



THE EDUCATIONAL  
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# Conceptions of Resilience: Compliance or Transformation?

by Brenda J. McMahon

## *Abstract*

*This paper offers a philosophical inquiry into conceptions of resilience—identifying it first as a set of individual traits or characteristics and, secondly, as a process existing within relationships. Both approaches unwittingly may reinforce existing inequities and marginalization as they are used to prepare students for the world. Alternatively, suggestions for arriving at a conception of resilience that potentially is meaningful, empowering, and transforming are presented.*

Educational literature that focuses on risk factors as inhibitors to students' academic success has come under attack as fundamentally negative in its approach to certain students (Johnson 1994; Fine 1995; Pearl 1997; Books 1998). Taking a more positive approach, theoreticians instead have begun to concentrate on conceptions of resilience to better understand how some children and adolescents overcome or succeed despite apparent risk factors. Some theorists (e.g., Benard 1995; Kaplan 1999; Smokowski, Reynolds, and Bezruczko 1999; Barr and Parrett 2001; Taylor and Thomas 2001) emphasized the internal attributes of individuals, while other researchers (e.g., McMillan and Reed 1994; Westfall and Pisapia 1994; Johnson 1997; Wang 1997; Pianta and Walsh 1998; Norman 2000) focused on relationships. Though not mutually exclusive, both perspectives conceive of resilience as mechanisms that ameliorate a "person's reaction to a situation that in ordinary circumstances leads to maladaptive outcomes" (Taylor and Thomas 2001, 9).

Several issues and concerns, related both to the meaning and purpose of resilience, call for a philosophical inquiry. Noticeably absent from resilience literature are two fundamental questions: resilient for what purpose, and resilient according to whom? Conceptions of resilience that fail to address these issues—either as individual capacities or as relational phenomena—are problematic on a number of levels: first, notions

of whom and which situations the literature identifies as resilient; second, the criteria used to identify resilient outcomes; and third, who names the person or situation as resilient.

This paper offers an initial philosophical inquiry into resilience factors and processes within educational institutions. The first depiction of resilience identifies it as a set of individual traits or characteristics. The second notion of resilience portrays it as a process existing within relationships. Though not articulated explicitly, both concepts are consistent with ideologies that identify the purposes of education as “cultural capital” and “individual growth” (Portelli and Solomon 2001, 18–19).

*Theoreticians have begun to concentrate on conceptions of resilience to better understand how some children and adolescents overcome or succeed despite apparent risk factors.*

These concepts supposedly espouse equitable outcomes by assuming to prepare students for the world as it exists; instead, they may reinforce existing inequities and marginalization. Because risk is seen as existing

in or created by environments that are antithetical to dominant ideologies, the social construction of resilience, by enhancing the “right” outcomes for students, can serve as another means of preserving the status quo. If this is the case, resilience discourse may be simply another mode of oppression, rather than a means of transformation for marginalized students. With an emphasis on making students at risk become more like those who are not at risk, conceptions of resilience do not necessarily challenge existing hegemonic structures or the dialogue, values, thoughts, and actions within them.

By way of contrast, suggestions for arriving at a conception of resilience by connecting it to critical democracy (Goodman 1992) are offered. A resiliency concept based on an ideology of emancipation (Freire 1998) or education for democratic transformation (Portelli and Solomon 2001), rather than reinforcing existing hegemonic structures, has the potential to be meaningful, empowering, and transforming.

### ***Resilience in the Current Literature***

Though resilience purports to be a positive depiction of a student’s strengths, discussions of resilience within the literature are limited to students who are deemed at risk. Because conceptions of resilience within educational contexts assume that conditions exist which students must overcome in order to achieve, the presumption is that resilience exists only when students have been placed in at-risk situations.

Fine (1995), Polakow (1995), Pearl (1997), and Books (1998) contended that definitions of what constitutes risk are problematic. According to Polakow (1995, 263), the designation of being at risk “serves to maintain stratification and the segregation of ‘difference’ among children in our schools, forming part of an all-encompassing web of privilege and

power.” This is consistent with what Books (1998) identified as anti-youth discourses or youth bashing—strategies designed to reinforce existing inequities by diverting attention from societal responsibilities for poverty and racism and their impact on students.

Identifying resilience as a bridge that exists between risk and desirable outcomes indicates that resilience either exists or it doesn't. The correlation between resilience and outcomes also entails that resilience as a characteristic, process, or event only is identifiable in retrospect, and that “the nature of the at-risk person's response will be such that the risk factor is obviated if the person is in fact resilient” (Kaplan 1999, 26). When identified retrospectively, the notion of resilient students presents a paradox: to become resilient, a student must in some sense be resilient.

Other questions are raised by identifying resilient children and adolescents as those who succeed despite social disadvantages, hardships, and the presence of at-risk factors, and who develop strategies and coping skills that enable them to adapt to life's stressors and attain outcomes that are better than anticipated. The obvious question is: anticipated by whom? Is it the children and their families who anticipate these lesser outcomes? On the contrary, people from within the dominant group have determined both what is desirable and that these students will not achieve the desirable. These students are seen as destined for low or negative outcomes. Consequently, any other results mean that they are experiencing better than anticipated outcomes.

As is the case with conceptions of risk, resilience is actualized according to certain criteria in some situations and not in others, so that, according to Kaplan (1999, 23), “Individuals may be judged to be resilient by these criteria, but not according to criteria representing competencies in other spheres.” Furthermore, Kaplan (1999, 32) pointed to the difficulty inherent in definitions used to determine what constitutes desirable outcomes; namely, “it is possible that the socially defined desirable outcome may be subjectively defined as undesirable, while the socially defined undesirable outcome may be subjectively defined as desirable.” Because the definers of the desirable are primarily members of the dominant group, resilience often becomes another name for acquiescence or compliance and, consequently, another venue for dominance to persevere and reconfigure itself.

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### ***Resilience as an Individual Trait***

Many researchers (e.g., McMillan and Reed 1994; Westfall and Pisapia 1994; Pianta and Walsh 1998; Smokowski et al. 1999) have placed resilience within an individual. Wang (1997), Smokowski et al. (1999), and Norman (2000) identified personal attributes

of children who are resilient. These include an absence of organic deficits and having an easy temperament, as well as responsiveness, flexibility, and adaptability. Resilient individuals also are deemed to possess an internal locus of control, as well as a sense of humor to generate comic relief and reduce stress, and the ability to find alternative ways of looking at things. Kaplan's (1999, 21) depiction of resilience as hardiness, includes commitment, control, and challenge, or "the belief that change is normal and represents a positive rather than a threatening circumstance." Westfall and Pisapia (1994, 2) contended that "a strong sense of self-efficacy" is of paramount importance to resiliency. Similarly, Barr and Parrett (2001, 26) identified

"social competency, problem-solving skills, autonomy, and a sense of purpose and future" as characteristics of resilience within students. Results from Smokowski et al.'s (1999, 444) research with disadvantaged youth equated resilience with "perseverance, determination, having had a past mastery experience, and being able to learn from other people's behavior."

### ***Resilience as a Relational Phenomenon***

Norman (2000, 3) contended that resilience "is not a fixed attribute of

individuals. Rather, a resilient or adaptive outcome is a process of interaction between environmental and personal factors." Norman (2000, 4) supported the contextual nature of resilience with his contention that "a resilient or adaptive outcome is a process of interaction between environmental and personal factors. If circumstances change, outcomes may be different." To create an analogy for resilience, he provided images of a hammer hitting a tire and a hammer hitting a pane of glass. He contended that the interactions between the hammer and the tire are indicative of resilience, while the hammer and the glass are not. Initially, when the tire and the glass are being battered by the same external forces, only the tire possesses internal factors which enable it to resume its original shape. Consequently, the claim could be made that the tire is resilient and the glass is not. However, over a period of time, as happens with students, repeated attacks from the environment accumulate, causing the tire to become increasingly more vulnerable and weakening its resilience. Further, if the glass and the tire come into contact, the result may be different, and neither may be seen as resilient, supporting the claim that context impacts resilience.

Student resilience is fostered by interpersonal dynamics, specifically, support from family members, peers, and social and community organizations and institutions. For example, Smokowski et al. (1999, 427) stated that caring, yet strict and highly directive parenting "distinguishes poor inner-city children who are academically resilient from their less resilient counterparts who are exposed to similar stressors." Research by McMillan and Reed (1994, 138) indicated that positive "parent-child relationships and supportive attachments appear to act as protective factors from the environment." Furthermore, par-

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ents' high expectations for the education of their resilient children pressure the students to remain engaged in school and to work toward high achievement (McMillan and Reed 1994, 138).

Johnson (1997, 45) highlighted the significance of school and community "as potentially protecting students from risk factors or as potentially compensating for personal and social disadvantage." Westfall and Pisapia (1994, 4) reported that the existence of support systems at home, school, and the community engender "the development of constructive personality traits such as self-efficacy, goals orientation, optimism, internal expectations, personal responsibility, and coping ability. These traits, in turn, lead to resiliency."

Pianta and Walsh (1998, 411) contended that "resiliency is produced by the interactions among a child, family, peers, school, and community," and that remaining cognizant of the interconnectedness of these relationships is important. They (1998, 410) argued that there is danger in "locating the successes of children in one (or even two or three) of these places (child, family, school), in the absence of an emphasis on the interactions, transactions, and relationships among these places." According to Benard (1995, 1), aspects of resilience-producing environments fit within "three major categories: caring and supportive relationships, positive and high expectations, and opportunities for meaningful participation."

As one of the arenas where interactions and relationships among individuals, groups, and systems occur, schools have a significant role to play in creating environments that are conducive to resilience. Bernard (1995, 3) stated, "Research suggests that when schools are places where the basic needs for support, respect, and belonging are met, motivation for learning is fostered." Furthermore, he contended that "reciprocal caring and respectful and participatory relationships are the critical determining factors in whether a student learns, whether parents become and stay involved in the school, whether a program or strategy is effective, whether an educational change is sustained, and, ultimately, whether a youth feels he or she has a place in this society." This assertion is supported by Smokowski et al. (1999), who found that the relational bonds between teachers and resilient adolescents were important in buffering risks and facilitating adaptive development. They (1999, 427–28) summarized, "Favorite teachers were among the most frequently cited positive role models in the lives of children. The teachers were not simply instructors facilitating academic growth, but also became confidants and positive models for personal identification." According to Westfall and Pisapia (1994, 3), resilient relationships are formed between students and educators who have "positive expectations and that push the students while remaining very supportive and understanding."

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Though emphasizing the relational contexts of resilience is important, it is essential to recognize that resilience processes can exist and that teachers can be caring, supportive, and understanding, and yet not question hegemonic structures. Consequently, teachers prepare students for society as though it were fixed and unchangeable. Caring educators may be complicit in perpetuating a system that sorts poor and minority students into lower streams.

### *A Democratic Notion of Resilience*

Though many different conceptions of democracy and critical thinking exist, the notion of democracy presented here is based on participatory democracy as a way of life. In this form, democracy is conceived as an ongoing reconstructive process “associated with equity, community, creativity, and taking difference seriously” (Portelli and Solomon 2001, 17). When applied to concepts of resilience, the adoption of this notion entails a shift away from schools as sorting and streaming mechanisms dictated by business agendas. Education within a democratic society and for democratic participation goes beyond preparing students to be passive, job-ready citizens. For active citizenship in a democratic society, resilience for all students must be seen as being “able to participate in society so as to transform inequities that impede full participation in democratic life” (Simon 2001, 12).

Resilience factors and processes can be perceived to be analogous to and subject to the same limitations as conservative and liberal notions of student engagement (McMahon and Portelli 2004). Contemporarily, critical democratic models of engagement (Foster 1986; Chavez and O’Donnell 1998; Freire 1998; Martin 1992; hooks 1994; Portelli and Vibert 2002; McMahon and Portelli 2004) can help educators move from a compliance stance toward a transformational perspective of resilience.



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One configuration of a critical democratic perspective entails that teachers and students work together to deconstruct and reconstruct knowledge and “uncover and articulate the implicit and explicit biases inherent in prescribed curriculum” (McMahon 2003, 260). This process involves questioning

assumptions within which educators are entrenched, such as uncovering beliefs inherent in theorists’ and practitioners’ conceptions of student resilience. Ruddick and Demetriou (2003) suggested that adolescents lead very complex lives where they develop skills in balancing competing demands, loyalties, and responsibilities. They (2003, 275) contended that, by and large, schools offer students “less challenge, responsibility, and autonomy than they are accustomed to in their lives outside of school.”

This has serious implications for educational conceptions of resilience. Educators must recognize that students come to school skilled at navigating their worlds and are

resilient within them. Attention to students' concerns and consulting with them about their learning are essential to a transformative notion of resilience, yet are noticeably absent from existing resilience literature. According to Ruddick and Demetriou (2003, 276), "The transformative potential of student consultation and participation . . . enables young people to develop positive identities as learners."

Transformative potential cannot exist when students are expected to fit into a static social order, nor can it be separated from questioning existing hegemonic structures. The need to challenge the status quo was supported by Anderson et al. (1998, 275), who emphasized the importance of questioning and challenging "authoritative discourses" so that "classrooms are sites of resistance as students and teachers are engaged in a critique of power."

Resilience as compliance is antithetical to conceptions of democracy and social justice based on Freire's (1998) notion of emancipatory education. Freire (1998, 86) claimed that democracy which informs pedagogy "does not exist in the muteness of those who have been silenced, but in the stirrings of those who have been challenged, in the doubt of those who have been prodded, and in the hopes of those who have been awakened." Resilience that embraces resistance to social inequities enables both individual and societal transformation. Chavez and O'Donnell (1998, 2) argued that students and educators who "do not accept the status quo and begin to unconsciously transform themselves to understand the status quo place themselves into a location for liberatory action based on a praxis of social justice." Within these notions of democracy and social justice, educators need to recognize various forms of rebellion and resistance—which Giroux (1983, 107) identified as "moral and political indignation"—as acts of resilience. On the surface, passive resistance may appear to be analogous to compliance, such as students using the existing system to attain their goals while not necessarily buying into it. In its more active forms, resistance may be seen as defiance, played out in challenges to educators and educational institutions. Whatever form it takes, rebellion is hardly the domain of spectator citizens who Martin (1992) suggested do not serve a democratic society well.

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In a democratic paradigm, discourses on resilience must begin with a genuine commitment to valuing student resistance to oppressive policies and structures. Recognizing that various forms of rebellion and probing questions are aspects of resilience can create democratic processes in schools that can be transformative for students, teachers, administrators, and educational institutions.

## Conclusion

Conceptions of resilience can be useful tools for understanding why and how some students are able to succeed in schools while others do not, despite apparently similar experiences. Resilience exists both within individuals and in relationships between and among people, and result from internal factors and external processes that enhance rather than inhibit student achievement in school.

Valuing resilience without incorporating notions of democracy and resistance may result in adversarial actions. In unresponsive environments, theorists such as Bellous (2001) and Solomon (1992, 113) claimed that when opposition by students is met by “unsympathetic educational institutions,” escalating conflicts ensue, resulting in increased rather than decreased conditions of risk for the students. However, when meanings are attached to

resilience, the location, worldviews, and the intentions of the definers, the language of risk and resilience can be reconfigured to align with education for democratic transformation.

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The following suggestions for educators run contrary to current curricular reform initiatives, but are consistent with Simon's (1992) concept of teaching “against the grain.” In meaningful, resilience-building school environments, voices of students at risk are taken seriously. However, Simon cautioned educational practitioners

to be wary of quick-fix approaches. Creating freedom as an aspect of a democratically transformative school environment does not lend itself to formulaic solutions. Rather, it is both time-consuming and contextual, requiring administrators and teachers to:

- suspend preconceptions and beliefs that limit students from low socioeconomic and visible minority backgrounds;
- move away from deficit approaches and negative configurations of students at risk;
- provide venues for students and educators to deconstruct dominant notions of risk and resilience;
- work to challenge and change existing educational inequities;
- ask students to identify their strengths, contexts, goals, and aspirations;
- expand notions of curriculum to validate students' indigenous knowledges, values, and skills;
- work with students to develop their strengths so that they are transferable to multiple contexts; and
- welcome resistance as a means of fostering learning.

Enacted in combination within the contexts of classrooms, schools, and districts, these initiatives provide space for the creation of resilient and resilience-building school communities.

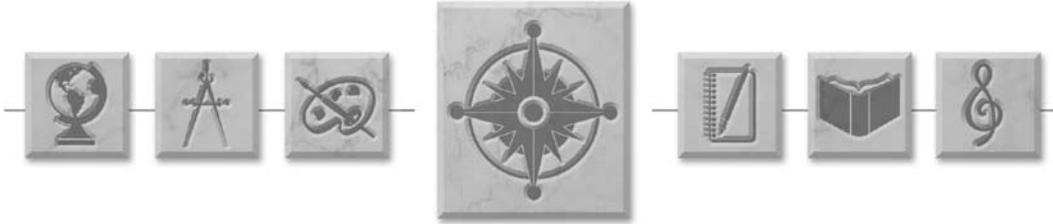
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