

**Developing Resilience: Acknowledging Racial and Systemic Issues**

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**Abstract**

Resilience is a trait which allows individuals to become “elastic” or “bounce back” from adverse situations. Resilience has become a topic for kids in urban context and how they handle harsh environments. Though resilience is needed and can help with adversity, research has failed to identify its relationship to systemic disparities and other racial issues. In this paper, I will challenge the way we view “resilience” (Werner, 2005) for Black children enrolled in elementary in urban context through the lens of Critical Race Theory. I will closely examine past research on student resilience in urban school contexts and pay particular attention to studies that do not give consideration to racial and systemic issues that can drastically affect the education of elementary children in urban environment.

Keywords: Resilience, Critical Race Theory, Urban Context, Elementary

### **Elementary-Age Children Building Resilience in Urban Contexts**

Authors such as Lillian Comas Diaz and her colleagues define resilience as, “the process of adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats or significant sources of stress — such as family and relationship problems, serious health problems or workplace and financial stressors” (Comas-Diaz, Luthar, Maddie, O’Neill, Saakvitne, Tedeschi, 2018). However, many definitions fail to consider the effects of racism on students’ health and well-being. In urban communities, children must develop resilience early due to factors such as poverty, violence, divorce, single parent households, death, and parental figures who are imprisoned. While the Emmy Werner Kauai (2005) study discusses three protective factors to foster resilience, it fails to include racism, colorism, capitalistic society, discrimination, and a slew of other racial inequalities. Werner (2005) protective factors includes: Protective factors within the individual, community and family (Werner 2005). Protective factors within the individual as Werner (2005) explains how “children that have temperamental characteristics, advanced language and motor skills, a special talent which gives them a sense of pride developed resilience and had better outcomes” (Werner, 2005, p.12). Werner (2005) protective factors in the family focus on children who “succeeded against the odds had a better opportunity to establish a bond with at least one that was sensitive to their needs” (Werner, 2005, p.12). Werner (2005) last protective factor the community, focus on resilient children relying on elders and peers in the community for emotional support (Werner, 2005, p.12). This community extends into the school system and other positive role models. Werner (2005) study is valid and focus primary on “at-risk” students. Werner study comes from a social science perspective. However, it is important to point out that her lens is positioned within a perspective that emphasizes the individual, rather than a perspective that examines systemic disparities within institutions or in

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society as a whole. More specifically, my argument informed by Critical Race Theoretical (CRT) lens, contends that Werner's (2005) study, among others I will discuss, fails to include the racial inequities, systemic issues, and racism that African Americans face in developing positive resilience. Knowing the concept of resilience does not stop with acknowledging racism and racial inequalities. Werner (2005) hints at "locus of control" in the individual protective factor. Perceived internal locus of control has been found to indicate a resilient response in individuals coming from an individualistic mindset (Lynch, Keasler, Reaves, Channer, & Bukowski, 2007). Locus of control for children in an urban context means they feel as if they have a strong control over their lives. They hold themselves accountable. They understand that there is a way for them to escape the harsh realities of life with their own doing. CRT scholars would argue that locus of control is a mechanism adopted to cope with racism and other power structures that cause children in urban contexts to "find a way". Locus of control ignites resilience so that children are better able to handle harsh environments and a society that derails so many like them. Therefore, in the paragraphs that follow I will discuss ways to develop and increase resilience for children in an urban context.

### **Critical Race Theory Embedded in Resilience**

Critical Race Theory was conceptualized by a group of scholars who were attempting to develop an explanatory framework that accounts for the role of race and racism in education. This works towards identifying and challenging racism as part of a larger goal of identifying and challenging all forms of subordination (Solórzano, 2013, p.56). CRT launched in 1989 as a way of acknowledging and analyzing systemic inequities in society. Understanding how systematic oppression affects children of color is key in understanding resilience. While the degree of resilience needed to navigate urban contexts will vary for everyone, we must acknowledge the

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importance of racism, racial inequality, and power structure that forces Blacks to become resilient earlier in life.

Critical Race Theory 5 tenets analyze societal issues stemming from race, laws, power, policy, and education. CRT tenets summarized by Solórzano and Yosso (2002): The intercentricity of race and racism with other forms of subordination; the challenge to dominant ideology; the centrality of experiential knowledge; the commitment to social justice; and the transdisciplinary perspective. When measuring resilience, we must analyze racism, discrimination, inequality, urban context, and situatedness. “Reimagining Critical Race Theory In Education; Mental Health, Healing, And the Pathway to Liberatory Praxis”, McGee and Stovall (2015) focus on resilience. Their definition of resilience is “the innate ability to bounce back from obstacles, without properly acknowledging how structural racism breeds the racial practices, policies, and ideologies that force black students to adopt a racial mental toughness in order to pursue traditional forms of educational advancement” (McGee & Stovall, 2015, p. 492). In their article, McGee and Stovall’s (2015) question a “static” definition of resilience.

To begin, we must understand that context and site are not interchangeable words, simply put, site is the room, context is the situatedness. Therefore, we must not single out just the context, but we must explore the culture and racial differences pertaining to individuals in urban contexts. If we are to understand resilience and ways to develop and increase it, there has to be a concrete understanding that race and the development of resilience are intertwined. Throughout this paper I will explore the intricacy of race as it pertains to resilience. I will focus primarily on Werner’s Longitudinal study (2005), aiming to offer a critique. In the paragraphs that follow, I will provide critical examples of how attaining resilience is more complicated than the Werner’s study shows.

### **Racism as a Societal Disease**

As we begin to study and understand resilience, we must first acknowledge that racism is real. It is a societal disease that minorities know all too well, unfortunately. Derrick Bell, a CRT scholar, writes that racism is permanent (Bell, 1992). Bell acknowledgement shows that in order to avoid despair Blacks must implement racial strategies (Bell, 1992, p.374). We then must look at the word, *resilience*, and understand that racism and other forms of inequality urge kids in urban contexts develop resilience early, as a response. In order to fully understand resilience in more complex terms, we must look at the community, schools' systems, and families from a Critical Race Theory lens. The tenet of intercentricity of race and racism validates racism as being permanent (Solórzano and Yosso, 2002, p.25). Unfortunately, this leads us to acknowledge that being Black inevitably spurs on inequalities.

### **Defining Resilience: 3 Types**

Werner (2005) uses Suniya Luthar's (2003) definition of resilience as, "a dynamic process that leads to positive adaptation, even with a context of adversity" (Luthar, 2003). From this perspective, resilience possesses three different traits including adaptive resilience, inherent resilience, and learnt resilience. These three types of resilience are vital to understanding how resilience is internalized. Adaptive resilience can be seen as the ability to conform to any environment. Following Southwick and colleagues (2014), "when you think of young children, for example, they are products of evolution and they are very adaptive" (Southwick, Bonanno, Masten, Panter-Brick, Yehuda, 2014, p.5). This form of resilience can be observed when considering children in an urban contexts a. Inherent and adaptive resilience are closely related. Inherent resilience is the ability to function well during a non-crisis time (Tierney, Bruneau 2007, p.14). Yes, being able to overcome adversity is a big component of resilience, but we still

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have to account for times that are not traumatic. An example would be a child failing a test or losing a basketball game, which would be instances of non-crisis. Resilience however, can be measured and challenged during those times. Inherent resilience can be viewed as a snapshot or static (Kais & Islam, 2016, p. 4). The snapshot/static state depicts the current stressful state of an individual. This concept of resilience provides clarity to current adversity and its interconnection to resilience. Learned resilience happens within the household, school or community. The ability to grasp the concept of overcoming adversity has to be internalized. Resilience can be learned from an adverse experience (Southwick, et.al, 2014, p.11). In this aspect of resilience, watching family members adjust to a hard situation can be an example of learned resilience. Watching, living and experiencing adversity can teach resilience.

### **Variation of Resilience and Identification**

Variation of resilience must not be excluded from the overall conception of resilience. Resilience will look different from those in urban and high poverty areas as opposed to children living in affluent areas. Children in urban communities have to deal with harsh and unsafe environments that include poverty, violence and gang activity. These difficult circumstances can affect all children development. Furthermore, we must not overlook systemic issues, racism, social inequality and racial discrimination which creates variations of resilience. Overlooking these matters make it impossible to create a framework that is valid for all populations, especially with respect to populations experiencing systemic oppression. Therefore, when understanding resilience, we must adopt The Critical Race Theoretical framework. Resilience can shape a person's identity. We must then understand that identification is a process of marking off symbolic boundaries through embodied performances of self, that call up and draw idealized figures and cultural representations as a reference to one's rightful membership and

authenticity (Aleman, Bernal & Mendoza, 2013, p. 236). Werner's (2005) study examines "the impact of a variety of biological and psychosocial risk factors, stressful life events, and protective factors (Werner, 2005, p.11). By looking not simply at how to develop kids' resilience in the early elementary years, but also at how to recognize the ways in which children are already resilient at that early age, we help prepare children to fully explore and understand the world and to endure the pain and its joy (Ginsburg, Jablow, Mulcahy & Rembert, 2015, p.29).

Werner's (2005) identification definition tends to extract the reality for Black children, especially boys. Werner's (2005) quote was, "resilient boys tended to come from households with structure and rules, where a male served as a model of identification, and where there was encouragement of emotional expressiveness" (Werner, 2005, p.12). The word "tend" bothers me on several accords. It's inconsiderately passive. We must understand that Black males struggle to construct their own identity within a cultural framework that views the nexus of Black and male as being criminal, deviant, and problematic (Aleman, Bernal & Mendoza, 2013, p. 236). The emotional and psychological toll that Black males experience to find identity needs to be addressed aside from having a father in the household. The inability to construct an identity due to societal constraints inhibits Black males from creating a solid identity to face adversity and hardships. Researchers need to consider that efforts to disrupt Black male underperformance have fallen short in producing new knowledge and unique insights, because the approaches taken historically have fallen short incorporating, addressing, and examining the full scope of Black male identity (Howard & Flenbaugh, 2011). Therefore, we must not analyze father or fatherless males, but address societal inequities that forces and strains identity formation in males at an early age. Eliminating power structures, racism, and racial inequality will continue to disservice Black males' pursuit of identification.

## **Children Building Resilience across Urban Contexts: Addressing Systemic Racism**

The child's family, in resilience studies, seems to always be acknowledged. Part of Werner's (2005) 3 cluster protective factors claimed that in order to become resilient, one needs a relationship with a competent adult within the family (Werner, 2005, p.12). The dynamics of a number of Black families in urban contexts highly differs. Black families continue to be plagued by racism, power structures, and injustices. Families in urban settings have a much harder road to travel. Racism and racial discrimination have done everything but disappeared, and for some millions of African Americans, the problem is one of class as well as race (Edelman, 2013). No amount of education and no amount of wealth can remove the stigma of race (Rhoden, 2006). Adverse situations that are paramount to Black families force them to become resilient early. From the time Black children are able to speak, they are mentally forced to face the harsh truth that being Black makes life a bit harder. Being Black forces you to become resilient, to handle and cope with society and power structures. The exploration of understanding resilience must not stop with Werner's (2005) 3 cluster factors, at least not for Black children in an urban context. We must start and end with race in order to fully develop a framework regarding how resilience is developed, built, and internalized. Once we unlock the importance of race within the frameworks conceptualized to study resilience, then we are able to triumph accordingly over inequalities and social injustices to help understand this phenomenon.

### **School Systems Developing Resilience Despite Marginalization**

School systems are constantly scrutinized when it comes to Black student's failures. Our government tends to look at biased test scores that force teachers to continue to instruct from a privileged perspective (Nelson, 2017). We eliminate culturally responsive pedagogy and

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implement power structure pedagogy. Nevertheless, school systems are a microcosm of developing and increasing resilience. A favorable teacher was often the role model who would give children insights that aligned with how resilience is fostered in school systems (Werner, 2005, p.12). In agreement with Werner (2005), school systems are often the primary source for developing and increasing resilience. Resilience through the community comes in part through interactions with teachers and the school environment, which can be constructed to help build kids' resilience (Bondy, Ross, Galligane & Hambacher, 2007, p.330). What we must address from a CRT lens is schooling in urban contexts. The context of urban settings creates a challenging environment encompassed with issues of limited funding, more inexperienced and underqualified teachers, greater teacher turnover, and more students assigned to special classes and categorical programs (Howard & Reynolds, 2013 p. 233). This then requires for us to look at structural causes as to why children in urban contexts develop resilience. These external factors force children to become resilient early. The social injustices and inequitable are a disservice to children. Therefore, instead of having teachers teaching, they are forced to help students understand the reality of existing power structures, racism, and separatism. When students go to school to learn in urban areas, instead of an education they yearn for love and care because of inadequate resources. The problem is not the school system, the problem lies within power structures and white privilege. In order to have a chance to succeed, students in an urban context develop resilience early for future references.

### **Community Alienated by Systemic Issues**

The troubled and impoverished communities in which so many Blacks are born, provide the backdrop for hard living. Drugs, crime, and lack of quality foods are normal characteristics of daily life. African Americans are oppressed in society. Power structures and white privilege

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diminish hopes of equality. Race, prison, and poverty coincide. Unemployment controls the community, keeping adults in the same position for years and prompting their children to repeat the cycle. The implication is that neither parents nor their children have any hope of escaping poverty (Hilfiker, 2002). It takes a village (community) to raise a child has been a slogan for years. Werner's study focused on resilient youngsters and their ability to rely on elders and peers in the community for emotional support (Werner, 2005, p.12). The community is important for resilience. We learn through our interactions and communications with others (Vygotsky, 1962). The community helps develop and increase resilience through play, communication, language and cultural interactions. The ability to develop resilience weighs heavily on the community, but we must also understand the difficulties the community face.

Black people are more likely to be victimized targets of racism, discrimination, and exclusion from mainstream opportunities (Howard & Reynolds, 2013 p. 238). The community is affected by these discriminations. Elders in the community then relay this information to the younger kids. That is why they are the vessels in the communities. They are the heartbeat that continue to inform children that in order to survive in this world you will need to develop "tough skin" also known as resilience. Communities often lose their neighborhood schools or are wrongfully displaced through gentrification, eminent domain, or other state-sanctioned policies with long-term effects on these communities (Stovall, 2013 p.294). These are the issues that Blacks face that are not discussed to understand resilience. The mental capacity to overcome these issues requires resiliency. Sadly, research has by and large ignored the racial facts that are intertwined with resilience. Gentrification and school closures force elementary children to develop resilience and understand how the power structure operates at an early age. The community helps develop resilience, but the reasons why have to be acknowledged and explored

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in order to fully understand ways to develop, increase, and foster resilience. The community will always be a vessel. The community connects with neighbors who experience trauma to assist in anyway. The camaraderie in communities is vital support. Acknowledging the inequalities that Blacks in urban communities' face will help identify the development of resilience in elementary children.

### **Poverty and Stressful Life Situations**

The continuance of poverty has affected Black people for decades, and there is more to poverty than finances. Poverty includes lack of resources, education, and social capital. Poverty as a financial problem only scrapes the surface of the issue, but the dire need of resources, education and social capital will bring exposure and knowledge to enrich African American males in lower income areas with various ways to escape poverty. Structurally and systemically, poverty is hard to obviate and unfortunately, it will probably persist forever in a capitalistic society. Poverty has many facets that hinder Blacks. Racism and racial discrimination have hardly disappeared, but for millions of African Americans, the problem is one of class as well as race (Edelman, 2013). No amount of education or wealth can remove the stigma of race (Rhoden, 2006). In other words, poverty is primarily viewed as a lack of finances, and society neglects to consider racial discrimination. Racial discrimination makes it hard for Blacks to ever escape poverty as a whole. Racism is visceral. This epidemic cannot be cured. There is nothing in place that will relieve society of this ignorance. Society is tribal despite the present day, and people tend to gravitate to those who look like them. This, almost natural, behavior causes the formation of racial realism. Once formed, blacks become resilient and this is learned early because racism exists once young children are able to speak and operate socially. Poverty and racism are multi-faceted concepts, which is why resilience needs to be examined from all angles

## **The Relationship between Resilience and Racism: The Impact on Elementary-Age Children**

The development of resilience for elementary children who live in urban areas is vital. Their trajectory weighs heavily on the influences of the family, community, society and schooling. Possessing resilience helps them overcome adverse conditions (Zolkoski, Bullock, 2012, p.2295). Familiarizing oneself with a child and becoming sensitive to their experiences is important for recognizing where resilience is lacking. Elementary children with healthy relationships and internal adaptive resources are setup for a good start in life with human and social capital for success as they enter school and society (Masten & Gertwz, 2006).

Young children lack the experience that leads to solid perceptions of the surrounding world. Therefore, it almost becomes inevitable for the child to pick up on the things they see. This is not to say that adults cannot learn new things, but when we focus on teaching young children how to build resilience, it's like submerging a sponge in water. When babies are born they cannot speak, but as they grow, it only becomes natural for them to pick up on the language around them, whereas an adult would have a more difficult time learning a new language because they have already ingrained their native tongue as a way of expressing the world around them. Hopefully by teaching young children how to become resilient during their elementary years, it will become second nature by the time they reach adulthood. Such children typically manifest resilience in the face of adversity, as long as their fundamental protective skills and relationships continue to operate and develop (Masten & Gertwz, 2006). Plus, the sooner children are consciously introduced to resilience, the longer they have to become experts.

### **Strategies for Developing Resilience for Kids in an Urban Context**

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Critical Race tenets commitment to social justice rings a bell when discussing resilience. “Social justices are grounded in concrete and often messy and conflictual racial realities” (Yamamoto, 1999, p. 129). The truth behind resilience for Blacks is that it is developed through racism, racial inequalities, racial discrimination, power structures, and a slew of other racially geared facets. We must first acknowledge this, and then find multiple means to increase resilience. The development begins with structural power. Now, we must learn to increase our awareness and resilience to help elementary children overcome future adversity in society. Increasing budgets and resources at school will help increase resilience because teachers will have adequate information to supply students. Resources may come in the form of dvds, books, e-readers, and other materials that will help eliminate inadequacies and give children a chance to succeed. Teachers have to deal with external issues that hinder students from properly fostering resilience.

### **Fostering and Increasing Resilience**

Resilience is necessary, it enables us to withstand racial discrimination and racial inequalities. We will always need adults to set examples (Edelman, 2013). Adults are important in life due to experience. Parents are the most influential adults in children lives, and they have the power to mold, develop, strengthen, and increase their child’s resiliency. Fostering resilience is a great opportunity for elementary children. They are able to learn the trait, then apply it to situations. Parents however can better help with fostering resilience.

You can increase resilience with families by creating equitable jobs so that parents are able to make an income suitable enough to take care of their families and feel comfortable. Parents work-shifts have huge implications regarding how their children are raised (Heymann, 2000). Children in urban communities tend to shoulder more responsibilities than their suburban

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bound peers. These responsibilities may include looking after siblings' full time, getting dressed alone, feeding themselves, and solving household issues due to parental figures being at work instead of home. This lack of involvement is attributed to unequal pay. Less pay leads to longer hours in the workplace. If parents are able to spend less time in the workplace, then they would have a greater chance at fostering resilience. Unfortunately, for children in urban communities, that supportive adult sometimes must be found outside of the home due to racial inequalities in the workplace.

### **Conclusion**

Let's face it, Werner's study is antiquated and simplistic. In order to understand ways to improve resilience in an urban context we must entrench ourselves in the culture (situatedness). Most resilience studies focus on environmental issues and at-risk children. During lecture, Vanderbilt professor Dr. Mark Cannon exclaimed "psychologists do not look at things systemically, they focus on the social science aspects of life" (Cannon, 2018). There is a need to look at resilience from a systemic lens. Children in urban communities are living in poverty, living in single parent homes, and lack vital resources at schools due to systemic issues. What we fail to divulge is racism, social injustice, microaggression, and racial inequality that forces children to require resilience. We have to look at resilience critically. Not from the eye of the community, family, or the child, but from society and the burdens that Black people have to face when dealing with racism. The living conditions, failing schools, intertwined with racism and power structure are all tenants Blacks must face. If we want to understand resilience, unpacking and critically analyzing these factors are imperative. Therefore, Werner's framework is a mere starter. The ability to recognize the importance of family, community, and the individual identification is important to understanding the basics of resilience. This approach is simplistic

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and a tiny spark towards unpacking alternate issues surrounding children in urban context.

Racism, discrimination, and racial inequality is present. Resilience is the way that children in an urban context deal with the harsh realities of societal power structures.

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