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Indicators of Resiliency Among Urban Elementary School Students At-Risk

Abstract
This study was designed to investigate the phenomenon of resiliency among urban elementary school students in an at-risk environment. In contrast with previous studies narrowly focused upon the identification of risk factors, this study utilized a phenomenological qualitative approach to investigate indicators of resiliency from both individual and contextual perspectives. The narrative descriptions of 25 elementary school students in an at-risk environment were analyzed. The results indicated that the participants had strong individual and contextual resiliency indicators through the fifth grade despite being educated in a school district with almost a 60% drop-out rate before high school graduation.

Keywords
Resiliency, Phenomenology, Ecological Systems, and At-Risk Environment

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This study was designed to investigate the phenomenon of resiliency among urban elementary school students in an at-risk environment. In contrast with previous studies narrowly focused upon the identification of risk factors, this study utilized a phenomenological qualitative approach to investigate indicators of resiliency from both individual and contextual perspectives. The narrative descriptions of 25 elementary school students in an at-risk environment were analyzed. The results indicated that the participants had strong individual and contextual resiliency indicators through the fifth grade despite being educated in a school district with almost a 60% drop-out rate before high school graduation. Key words: Resiliency, Phenomenology, Ecological Systems, and At-Risk Environment

Introduction

Resiliency is more commonly recognized by what it is not, rather than what it is. The United States is all too familiar with the manifestations of a lack of resiliency evidenced in the large number of children at-risk for academic difficulties, maltreatment, family instability, delinquency, exposure to drug and alcohol abuse, and low socioeconomic status (Johnson, 1994). Children at educational risk have been defined as those with normal intelligence whose academic background or prior performance may cause them to be perceived as candidates for future academic failure or early withdrawal (Dryfoos, 1990). Children are particularly prone to develop at-risk characteristics in the United States since it has some of the highest rates of divorce (National Center for Educational Statistics, 1996), teenage pregnancy (National Center for Health Statistics, 2001), infants and preschool children living below the poverty line (National Center for Children and Poverty, 2001), and drug and alcohol abuse among adolescents (Harrier, Lambert, & Ramos, 2001). Low-income, urban, African American youth are disproportionately represented in many statistical indicators of poor school adjustment such as urban poverty, street crime, school drop-out rate, poor mental health outcomes, and long-term unemployment (Baker, 1998).

"Resilience is concerned with individual variations in response to risk. Some people succumb to stress and adversity whereas others overcome life hazards" (Rutter, 1987, p. 317).

Psychological resilience may be comprised of internal states of well-being or adapting well to the environment, or both (Masten, Best, & Garmezy, 1990). Children may be more likely to be resilient when "(a) they receive good and stable care from someone; (b) they are good learners and problem-solvers; (c) they are engaging to other people; and (d) they have an area of competence and perceived efficacy" (Masten et al., 1990, p.438).

The awareness of the pathological is reflected in much of the past research on risk and resiliency that focused on populations exhibiting a lack of resilience. The sources and methods used for obtaining this data typically have employed teacher or parent responses to surveys, inventories, or stress checklists developed from adult instruments (Werner & Smith, 1992). Such secondary sources and retrospective approaches have been useful for identifying risk factors. However, the complexity of resiliency demands a more holistic approach, one that includes both the contextual and individual perspectives of children themselves.

Gaining this individual perspective is the purpose of this study. By focusing on the narrative perceptions and interpretations of children in an at-risk environment, the relative individual and contextual indicators of resiliency might be identified. These first-hand perspectives are crucial to understanding this phenomenon, as the existence of resiliency must be verified through the individual's interpretations of his or her experiences. Phenomenology focuses on the investigation of human experience which is "necessary content for understanding human psychology" (Colaizzi, 1978, p. 52). A phenomenological study was chosen as this approach would most directly focus on the analysis of children's individual perspectives as a means to examine the indicators and the dynamics involved in the development of resiliency within an at-risk population. The purpose of this study was to gather the participants' perceptions of their experiences of living and going to school in an at-risk environment. The researchers attempted to interpret those related experiences to help elucidate whether there were individual and external indicators of resilience for these participants.

This study's more positive emphasis upon resiliency indicators, however, is in contrast with still enduring deficit-based models concerning risk factors. This simple, yet significant, shift in emphasis focuses more upon the processes of resiliency rather than merely upon the individual factors associated with risk. This perspective provides an investigation into more malleable indicators of resiliency rather than focusing on risk factors which may not be immediately alterable like poverty level.

Past research with children at-risk proceeded from a medical model approach that identified the symptoms of risk rather than indicators that preserved resiliency (Printz, Shermis, & Webb, 1999; Werner & Smith, 1992). Although more narrow in its focus, this original framework did provide a means of defining and identifying some of the characteristics of this multi-faceted phenomenon. These defining characteristics were initially labeled "risk factors" and characterized as adverse circumstances that increased the probability of negative developmental outcomes (Segal, 1983). Not surprisingly, these risk factors generally clustered around the domains of family, school, and community (Bernard, 1991; Onikama, 1998).

Subsequent research has served to broaden the reductionistic focus upon isolated risk mechanisms to include the "protective" factors that may contribute to adaptive outcomes in the presence of risks (Rutter, 1983). These protective factors may include a positive personality disposition, a supportive family, and external social support. Ideally, the culminating effect of these protective factors would help facilitate the development of resiliency, even within a high-risk environment.

Rutter investigated the variations in risk negotiation among individuals. This process-focused approach analyzed and contrasted the dynamic interactions among risk mechanisms and protective factors, mediated by an individual's cognitive appraisal of the situation. Rutter posited that the psychological processes for risk and protection were essentially dichotomous. The presence of potential risks may or may not pose a threat to an individual as risks are defined by an individual's appraisal of and response to them as being stressful. In some instances, these "risks" serve to stimulate a psychologically adaptive response against environmental stressors, analogous to the physical body's immunity adaptation through inoculation (Rutter, 1985). In this manner it can be understood that protection is not an isolated quality inherent within an individual, but is produced through the process of successfully dealing with adversity (Rutter, 1987). While the presence of potential risks may render one individual more vulnerable, the same "risks" may evoke a "steeling" effect in another (Rutter, 1985, 1987). It is the individual's appraisal of his or her situation that becomes the pivotal catalyst in this dynamic process (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Rutter, 1983). Rutter's ideas inspired the use of a phenomenological approach in the current study to investigate the individual child's perspective concerning the aspects in their lives that may or may not have been helping them develop resiliency.

Garmezy (1985) found environmental and individual variables that functioned as protective mechanisms. Environmental variables, such as family cohesion, absence of discord in the home, and the availability of external support systems that encouraged and reinforced children's coping efforts, served as potential protective mechanisms. Individual personality features like self-esteem could also function as protective mechanisms (Garmezy, 1985). An internal locus of control has also been shown to be related to resiliency (Luthar, 1991; Werner & Smith, 1982). However, resilience may change over time when circumstances change, so it is not necessarily a fixed attribute for an individual (Rutter, 1987). Protective factors may not be enough to provide resiliency if the levels of risk are too great.

When enmeshed in a high-risk environment, protective factors become critical in helping children survive physically, socially and academically. Competent adult parental figures, effective schools, and higher IQ scores have been found to be correlates of resilience in high risk samples in Boston (Long & Vaillant, 1984), Rochester (Baldwin, Baldwin, & Cole, 1990), and London (Rutter, Maughan, Mortimore, Ouston, & Smith, 1979). Positive school experiences have been found to compensate for less positive family situations (Rutter & Quinton, 1984). Church membership and faith in a higher power have also been related as protective factors in high-risk situations (Ianni, 1989; Pinkney, 1987; Werner, 2000).

As further research focused upon the mediating processes among potential risks, the individual, and the environment, the transition from a mechanistic model to a more contextual one was initiated. One of the most influential sources of support for such an approach exists in Urie Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1989; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). This contextual model portrays the developing individual as being embedded in a series of distinct, nested environmental systems, interacting with and being influenced by the environment (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). This model's representation of common ecological systems and the resulting reciprocal influences between the individual and the environment provides a useful framework for analyzing the dynamics of an "at-risk" environment (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998).

Labeled as microsystems, mesosystems, exosystems, macrosystems, and chronosystems, these contexts correspond to the family, school, community, and developmental clusters of risks. At the innermost level, the microsystem encompasses all the reciprocal interactions and influences occurring within an individual's immediate surroundings such as family members,

friends, as well as the individual's own biological and personality characteristics. Interconnections between the microsystem and the surrounding neighborhood, school, and peers create the mesosystem, the second level of influence surrounding the individual (Bronfenbrenner, 1989). The quality and quantity of such links serves to either increase vulnerability to, or protection from, potential risks in these areas (Bronfenbrenner, 1986).

Links between the school and the neighborhood, between the home and the parent's employment, or between the neighborhood, extended family, and the home, form the exosystem, which is the third environmental level (Bronfenbrenner, 1989). These links may not directly contain the individual, but rather, exert indirect influences upon the individual. Parental job satisfaction or job loss, school board decisions, as well as community events may either contribute or detract from a protective environment. However, positive ties with churches, synagogues and extended family members, in particular, have been found to be largely protective in nature (Pearson, Hunter, Ensminger, & Kellam, 1990; Wilson, 1989).

The overarching patterns of interaction that develop among these entities form the outermost environmental layer known as the macrosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1989). This level is characterized by the common belief systems, lifestyles, laws, and social and economic resources that form the "societal blueprint" for a particular culture or subculture (Bronfenbrenner, 1989, p. 228). These, in turn, establish the cultural mores regarding behavior, parenting styles, goals, and expectations that are passed on from one generation to the next. The resulting interaction of such influences poses either potential risks or buffers for the developing individual.

Lastly, the chronosystem represents the all-encompassing temporal component in which the ecosystem is immersed (Bronfenbrenner, 1989). This dimension accommodates the on-going, reciprocal biological, cognitive, and social developments occurring throughout the life course between the individual and the environment. Such a view portrays individuals as being both "products and producers" of such changes (Berk, 2000, p. 30). Rutter's resiliency theory also supported the view that the occurrence of these interactive processes at particularly critical developmental points may either increase or decrease their potential to evoke adaptation or vulnerability (1985).

From the convergence of resiliency theory with ecological systems theory, the profile of a resilience fostering environment emerges as one that fosters high expectations, provides caring, support, and opportunities for participation (Bernard, 1991; Werner & Smith, 1992). Furthermore, the profile of an individual existing in such a context is one manifesting resilient qualities such as social competence, autonomy, and a sense of purpose and future (Bernard, 1991).

Considering the participating school district's 59.5% drop out rate before high school graduation, studies such as one conducted by Barrington and Hendricks, which identified predictive indicators of high school dropouts with 66% to 70% accuracy as early as third grade, and 85% to 90% accuracy by ninth grade, underscore the utility and urgency of investigation at the elementary school level (1989). From a contextualized perspective of resiliency, these individual and environmental indicators of resiliency among elementary age at-risk population were investigated in this study.

The intent of this research study was to investigate the phenomenological experiences of children who lived and attended school in an at-risk environment to find what individual and environmental resiliency indicators existed in their lives. The research questions for this study included:

1. What individual indicators of resiliency exist for elementary students at-risk? For example, what personality, behavioral, problem-solving, and academic factors may indicate higher or lower levels of resiliency?
2. What external or community indicators of resiliency exist for elementary students at-risk? This might include influences from family members, school, peers, financial status, and larger decisions from local, state, and national levels that might impact the participants.
3. Are risk factors overwhelming resiliency factors for elementary students at-risk? If these participants are being exposed to many risk factors, are they succumbing to those risks or are they resisting those risks and demonstrating resilience?

Methodology

Setting and Participant Selection

This study involved a series of individual interviews and observations with 25 elementary school students in a large urban school district in the Midwest. The school district was purposely selected as it is one of the largest in the Midwest, it is centered in a large urban area, and the district has many identified risk factors present. The participating school district comprised nearly 74,000 students in 82 elementary, 23 middle, and 16 high schools. In this district, the dropout rate before high school graduation was 59.5%, student attendance was 83.9% per day, the ninth-grade proficiency test passing rate was 11.7%, 65.7%, of students were identified as economically disadvantaged, there was an average of 24 students per teacher, and per-pupil spending was approximately $8,000.00. In comparison, a wealthier suburb that served 2,000 students had a drop out rate of 2.2%, an attendance rate of 94.5%, an 83.2% ninth-grade proficiency passing rate, 1% of students were identified as economically disadvantaged, there were 12.9 students per teacher, and per-pupil spending was $13,000.00.

Permission to conduct the study was granted by the institutional review board at John Carroll University, and by the participating school district. Letters requesting permission to conduct the study were then sent to the elementary school principals in the district, and the principal from two participating schools granted access to conduct the study. Consent forms were then sent home to parents in the schools. Once parental consent was obtained, child assent was also obtained by the participants. The first author collected the data from the participants, and his role was solely as a university researcher collecting data in the schools.

The participating students were in grades 2, 4, and 5 and included 11 females, 3 in second-grade, 3 in fourth-grade, and 5 in fifth-grade. Ten were African American and 1 was European American. The 14 males were all African American with 7 in second-grade, 3 in fourth-grade, and 4 in fifth-grade. Additional information regarding the participant's school setting and family structure is included within the Results section of this study.

Data Collection

The participants were observed and interviewed over a three-month period. One to two hours of audio-taped interviews were completed with each participant during those three months. The audio taped interviews were conducted with semi-structured interview guides. The interview questions were developed from the literature review and consultation with school personnel to address the research questions. The interview questions were tested for developmental

appropriateness and confirmation of constructs in a pilot project with a sample of 10 participants from an elementary school in a different urban school district in the Midwest. The interviews were transcribed verbatim by the researchers. (See Appendix A for sample interview questions).

Part of the interview guide included two narratives to be completed or solved by the participants. One story was "The Porcupine and the Moles," a moral dilemma embedded in a fable (Johnston, 1985). Pictures of porcupines and moles were utilized as many of the participants had not seen these animals previously. The other narrative was the "New Child on the Street" (Brown & Gilligan, 1992). These narratives were selected to investigate the repertoire of responses the children might give in a problem-solving situation rather than as an assessment of moral development (See Appendix B for narratives). The goal of using the narratives was to investigate whether the participants' responses to the narratives might provide some insight into potential indicators of resiliency by considering the types of answers they provided.

The participants were also observed at different times in a variety of settings such as in the classroom, in informal social situations with peers and teachers, and in recreational activities. A semi-structured observation guide was utilized to record the observations. The first observations focused on the physical aspects of the schools. In subsequent observations, the researcher observed each participant individually for at least one entire school day. The goal was to observe the participants' learning strategies, social interaction, behavior, and play. The interviews were considered the primary data sources in this study, but the observations provided a means of triangulation to assess whether the participants' activity in school matched their interview information.

Data Analysis

A phenomenological method was used in analyzing the interview and observation data (Colaizzi, 1978; Moustakas, 1994). The interviews and field notes were transcribed verbatim by the researchers. To increase the consistency of the analysis (Constas, 1992), each researcher independently read through all of the interview transcripts and field notes and selected significant statements, phrases, or actions directly from the interviews or field notes that related to the research questions. The researchers then met to discuss the significant data they had selected from the interviews and field notes. Each selected piece of data was then examined to try to interpret the participant's meaning by evaluating the statement as it related to the remainder of the interview and observation data. The researchers then independently analyzed the significant data and the meanings discussed to form themes that comprised similar types of statements and meanings. Then the researchers met again to discuss the themes they had developed. The themes were examined across the participants' interviews and observations to examine both common and unique experiences.

The analysis strategy included having the researchers independently review the data for significant statements and themes, and then meet to discuss what information they found that was similar and different. This process was intended to develop a technical means for verification similar to inter-rater reliability (Constas, 1992). The goal was to come to agreement on the data and themes that best represented the participants' experiences as they related to the research questions, and to make the analysis process as public as possible (Anfara, Brown, & Mangione, 2002).

Once the themes were developed, member checking was attempted with the participants by summarizing the main themes and the participants' interview data to see if the results matched the participants' experiences. However, all of the participants agreed with the information presented. The researchers felt the participants' agreement was either an attempt to

please the researchers, or that the participants did not understand the task. To attempt to confirm the analysis, the researchers returned to the original transcripts and field notes to examine if any of the developed themes were not represented in the participants' data, or if significant aspects of the data were not represented in the themes. The researchers found that the themes were supported by the original data.

During the final phase of analysis, the researchers collaborated on creating an exhaustive description of the corresponding resiliency indicators that were related by the participants. The themes that were developed across the participants' data sources included impacts on resiliency from personal influences such as self-concept, future expectations, problem solving, and social competence. The participants also related impacts from family, school, church, and the larger community. The themes were developed after the data was collected, and the origin of the theme names came from the participants' data and the researchers' interpretation of that data (Constas, 1992). The exhaustive description of the impacts on resiliency developed by the researchers seemed to fit well with an ecological systems model (Bronfenbrenner, 1989). The intent of phenomenology is to focus on the participants' experiences, and in this case, the participants' related their experiences in a manner that reflected an established theory. Constas referred to the referential strategy of category verification as one that "utilizes existing research findings or theoretical arguments to justify, through corroboration, the use of particular categories" (1992, p. 260). The individual and contextual indicators related by the participants are reported in relation to the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem levels of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems model (1989). We were not intentionally trying to fit the data to the theory, or to test the theory, but the research and interview questions probably did lend themselves to interview answers that reflected aspects of the theory.

Results

Microsystem

One of the participating elementary schools was located in a 90 year old building that had formerly been a high school, and the other was a 60 year old elementary school. The majority of the students walked to both schools, which were located near many boarded-up or gated store fronts in the area, and groups of adolescents or young adults gathered at several street corners. The city police department statistics showed that the area had some of the highest numbers of arrests for gang and drug activity in the city.

Within both schools, there were not enough books in the schools for each child to take home a book for homework assignments, so the teachers usually wrote out problems on the board for students to copy and complete at home. Each library had three computers for student use, and only two classrooms had computers in them that the teachers had brought in from their own homes.

Given this high-risk setting, however, the children's narrative descriptions of their daily routines reflected what might be related by elementary students in other settings. These accounts generally reflected lifestyles structured around family and school activities and responsibilities, as well as with neighborhood friends. At the microsystem level, the children's personal influences such as self-concept, future goals, problem solving ability, and social competence were examined as well as aspects of family influences on resiliency.

Personal Influences

Self-concept

Most of the participants' descriptions of themselves, like this fifth-grade boy, "I'm a nice person, nice eyes, and I do my work all the time," reflected generally positive self-concepts. Some answers such as this one from another fifth-grade boy, "You gotta respect somebody. If you respect somebody else, they'll respect you," and "Oh, like have to be kind, wanna do things to help, and have to have self-esteem," reflected information that they may have heard from a teacher or family member. A few descriptions indicated poor self-concepts, as the following statement from a fifth-grade girl who was asked to describe something she felt was unfair, "When they call me names just because I'm a different color than the class. Cause this boy; he called me a white seal. He called me a white whore. It makes me feel sad." During the observations, this student did seem to be isolated in the classroom as she sat by herself and other students rarely interacted with her.

Future expectations

With few exceptions, celebrities and professional athletes were identified as role models. During observations of physical education class, the students often made comments like "Here comes Michael Jordan". A few exceptions included a student who mentioned an auntie who was a nurse and another cited her teacher. While many of the boys' responses indicated a desire to become professional athletes, other goals were mentioned as well such as becoming an architect, a lawyer, and a job "like my father, with chemicals and stuff." Career goals mentioned by girls included wanting to become a teacher, a singer "like Mariah Carey", a psychiatrist, a nurse, and a doctor. One fifth-grade girl described her plan to become a pediatrician in the following passage:

> I want to be a pediatrician. I used to help out my cousin with her two babies. So that's why I think my life is to be a pediatrician. I'm going to go to school for the whole thing, going to be a doctor. Then work my way to be a pediatrician.

Problem solving

The interview guide included two narratives to be completed or solved by the participants. One story was "The Porcupine and the Moles," a moral dilemma embedded in a fable (Johnston, 1985). The other narrative was the "New Child on the Street" (Brown & Gilligan, 1992). These narratives were designed to investigate the repertoire of responses the children might give in a problem-solving situation rather than as an assessment of moral development (See Appendix B for narratives).

The majority of the participants provided advanced solutions to the porcupine dilemma. One second-grade boy recommended that "they (the porcupine and the moles) should find a bigger cave." When asked how he personally solved problems, he stated, "By voting." A fourth-grade girl decided splitting the house would be best, "They could divide the house in two parts. Like one part could be for the porcupine and the other part could be for the moles."

The porcupine and the moles dilemma proved to be analogous to real life situations for some of the participants. During an observation at lunchtime, a fifth grade boy was talking about two cousins that were going to move in with his family. When the researcher asked how this might impact his family, he stated that they would make room. He related that another cousin had lived with the family for a few months during the previous year.

"The New Child on the Street" dilemma provided a realistic situation the children may have encountered in their lives. The participants' responses to the questions represented both problem-solving strategies and decision-making strategies about what friendship meant to them. When asked if he would play with the new child, one second-grade boy replied, "Yeah, I would like to meet him." When asked how he would make friends with the new child, the same boy answered, "Shake his hand and play with him. I would tell him [the other friend] there is nothing to be afraid of." Other resolutions to the dilemma included the following from a fifth-grade boy:

> I'd just invite him onto my porch and I'd tell my friends to come here and meet him. And they'd play if they want to. Then politely say, come on. And if they say no, I say, I'll be right back, I gotta go tell my friends something. And they let him play.

A fifth-grade girl suggested the following solution:

> I go over there and ask her what her name is and I tell her my name and then, I'll start playing with her and start talking about how I feel to have a new friend in the neighborhood.

Social competence

Social competence was defined as the children's ability to understand and relate aspects of their lives in a realistic manner. A second-grade boy explained why he wanted to become a police officer, "Because I don't want bad people to steal things." When another second-grade boy was asked to describe a gang, he responded, "A whole bunch of people with guns and knives." A fifth-grade boy related how he felt about gangs, "It's just sad."

During the classroom observations, one of the fourth-grade classes was discussing the Oklahoma City bombing and the Timothy McVeigh trial. One of the girls talked about this in her interview:

> I thought it was sad. Timothy McVeigh, he did the bombing. He was in jail, but I think he went to the crazy house because he blew up about 100 kids in Oklahoma City. I think he died.

Many of the participants displayed the ability for empathy in their interview responses. A second-grade boy related his desire to share because the school did not have enough books, "If they don't have a book, I would share with them." When asked what he would do if he could do anything in the world, a fifth-grade boy answered, "Get the homeless people some homes." Another fifth-grade boy described his definition of love, "To like them a lot and like if they get hurt, you'll start crying 'cuz that's someone you love." When asked what it meant to be a good friend, a fifth-grade girl replied, "Like when my friend gets in trouble, then she will walk home and I will walk home with her. Or maybe I can give her some advice or something, or help."

Family Influences

Family structure

In this study, 12 participants lived with a mother, father or stepfather, siblings, and extended family members. Seven participants lived with single mothers who had at least one other adult in the home such as a grandmother, aunt, or uncle. Six participants had single mothers with no other adults in the home. Twelve total participants lived with extended family members. Such a blended family composition was illustrated by a second-grader's list of family members living in or near her home, "My mother, my grandmother, my two brothers, and my one sister, and my grandfather live downstairs, and my aunt live around the corner." Also affecting family structure, the impacts of divorce were evident in a few interviews, as a second-grade girl related:

> because my daddy, my sister's father, he wanted a divorce and then we had to go out of the house so my mommy, she had to go find some boxes so we can get our clothes together.

Among children's references to family conflict experiences were issues of bereavement, fighting among family members, having a father in jail, and a sibling in a group home. In contrast with these, the following narratives typify the majority of the participants who described warm, loving, and trusting relationships with family members:

> Interviewer: What makes a family?
> [Fifth-grade boy] A family is a group of people who really love each other. And who, like, does things with each other and backs themselves up.
> Interviewer: What makes you happy?
> My mother and my family. Being with my family.
> Interviewer: Who do you trust?
> [Fifth-grade girl] I trust my family. My mom and dad.
> Interviewer: Do you like having friends? Is that important?
> [Fourth-grade girl] Not as important as my mom and dad.

Family activities and responsibilities

The participants described family activities that might be found in any regularly functioning family. At the time of the interviews, the participants seemed to be identified with their family units. The following excerpts represent a sample of the comments made concerning special, or just everyday, events that they enjoyed with their families:

> [Second-grade girl] We play games like hopscotch and play with my Barbie doll and my toys. Then we play Monopoly and then I win it since I ask my mom to win it, and then my sister, she like to play with us too.
> [Fourth-grade girl] We go to the park or something, we go out to eat, or we go to the playground, or we go to the beach, or the lake, to the store together, we just do everything together.

> [Another fourth-grade girl] On Sundays she cook special meals and I help her. I ask can I help her and she say, yeah. And I ask her when we finish eating can we go to the park on Sunday, every Sunday because Sunday is a special day and she say, yeah.
> [Fourth-grade boy] Me and my brother take out the garbage.
> [Fifth-grade boy] Play football, clean up my room, and play sports, all kinds of sports.
> [Second-grade girl] Help her cook. I wash dishes with her and I clean the pots with her, and I clean up her room with her, and I stack her shoes with her.

Mesosystem

School Transitions

One of the negative risk factors experienced by most of the participants was having attended many different schools already in their young lives. Some of their families moved often, and the school system had been re-zoning which schools children would attend because some schools had been closed due to financial or physical structure concerns. When asked if this was the only school he had gone to, a second-grade boy answered, "I went to three different schools." When asked how many schools he had attended, a fifth-grade boy reported, "I think around five or six." A fifth-grade girl stated, "I had to transfer to five schools in one whole school year." She later described how difficult making this many transitions was for her:

> It bothers me because, first when I came from [an East Coast school], I didn't know anybody at my first school here. I was mad because I left all my friends back there. It was hard for me here because I had to go through fights too. Because the other girls said this and that, and then she wanted to fight with me. And then, a couple days later, then her and her friends came and jumped me. Then I was at the third school, it was hard for me because I didn't know anybody. Same thing, but I only got into one fight because the girls keep coming to me, hitting on me.

On the first day of observations, about four weeks into the semester, the first author sat waiting to speak to a principal in the main office area. During about a 30 minute period, four new students came in to register with a parent or guardian, and two students were being checked out to transfer to a different school. When asked about this, the principal responded, “It’s like this every day. I don’t know how the teachers cope. You never know how long they’ll be here, or what they know. You just have to keep going.”

Identification with Academics

In spite of the school transitions and other negative school environmental influences that were observed such as aging school buildings, a lack of computers and sufficient textbooks, and a location in the middle of a great deal of drug and activity, the participants generally expressed a positive identification with school. The following collection of statements seemed to illustrate a positive identification with school related achievement goals, as well as persistence:

> [Fifth-grade boy] um, sometimes you got to study when you really don’t want to study. I try to work the best way I can. Find out how to do it.

> [Second-grade girl] Because I get to learn and if you don't go to school, then you can't be whatever you want to be when you grow up.
> [Fifth-grade boy] When I was in the second or third-grade, I tried to work really hard to get on the honor roll, and I got it for that marking period.

The following statements indicate plans for completing high school as well as aspirations for college:

> [Fifth-grade boy] Then [when] school start I go to middle school. Like today school was out, then I go to the ninth, then I go to high school, go to twelfth-grade, then I'm going to college.
> [Fifth-grade girl] And I was saying, maybe if I can get my grades up, all I had S's on one side and C's on the other side. Maybe I was saying, if I can keep my grades to an A/B average, then I work myself up to getting a scholarship to college.

The classroom observations appeared to confirm the participants' current identification with academics. Documents were examined such as the participants' attendance, homework, grades, and behavioral records. None of these documents indicated significant risks for at least 24 of the participants. During classroom observations, most of the participants were engaged in the lessons and participated in large group and small group activities. One notable exception was a fifth grade male participant who had been suspended during the previous year for fighting with a classmate. He also had the lowest grades in the sample. However, his teacher related that she felt he had the ability to do the work in the class. He also related a strong connection with family members during the interview.

Home and School Links

Descriptions of family interest in and encouragement for school work indicated the existence of links between the family and school. When students were asked what family members said at home regarding school, responses such as this one from a second-grade boy seemed to verify such supportive links, "That school is important. If you stay in school you can get an education." A fifth-grade girl described this supportive atmosphere in the following:

> When I come home, everyday my mother ask me what I been doing in school and tell her what we been learning on, at home, and what we been studying. And then she'll tell me to get to my homework, and I'll do my homework, and she checks it just like she's a regular teacher.

Documents examined from the schools' parent-teacher organization claimed a 70% parental involvement rate for the elementary schools in this study. That percentage included a variety of levels of involvement from being actively engaged in the parent-teacher organization, to volunteering as a tutor, to attending parent-teacher conferences. The district did appear to be seeking more involvement from parents and the community. During the study, parents were observed to be infrequently volunteering in kindergarten and first grade classrooms. However, parents were rarely observed being involved in the second through fifth grades during this study.

Home and Friendship Links

Many of the younger students typically defined "friends" in regard to proximity and common activities. The list of activities engaged in was quite typical and included events such as riding bikes, playing video games, sports, and talking on the phone. A fourth-grade girl described the details of such activities in the following statement:

> My friends, they nice, and when we ask can we go over their house, they say yeah. And ask my mother and their parents and they say yeah. And we play games. We play Barbie the last time it was my cousin's birthday. We used to spend the night over her house and play video games. The boys played the video games, and after them, we play the video games, and we play Barbie.

Some of these same students also identified a "best" friend as this second-grade boy's description, "Um, the best friend, he true to you and the friend sometimes will be true, but the best friend he'll be true the longest." When asked what he thought it takes to be a good friend, a fifth-grade boy's description reveals an understanding of a meaningful friendship: "Takes good friendship. If, you know, we have a problem you can ask 'em about the problem and you can talk about it."

Exosystem

Links with extended family members are generally considered as a part of the exosystem level. Nearly half of the participants lived in this type of family situation, with an extended family member frequently providing child care assistance. However, many participants also gave accounts of traveling and taking vacations to visit relatives in other cities and states, as a fifth grade girl explained, "We go out to the country, we go to West Virginia sometimes to visit my step-auntie, we go almost everywhere."

Religious Influences

Links between a church and home seemed quite important for the participants. Most of them reported attending church every week with family members. This activity may have helped strengthen family ties, assist personal development for the participants, and as one related, even helped her learn to read:

> Interviewer: How often do you go to church?
> [Second-grade boy] Every Sunday.
> [Fifth-grade boy] It taught me that there is a God. And never say you can't do it, and who loves you.
> Interviewer: Who loves you?
> My mother, my father, my grandmother, the Lord, and my family.
> [Second-grade boy] I learned that if you come to church every day, God will bless you.
> Interviewer: What do you do at church? What kinds of things happen at church?
> [Second-grade girl] Well, they have lots of stuff. And I like church because they tell me about God and I like that because if I don't know about God, then I be bad and I know

about the Devil. And that wouldn't be good because God is good. Devil, he bad. Devil like bad. God like good. And Devil like ugly and God like pretty.

[Fourth-grade girl] You get to, it's fun. You get to take a book to church and you get write the stuff down, then when you get home, you can read the stuff. Then, you can sing or pray or something.

[Fifth-grade girl] Taught me about the books of the Bible. And how to read.

Work and Home Links

A variety of occupations was represented among the participants' families. Examples included a postal employee, mechanic, school bus driver, nurse, chemical worker, housekeeper, food service employee and small business owner. One participant mentioned his mother having two jobs, and none stated their families were surviving solely on public assistance. However, 98% of the students in the school qualified for free or reduced lunches. So despite at least one adult having a full-time job, most of the students were still living below the poverty level. One of the principals related that in several families, one person's job might be supporting immediate and extended family members.

Macrosystem

The children's narratives represent the values and goals of most healthy families by displaying strong work ethics, support of educational goals, and generally organized lifestyles. The macrosystem helps establish the cultural mores regarding behavior, parenting styles, goals, and expectations that are passed on from one generation to the next. The resulting interaction of such influences poses either potential risks or buffers for the developing individual. Larger economic, cultural, racial, and political forces were also impacting the participants and their families. Changes at this level need to be made for this school district to survive, and to ensure the continued resiliency of these participants. The nature of such change is beyond the focus of this paper which has tried to capture the point of view of children within this community.

Chronosystem

A longitudinal study extending beyond the scope of the present one would most appropriately assess the presence and stability of resiliency indicators within this dimension. Nonetheless, precedents established by longitudinal studies such as those conducted by Werner & Smith (1982, 1992) support the existence of critical transitional points of the life cycle which may significantly impact an individual's vulnerability to adversity. Examples of such critical points would be the onset of adolescence and the transition to adulthood (Balk, 1995; Berk, 2000; Santrock, 1995, Werner & Smith, 1992). Future research should focus on youth at the middle school or junior high level. If students are still resilient during elementary school, but the high school drop out rate is staggering, there must be tremendous changes occurring between those two points. The goal would be to find ways to maintain the resiliency of these elementary students throughout their lives.

Discussion

Based upon resiliency theory and ecological systems theory, the narratives contained within this study appeared to confirm the existence of individual and environmental indicators of resiliency. The first hand insights gathered and analyzed during this phenomenological study seemed to not only validate, but also humanize, the resiliency phenomenon. The focus in this study upon the more positive resiliency indicators, rather than risk factors, captured salient information regarding the existence of resiliency within a high-risk environment.

In previous research, essential indicators of resiliency have included caring and supportive relationships, high expectations, and opportunities for meaningful participation in school and home life (Bernard, 1991; Werner & Smith, 1992). This study seems to reflect and expand those previous findings. Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory appeared to be a good model to help relate the participants' experiences. The participants related many positive personal influences such as positive self-concepts, high academic and career expectations, advanced problem solving, and social competence. Several positive influences from the environment also supported resiliency like healthy home lives, strong home and school links, connections with a church, and positive family role models in terms of occupations.

Limitations

The results from the study are limited in their generalizability due to the smaller sample size from one urban school district. However, in qualitative research the goal is to generalize to other locations and situations that are similar to the purposive sample chosen in the study (Seale, 1999). Another limitation was not visiting the participants' homes to observe their level of resiliency in another setting, or to interview the parents to provide further triangulation. This was considered, but the intent of this study was to gather the participants' personal experiences as previous research has often gathered data concerning children from the adults in their lives. Another limitation was that the larger layers of Bronfenbrenner's theory, the Macrosystem and Chronosystem, were not strongly represented in the participants' data. These levels require further information from larger societal impacts or longitudinal studies that was not gathered during this study. The researchers see these as critical elements in the study of resiliency that should be addressed more in depth in future research.

Future Research

Although indications of resiliency are evident at this point in the participant's lives, predictions concerning its continued development are bleak, particularly in the absence of support in the chronosystem. As life's adversities, further magnified within an at-risk environment, collide with adolescent identity development and idealism, the likelihood of sustaining high expectations for the future decreases without adequate support. As these participants become increasingly aware of the disparity between their future academic or celebrity aspirations, and the existent opportunities to fulfill them, the maintenance of their current levels of resiliency seems unlikely without supportive intervention. This study addresses this urgent need for such supportive preventative interventions aimed at building upon existent resilience.

Future research needs to be conducted with students at the middle school or junior high level, as well as high school, concerning resiliency and risk. A larger scale longitudinal study

would provide much needed information to find what indicators of resiliency remain in place or are strengthened over time, and which indicators of resiliency may start to diminish with the increasing risks encountered during adolescence. Interventions need to continue to be investigated to find what types of support and services may help families, schools, and the children themselves maintain resiliency beyond elementary school into the adolescent and adult years.

Conclusion

Overcoming adversity is a normal, and in some respects, healthy, part of human development. However, struggling against adversity while encumbered by the additional stresses of living in an at-risk environment greatly compounds the dilemma. This study has shown that resiliency indicators existed in the lives of these participants up through fifth grade, but how long will those indicators persist? Resiliency resonates in these children's current narratives, and now there must be support from educators, parents, the community, and the nation to help maintain that resiliency.

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Appendix A

Sample Interview Questions

1. How many schools have you been to?
2. If I was a new person in your school, what should I know about the other kids here?
3. What should I know about the teachers?
4. Do you like to read?
5. What types of stories do you like to read?
6. Tell me about your group of friends.
7. What do you like about them?
8. How did you get to know them?
9. How long do you think you will remain friends?
10. Do you think anything could end these friendships?
11. What do you think your friends like about you?
12. What do you do really well in school?
13. What types of things are difficult for you in school?
14. When you have trouble doing something, either school work or other things, what do you do?
15. Tell me about a time when you worked really hard to do something and you were successful?
16. How did you feel about that?
17. Why did you do well?
18. What is your favorite subject/activity in school?
19. What is your least favorite subject?
20. How would you describe yourself to someone who cannot see you, like over the phone or in a letter?

21. What would you like to do in your life when you get older? Why?
22. What do you need to do to reach your goal?
23. Is there something right now you are looking forward to that will happen soon?
24. What do you think will change when this happens?
25. When was the last time someone helped you with your school work?
26. How did you feel when this person helped you?
27. Have you helped other kids with their school work?
28. Do your family members talk to you about school?
29. Who influences your decisions?
30. What would you do if another child wanted to do something you knew was not right to do?
31. Tell me about a time when something happened to you that you thought was unfair?
32. Why was it unfair?
33. What do you think should have happened in that unfair situation?
34. What does it mean to make a mistake?
35. Who decides if things you do are a mistake?
36. How do other people react when you make a mistake?
37. What makes you feel frightened?
38. What do you do when you are frightened?
39. What makes you angry?
40. What do you do when you are angry?
41. What makes you feel frustrated?
42. What do you do when you are frustrated?
43. What makes you feel happy?
44. What does it mean to you to feel safe?
45. Do you feel safe at school?
46. Do you trust your friends?
47. How do you know when you can trust someone?
48. Who do you trust the most?
49. How far do you think you will get in school? Do you think you will graduate from high school? Do you think you will go to college?
40. Can you think of anything that might interfere with you graduating from high school or going to college? How might you get past that?

Appendix B

The Porcupine and the Moles

It was growing cold, and a porcupine was looking for a home. He found a most desirable cave but saw it was occupied by a family of moles.

"Would you mind if I shared your home for the winter?" The porcupine asked the moles.

The generous moles said yes and the porcupine moved in. But the cave was small and every time the moles moved around, they were scratched by the porcupine's sharp quills. The moles put up with this as long as they could. Then at last they go up enough courage to tell the porcupine, "Would you please leave, and let us have our cave to ourselves again."

"Oh no!" said the porcupine, "I like this place very well."

[Questions were then asked such as: "How do you think the story should end?"; "How should they solve their problem?"; "What would you do in this situation?"]

The New Child on the Street

Two friends were playing one afternoon. They heard that some new people were moving into the neighborhood and they hoped the family would have a child, and sure enough they did. After school they saw a child their age standing alone. "Hey," they called to the kid, "Want to come over and play with us?" So the new kid came and played for a while. After he left the first child said, "I don't like that new kid at all." But the other child said, "I thought he was nice." [Questions were then asked such as "How do you think the story should end?"; "Why do you think one of the friends did not like the new kid?"; "If you wanted to play with the new kid, and your friend did not, what would you do?"]

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