

2016

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## Recommended Citation

Williamson, Alexis and Witzel, Bradley Steven (2016) "Instilling Resilience in Children of Poverty," *The Winthrop McNair Research Bulletin*: Vol. 2, Article 13.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.winthrop.edu/wmrb/vol2/iss1/13>

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# Instilling Resilience in Children of Poverty

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## ABSTRACT

More than sixteen million children are currently living in poverty in the United States (NCCP, 2015). If these children fail to develop resilience, then they will continue to live in the cycle of generational poverty. Generational poverty is where a family continues to live in poverty from generation to generation. In order to develop resilience, strategies must be implemented within schools in order to nurture resilience in children. This research study focused on resiliency and instilling resiliency in children living in poverty. Knowledge from administrators, teachers, and parents was gathered in order to create strategies to instill resilience in children of poverty. Administrators, teachers, and parents that participated in this study were individuals from Title I schools. Title I schools are schools where at least 50% of the school is on free/reduced lunch. In order for a student to be placed on free/reduced lunch, the family must be making a low enough income and considered to be living in poverty. Literature on resilience was used in order to support the ideas of educational personnel and parents. Concepts found in both interviews and literature was combined in order to form strategies that can be implemented inside of a classroom. Four strategies were created using concepts found in the study.

## INTRODUCTION

Child poverty is a global issue (McKinney, 2014). As of right now, almost half of the 2.2 billion children that live in the world are living in poverty. (CLASP). The United States ranks among the worst developed nations in the world with almost 22 percent of children living in poverty (NCCP, 2015). “There are nearly 24 million young children under age 6 years in the United States” (NCCP, 2015), while more than 24 million children aged 6 through 11 are currently living in poverty. Poverty is defined as lacking material needs, such as the food, fuel, healthcare, clothing, housing, and resources, due to low income (McKinney, 2014). Thus, a child living in poverty lacks some of the most essential needs to survive and thrive. Numerically, poverty is when a family household income is below 100% of the Federal Poverty Threshold (NCCP, 2015). The Federal Poverty Threshold is currently set at \$16,057 for a family of two, and it goes up to \$23,624 for a family of four (NCCP, 2015). Child poverty is linked to poor performance in both school and work for children and adults (CLASP, 2013). If a child grows up in poverty, then the odds of that child becoming successful is quite slim.

In many families, poverty is generational. Generational poverty is where families continue to live in poverty through the years or through generations. Children who are living in poverty now will continue living in poverty in the next generation. In order to stop the cycle and prevent the continuation of living in poverty, it is important that children develop resilience at a young age. Developing resilience at a young age will enable children to carry on that resilience throughout the rest of their lives. Overall, resilience is the ability to overcome adversity that one person may face in his or her life. Resiliency could be compared to sports. If an athlete is injured during the game, that athlete will have to undergo procedures and rehabilitation. Before the athlete is allowed to return back to the game, he or she must prove his or her capabilities. The athlete’s determination and perseverance to working hard in order to get back in the game is resilience. Even though the athlete was halted due to an injury, he or she pushed through the adversity in order to keep performing in the game. This current investigation will analyze how to instill academic resilience in children of poverty at the elementary level. Administrators,

teachers, and parents are people that influence a child's life. The purpose of this investigation will determine how administrators, teachers, and parents are currently instilling resilience in children so that a framework may be set to help educators and families alike. From this framework, a series of strategies will be realized that could be used by administrators, teachers, and parents in order to help instill resilience in children of poverty.

#### *Resilience*

Resilience is a topic that has been mentioned multiple times in social science literature. Resilience will be a key to help children of poverty break the cycle that they were already born in. The definition of resilience has changed over the years, and there is no consensus on an operational definition (Herrman, 2011). However, resilience has supportive research and common similarities are found between definitions. One definition of resilience, as stated by Herrman (2011), is "the positive adaptation, or the ability to maintain or regain mental health, despite experiencing adversity" (p. 258). Different types of adversities include, deficient parenting, poverty, homelessness, traumatic events, natural disasters, violence, war, and physical illness (Herrman, 2011). Poverty is defined as an adversity or as a risk factor (Masten, 2001). Risk factors are "predictors of undesirable outcomes drawn from evidence that this status or condition is statistically associated with higher probability of a 'bad' outcome in the future" (Masten, 2001, p. 228) Children who are living in poverty are facing an adversity at such a young age. However, developing resilience will be a key for children living in this situation to adapt to their circumstances. Herrman stated (2011), "Mastery of relatively minor adversity by children is important for developing resilience to later challenges." (p.259). By instilling resilience at a young age, children will be able to use the resilience later when they are faced with more obstacles. Another definition of resilience, as stated by Trevino and DeFritas (2013), is "persisting and demonstrating strong effort towards their academic goals despite barriers such as limited finances." (p. 300). Unlike Herrman's definition, Trevino and DeFritas'

definition focuses on the academic aspect of resiliency. Trevino and DeFritas define resilience as having the ability to obtain academic achievement regardless of the financial situation. Masten (2001) defines resiliency as "A class of phenomena characterized by good outcomes in spite of serious threats to adaptation or development" (p. 228). Each of these definitions focuses on a person's ability to persevere through negative circumstances. In this study, the definition of resilience by Trevino and DeFritas will be used.

#### *Intrinsic Motivation*

One's persistence and efforts are motivated by several potential sources (Witzel & Mercer, 2003). Two common categories of motivation are extrinsic and intrinsic. Intrinsic motivation occurs when someone develops internally satisfying consequences during or after the behavior, such as task completion, feedback or result, acquisition of knowledge or skills, and a sense of mastery. Extrinsic motivation takes place when someone develops satisfying consequences outside of the person such as tangible objects, token systems, and social approval. Often times when resilience is discussed, the topic of intrinsic motivation is mentioned. Intrinsic motivation is the drive that students have intrinsically to succeed. Intrinsic motivation is the passion that students have in order to be successful. In order to be resilient, one must be intrinsically motivated. It has been shown that a relationship exists between intrinsic motivation and achievement outcomes (Trevino & DeFreitas, 2013). If a child develops intrinsic motivation, then the child will experience a positive academic correlation. By seeing positive academic outcomes, children will slowly start to develop resilience. The self-determination theory is often related back to intrinsic motivation. The self-determination theory "explains the ideas of motivation including what causes motivation to manifest, what increases motivation, and what decreases motivation." (Trevino & DeFreitas, 2013, p. 294). The self-determination theory helps understand how to create intrinsic motivation and increase it within students. Intrinsic motivation requires nurturing or undermining positive potential within individuals (Ryan and

Deci, 2000). Intrinsic motivation is needed for resilience, but extrinsic motivation is not. Extrinsic motivation has been proven to negatively affect students and their development of resilience. Extrinsic motivation is the use of external rewards to encourage motivated or positive behavior. It often uses wealth, fame, popularity, and other tangible rewards (Trevino & DeFreitas, 2013). Students who depend on extrinsic motivation show less interest and less persistence in their academics. With intrinsic motivation, students showed more interest and value in what they were learning. Intrinsic motivation is critical for the development of resilience in students.

#### *Racial Identity and Racial Climate*

The racial identities of students and the racial climate of the school are both factors of developing resilience in students. Students who identify positively with their race or their race's historical background, have shown positive values and achievement (Byrd & Chavous, 2011). When students associate with the negative stigmas related back to their racial group, then the students will perform poorly. The negative stigmas will act as a barrier for the students. However, if students are shown the positive qualities of their racial group, the students will become more motivated to succeed. This leads back to intrinsic motivation. A positive racial identity leads to positive academic achievement. Racial climate also influences the development of resilience in students. A school's racial climate or even a classroom's racial climate affects student's intrinsic motivation. If a racial group is ignored or not acknowledged in a school or classroom, then students will not be motivated to succeed (Byrd & Chavous, 2011). If a racial group is acknowledged in the school or classroom, then positive academic achievement can be expected. If a racial group is shown as important in the classroom or in the school, the students of that racial group will feel more motivated to excel in their studies (Byrd & Chavous, 2011). Most students who are in poverty are of the African American and Hispanic race. In 2012, 37.5 percent of children in poverty were African American while 33 percent were Hispanic (CLASP, 2013). In order to instill resilience, it is

essential to consider racial identity and racial climate essential.

### **CURRENT STUDY**

The current study will be focusing on how to instill resilience in children of poverty. Resilience will enable children of poverty to go beyond their circumstances and possibly break the cycle of poverty. The most influential people in a child's life are their teachers, parents, and administrators. This study will gain knowledge from administrators, teachers, and parents of children who attend Title I schools in the Rock Hill area. Title I schools are schools where over 40 percent of children who are attending the school are on free and reduced lunch. Knowledge will be gained from the essential people in the children's lives to see what is already being done to help instill resilience, and what else needs to be done to help develop resilience. Responses gained from the subjects were compared to what has already been found in the literature to determine supportive strategies that could be used to instill resilience. The practical strategies that will be created at the end of this study could be used in schools and at home. By developing strategies that could be used at home and in school, these could help bridge the gap between school life and home life. Creating these strategies to develop resilience might be able to break the cycle of generational poverty. Over 2.2 billion children are living in poverty currently (CLASP, 2013), which means that these children will become adults in poverty. The children who are living in poverty are destined to continue living in poverty as adults unless resilience is instilled in children now. Resilience is a key to giving children of poverty a successful and productive life.

### **METHODS**

#### *Statement of Problem*

The statistics of the amount of children living in poverty is saddening. In the U.S alone, over 16 million children are living in poverty (CLASP, 2013). That is almost 22 percent of the children population living in the U.S. Poverty is an adversity that influences a child's outcome.

“Research shows poverty is a strong predictor of children’s success in school and adult employment and earning” (CLASP, 2013). If intervention is not implemented in these children at a young age, then these children will continue to live in poverty even as adults. In order to break the cycle of generational poverty, resilience must be instilled in order to motivate children to exceed beyond their circumstances.

#### *Research Question*

This investigation focused on how to instill resilience in children of poverty. This study took expert knowledge from the individuals who work with children of poverty on a daily basis. Administrators, teachers, and parents are the three most influential people in a child’s life. The goal was to create strategies that could be used by gaining knowledge from individuals on what they are currently doing to implement resilience, and comparing it to the literature that is already on resilience.

#### *Study Design*

This study is considered a pre-experimental design. As a pre-experimental design it investigates the conditions that have already occurred and cannot be directly used for cause-effects. As such, the purpose of this research is to define variables and determine how these variables are related (Campbell & Stanley, 1963, p. 34). This investigation is exploratory research. The focus of this research was finding the themes that were most important in developing resilience, and developing friendly strategies that could be used by administrators, teachers, and parents. This investigation was focused on creating strategies that could later be used in experimental research to determine if they are effective.

#### *Data Gathering Procedures*

For this study, intensive interviewing was used in order to gather data. Intensive interviewing “permits an in-depth exploration of a particular topic or experience and, thus, is a useful method for interpretive inquiry” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 25). Subjects were interviewed in order to gain more insight on their experiences related to resilience. Subjects in this study were specifically selected to include administrators, teachers and parents from Title I schools in the Rock Hill area. Four out of the

eight Title I schools in the Rock Hill area participated in this study. One administrator was chosen from each school. Two teachers were chosen from each school, along with two parents from each school. Four administrators, seven teachers, and five parents were able to participate in the research. Recruitment for participants started with interest emails being sent to the administrators of each school. If administrators chose to participate, then recruitment letters were sent out for administrators, teachers, and parents. Afterwards, communication was made in order to set up meeting times for interviews. Once confirmed with a date, interviews were held. Each participant was asked five primary questions, with two supplementary questions following. Each set of questions was tailored to the role of the participant, but each set of questions focused on how the participants instilled resilience. The interviews lasted approximately thirty minutes. A maximum time of an hour was given if needed for the participant. The interviews were mostly held in person, but depending on the circumstances of the participants, phone and Skype interviews were offered. There was no recording of the responses of the interviews. Participants’ responses were written down. At the end of each interview, participants were given a review of what was recorded so that no misinterpretations were included in the responses.

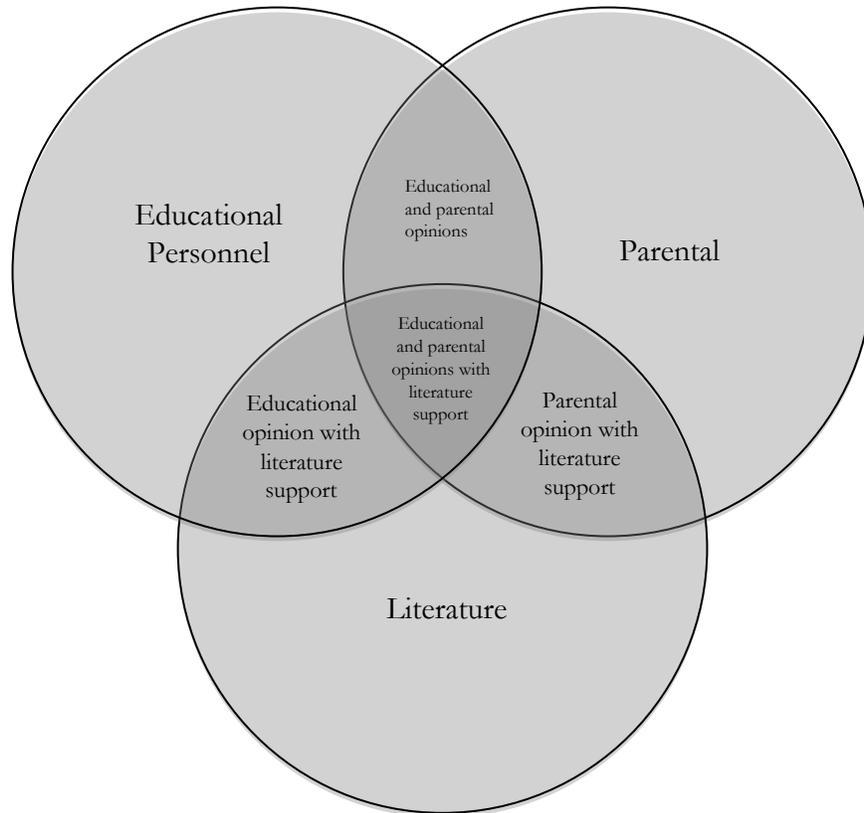
#### *Confidentiality*

All participants in this study were anonymous. Each subject was informed that his or her identity would be protected throughout this investigation. No names were written down on the data that was gathered from each interview. The only piece of information that had names written down on it was the informed consent agreements. Each participant had to sign an informed consent agreement showing that he or she agreed to participate in the research process. All informed consent agreements will be held in a folder inside of a locked storage cabinet. No one outside of the researcher will be able to view the informed consent agreements. All identities were protected in this research.

*Coding and Analyzing*

Once all the interviews were conducted, coding and analyzing took place. Data gathered from the interviews was coded and analyzed. This study used Grounded Theory in order to analyze and synthesize data. Grounded Theory “consists of systematic, yet flexible guidelines for collecting and analyzing qualitative data to construct theories ‘grounded’ in the data

themselves” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 2). Data gathered from the responses of the interviews was referred back to the literature to find common themes. Triangulation was also used between the responses of educational personnel, parents and the literature. Triangulation consisted of taking data from three different sources and finding correlation between all three of the resources.



**Figure 1:** Triangulation between educational personnel, parents, and literature

The common themes were used in order to produce strategies that could be used at home and inside of the classroom.

#### *Summary*

This entire study is a pre-experimental design. The goal of this research is to develop strategies based off of the literature and the knowledge of particular individuals. In this investigation the individuals were administrators, teachers, and parents of Title I schools in the Rock Hill area. Interviews were conducted in order to collect data. The data in this study consisted of the knowledge and opinion from administrators, teachers, and parents about how they are instilling resilience in their students/children. All identities in this study remained anonymous. All identities were protected, with the paperwork that has names being locked in a storage cabinet. Data gathered was coded and analyzed with the literature. Grounded Theory and Triangulation was the main two methods used in order to code and analyze information gathered. Strategies were created based off of the themes found.

### **RESULTS**

After conducting sixteen interviews and undergoing two phases of triangulation, three main themes were found. Positivity, Relationships, and Self-Regulation were the three themes that not only appeared throughout all of the interviews, but also has foundation in the literature about resiliency. Having a positive attitude and setting high expectations for students will encourage resiliency in the students. Benard states “research has indicated that schools that establish high expectations for all youth—and give them the support necessary to achieve them—have high rates of academic success” (1995). Inserting positivity in a child’s life and setting high expectations of that positivity could instill resiliency in that child. Relationships are another key theme that is important to developing resiliency. “At a time when the traditional structures of caring have deteriorated, schools must become places where teachers and students live together, talk with each other, take delight in each other’s company...It is obvious that children will work harder and do things...for people they love and

trust” (Benard, 1995). Relationships must be built not only between students and teachers, but also between peers, child and parent, and also teacher and parent. A teacher from one of the schools that participated in the study stated “It is important to build a relationship with your students, you must earn their trust and respect.” By developing relationships with students living in poverty, teachers or parents will be able to encourage the child and also express positivity. That will slowly develop resiliency in the child without the child even realizing it. The last theme that was found within this study was Self-Regulation. Allowing children the freedom to make decisions or take control over their own path can instill resilience in a child of poverty. Self-Regulation deals with a person being able to control one’s emotions, self-control, self-esteem, etc. Allowing a child living in poverty the ability to make decisions or to actively participate will help encourage resiliency. “Participation, like caring and respect, is a fundamental human need” (Benard, 1995). Allowing active participation and giving out responsibilities will not only help with Self-Regulation, but it could also help strengthen relationships and encourage positivity. All three themes work as a continuous cycle, if one theme is implemented then the other two themes can be found. From these three themes, four strategies were created. Each of these strategies can be used inside of the classroom. Each of the strategies focuses on one or more of the themes found in this study.

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|---|
| <p><b>1. Daily individualized optimistic messages for each student (Positivity &amp; Self-Regulation).</b></p>                |
| <p><b>2. Monthly/Weekly goals for individual students and as a classroom as a whole (Positivity &amp; Relationships).</b></p> |
| <p><b>3. Community-building activities or assignments on a weekly basis (Positivity, Self-Regulation, Relationships).</b></p> |

- |   |
|---|
| <p>4. Let students play an active part in decision-making within the classroom and individually with themselves (Self-Regulation &amp; Relationships)</p> |
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**Figure 2:** List of strategies based on the three themes (Self-Regulation, Relationships, and Positivity).

## CONCLUSION

The next step for this study will be to implement the strategies found in the pre-experimental portion of this study inside of an elementary classroom. Preferably one of the schools interviewed would be one of the schools to participate in the next stage of this study. A longitudinal study would most likely be used in order to gather significant enough progress and data. Implementing these strategies over an entire school year or through a semester of school would be ideal. Students who are deemed at risk will be the students that the study focuses on, but the entire classroom will experience the four strategies being implemented. A pre and post survey will be done in order to track growth and to see if the implantation of the strategies has an impact on the development of resiliency in children of poverty. The next phase of this study would be to see if these strategies are effective or if there is another focus that needs to be looked at when developing resiliency.

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