country. AVID students enroll in rigorous college preparatory courses, placing them in an academic track typically targeting higher-achieving students, and attending an AVID elective class during which teachers provide academic skills coaching, explain the college application process, and facilitate social-emotional skill development, including persistence in the face of challenges, problem-solving, and coping skills. Ultimately, the program prioritizes the student-teacher relationship and fosters a family-like atmosphere (Dudovitz et al., 2023). The student-teacher relationship can be crucial in helping first-generation students attend college, as they may not have a family member to guide them through the complex process of preparing for and applying for college admission.

A recent Pew Research Center (PRC) report states, “Some 70% of adults aged 22 to 59 with at least one parent who has a bachelor’s degree or higher education have also completed a bachelor’s degree themselves.

Only 26% of their peers who do not have a college-educated parent have a bachelor’s degree” (Fry, 2021, p. 5). Graduating from college, followed by a lucrative career, could be a way to lift low-income youth above the poverty threshold.

Children who grow up in disadvantaged situations are susceptible to remaining in poverty. Not only do impoverished youth, many of whom are from single-parent family homes, fail to attend college, but too many of them also drop out of high school (Duncan & Brooks-Gunn, 1997; Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009).

Too many children who grow up in poverty live that way throughout their lives; now is the time to recognize and perhaps better address why the poor remain in that predicament; could it be that the system is broken, which is evident by the fact that the middle class is shrinking, and the ranks the poor have grown due to the lack insufficient income gains( Lowery, 2019).

**Why do people stay poor? Poverty traps are deep holes from which many people cannot escape.**

There is an excellent argument to be made that suggests poverty begets poverty. “The depth and persistence of extreme poverty raises the prospect of poverty traps, which arise if poverty becomes self-reinforcing if the poor’s equilibrium behaviors perpetuate low standards of living. This can happen when income dynamics are nonlinear and generate multiple equilibria, with a low-level equilibrium corresponding to poverty” (Carter et al., 2019, p. 3).

“Why do people stay poor? This is one of the most important questions in the social sciences due to its implications for human welfare” (Balboni et al., 2022, introduction).

Various societal factors can contribute to people's being poor. Many people are born poor and are unable to navigate their way out of that unfortunate situation; it is as if they are trapped in a perpetual generational poverty cycle.

There are two broad views on why people stay poor. One emphasizes fundamental differences, such as ability, talent, or motivation. The other view is that of the poverty trap, which emphasizes the differences in opportunities that stem from access to wealth (Balboni 2022 et al., abstract).

Many of the world’s poor are not unemployed but underemployed. Balboni et al. (2022) state, “Most of the world’s poor are employed but have low earnings; therefore, to understand why they remain poor, we must understand why they work low-earning jobs. One view is that people experiencing poverty have the same opportunities as everyone else; therefore, if they work in low-paying jobs, it must be because they possess traits that make them unsuitable for other occupations. The alternative view is that the poor face different opportunities and hence do low-earning jobs because they are born poor, which indicates that there is a wealth threshold below which people are trapped in a poverty cycle, where their initial wealth, rather than their abilities or traits, perpetuates their poverty” ( p. 2).

The statement(s) above, which highlight the two points, is excellent, and I would like to add another point that should also be considered. One could argue that the welfare system, which was designed to help people manage their way through impoverished circumstances with the idea that they would someday rise above the poverty line, has been counterproductive because some people are content with living off government subsidies.

Most people who depend on government subsidies do not attend college; many do not even graduate high school, further perpetuating the poverty cycle (Lowder et al., 2022).

Is it the individual’s fault they were born and raised in an impoverished environment, putting them at risk? As stated by Filges et al. (2022), “At-risk youth are defined as a diverse group of young people in unstable life circumstances who are currently experiencing or at risk of developing one or more severe problems” (p. 3). Many impoverished people are born in a situation that, without intervention, will probably lead to them adhering to the poverty cycle they have been indoctrinated in; oftentimes, people resemble their environment.

**Conclusion:**

If being at-risk is the societal norm of impoverished youth, how are they supposed to be re-tooled to rise above the at-risk stigma category when they have been indoctrinated into thinking it is normal? Moreover, what role did they play in becoming at-risk youths in the first place? More importantly, why have classifications of people, especially minorities, been excluded from many opportunities afforded to the majority?

Perhaps there is time for a concerted effort to level the playing field by developing A sustainable and inclusive economy that leaves no one behind (Andrews et al., 2012). This would include addressing the poverty crisis. As stated in a publication titled white poverty, “America as a people is unable to address the crisis of poverty because we do not see it”. (Barber & Wilson-Hartgrove, 2024, p.4) It is not only time to acknowledge the poverty crisis, but this moment is a call to action to move toward eradicating it!

Every child, including those born into poverty with a steeper ladder to climb to achieve success, deserves the opportunity to reach their full potential. Children born in poverty, many of whom are those of color, have a better chance of overcoming obstacles to achieve success by choosing resilience, seeking mentors or role models, and pursuing educational opportunities.

While all the aforementioned factors — resilience, a positive youth development environment, and education — are important for impoverished children to reach their full potential, having a positive role model or a supportive adult is crucial (Walsh, 2015). Children, including those from impoverished backgrounds, deserve the right to reach their full potential; to that end, a solid role model can prove to be indispensable.

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