ABSTRACT

(To receive a copy of the paper please contact Dr. Margaret Beale Spencer at marges@gse.upenn.edu)

Margaret Beale Spencer, Jill Stoltzfus and Matthew Pearson

University of Pennsylvania

October 1999

Support for the collection of data presented and the writing of this paper was made available to the first author from several sources: the National Institutes of Mental Health, Office of Educational Research Improvement (OERI), and the Casey, Ford and W K Kellogg, Foundations.
Contexts that Promote Competence and Healthy Coping: A Theory-Driven Analysis of Urban Adolescents

Writings by Weiss (1995) suggest that theory-driven program strategies are useful and cost-effective in that they provide more precise methods for determining the best practices for intervention/prevention initiatives. This paper has several aims. Following a brief overview statement, the paper first introduces a theoretical framework: The Phenomenological Variant of Ecological Systems Theory [PVEST] Spencer 1995, 1999. The framework has demonstrated utility and “drives” our prior and current programming initiatives and longitudinal research efforts.

Second, a synthesis of empirical longitudinal evidence from the Promotion of Academic Competence (PAC) Project is presented. The longitudinal, largely male (70%), African American, urban adolescents were followed from middle school through high school graduation. Study findings served as the conceptual basis and design for the recently launched longitudinal, multiethnic, multiple contextual and culturally-linked research and program initiative (i.e., Achievement Linked Programming and Health Advocacy [ALPHA] Project).

Third, pilot data are reported for a resilient group of multi ethnic, incentive-receiving (i.e. monetary), secondary school adolescents that explore specific coping behaviors. Specifically, the coping behaviors of four ethnic groups of high-achieving adolescents coping behaviors are described. Fourth, qualitative data are presented for a sample of predominantly African American urban special education students. This specialized programming initiative employed the PVEST framework (Spencer, 1995,
Specifically, the Start-on-Success (SOS) program for special needs students was designed to increase personal efficacy and prosocial coping as well as to decrease youths’ maladaptive context-associated (i.e., school-based) aggressive tendencies. Programming designs both for the high achievement (ALPHA Project) and special education (Start-On-Success) students were intended to enhance achievement, to promote instrumentality, competence and school completion, and to utilize the PVEST framework as an organizational and explanatory heuristic device.

Following the introduction of the conceptual framework and prior to presenting the PAC Project findings, a synthesis of research is presented that links net stress level (i.e., challenges versus support) and coping methods (e.g., internalized anger and externalized hypermasculinity) with aggressive behaviors. Specifically, coping methods and aggressive behaviors have been linked to low achievement, special education placement, and untoward life-course outcomes (e.g., incarceration, compromises health status, and early death). The methods for quantitative and qualitative data analysis of the PAC Project data are described and linked to the PVEST framework for the quantitative study of high achieving secondary school students and to the programming and qualitative study of special needs urban adolescents. Lastly, following the presentation of data from the aforementioned projects, the policy relevance of the parallel theory-driven programs as well as the fiscal and societal implications of each are discussed.