

Improving Literacy and Narrowing the Achievement Gap in America:

Academic Resilience as a Solution to this Nationwide Epidemic

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According to Bronfenbrenner's well known Ecological Theory of Development, *the school* is one of the largest microsystems in a child's life. Schools and public education are often thought of as powerful sociocultural symbols of normal life (Masten, 2014). In fact, in America, we are raised to depend on this microsystem for providing us with basic skills to be successful in life. Success can be defined and achieved in a myriad of ways, yet in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, an individual is certain to face difficulties in the workplace and in daily life if they do not possess certain fundamental, academic skills. Literacy, or the ability to be proficient in reading and writing, is one of these qualities crucial to success.

Our educational system was founded under capitalist ideals that those from disadvantaged backgrounds would have the opportunity to rise up from their parents' social class, if they worked hard and excelled in education. Unfortunately, it is now clear that this is a hollow promise for the majority of today's urban youth. Equal opportunity is a myth because the disparities in both resources available, and quality of education, between low socioeconomic status and high socioeconomic status communities are severe. Truly equal opportunities for success are impossible and unrealistic (Duncan & Murnane, 2014). Literacy is one area that is significantly affected by this inequality.

Improving the literacy in this country requires those individuals who have the lowest levels of achievement in reading and writing to be reach the same standards of proficiency as those in middle class America. In other words, improving literacy requires narrowing the achievement gap. As defined by Ladson-Billings (2006), the achievement gap refers to "the disparities in standardized test scores in reading and mathematics between Black and White, Latina/o and White, and recent immigrant and White Students." Of course, the issue is far more complicated than the racial differences outlined in the definition—membership to a minority

ethnicity is not the only factor responsible for a student's low achievement. There are a variety of cultural and social issues embedded within the racial divide, most notably the disparities in socioeconomic status.

In fact, some researchers have revamped this original definition of the achievement gap to specifically compare literacy and mathematic achievement gaps by socioeconomic status, rather than race. The results of this are astounding. While an achievement gap on race alone does exist, it has been steadily declining since the 1950s, whereas the achievement gap on income alone has followed an inverse trend. In 1950 there was a 0.75 of a standard deviation in achievement difference between high-income and low-income students, and a 1.25 standard deviation in achievement difference between black students and white students in America. By the year 2000, this had shifted to a 1.25 standard deviation achievement difference between high and low SES students and less than a 0.70 standard deviation between black and white students (Reardon & Murnane, 2011). As our nation has become more developed, SES has become perhaps the largest obstacles for academic achievement.

To demonstrate that these gaps in socioeconomic achievement directly relate to literacy, a 2003 longitudinal study conducted by Hart & Risley tracked families in four different income brackets that showed in the first three years of life, children from professional families are exposed to about five times the number of words as children in families who are on welfare. Between the ages of three and four, those children from professional families have about double the vocabulary those from welfare families. As a testament to how much influence the family has on vocabulary, 97-98% of the words used by the children across all income brackets are words said directly by their parents.

Because the financial disparities inherent in our economy is something that cannot be easily changed, interventions to improve literacy in America must be extremely sensitive to the fact that income and access to resources across the country are going to vary greatly. That being said, the next step for education in America and improving the literacy rate must involve something that can be implemented in even the most impoverished communities. Because it is the discrepancies in income that are largely responsible for literacy and achievement gaps in American students, this is difficult, but not impossible. My proposal, therefore, is centered on creating school environments that encourage resiliency in academics.

Resilience in the field of psychology generally refers to “positive adaptation in the context of risk or adversity”. In other words, individuals demonstrate resilience when they are faced with difficult circumstances or experiences, and rise above them to unexpected levels of achievement (Masten, 2014). “Academic resilience” in at-risk students is actually more common than we might expect, and can be achieved through both personal characteristics and thoughtful interventions. A focus on resilience as a means to improve literacy avoids patronizing attitudes towards low-achieving minority groups, and interventions targeting resilience can be politically acceptable to both liberals and conservatives. Defined as “the heightened likelihood of success in school and accomplishments despite environmental adversities brought about by early traits, conditions, and experience”, academic resilience is a path out of the inequality in the educational system (Gayles, 2005). Knowing the conditions that foster academic resilience is one way we can plan thoughtful intervention to reduce the achievement gap, thus improving literacy in America.

There are several different protective factors that foster an at-risk student’s resilience within the educational system. Borman and colleagues (2006) outline several of these factors by

grouping them into two separate spheres; individual characteristics and school characteristics. Both characteristics of the student and the school the student is receiving their education from, have a large influence on whether or not the child is able to be resilient and succeed despite their economic disadvantages. Naturally, students have more autonomy over individual characteristics, but school characteristics are important for school planning and for possible intervention.

One individual characteristic that serves as a protective factor for at-risk students is having an internal locus of control, coupled with a more positive outlook on school and high self-esteem (Borman, 2006). If a child can attribute success and failures as something they have personal control over, then optimism about the ability to change one's undesirable circumstances will follow, which can result in high-self-esteem. On the contrary, an external locus of control can be particularly dangerous for at-risk youth, because a child who believes they have no control over why they have received the short end of the stick in life is likely to give up on a world that they feel gave up on them.

Another characteristic that is important for the development of academic resilience is the peer groups that a child spends their time with. Association with deviant peer groups has a negative impact on many aspects of development, further catalyzing the undesirable circumstances at-risk children are already facing (Masten, 2014). On the other hand, association with non-deviant peer groups can be a major protective factor and supports academic resilience. Having friends and spending time with peers that are positively involved with the community can have an enormous impact on an individual's success, especially during the young, impressionable years. Of course, the community is responsible for having outlets for youth to be

positively involved in the first place. The school, as part of the community, can assist in promoting this protective factor.

Some school characteristics that serve as protective factors for at-risk students include opportunities for students to become meaningfully and productively involved and engaged in school, caring and supportive teachers, a safe and orderly environment, positive expectations of all the students, and efforts to improve the partnership between home and school (Borman, 2006). From my own experiences, the factors that are the easiest for the school to have control over is holding positive expectations of all students.

In summary, an intervention to improve literacy in America by increasing resilience would address locus of control, peer group influences, and consistently engaged educator that hold high, yet positive expectations for all their students. Although a standard like this might seem unattainable, when implemented correctly the results are astounding. I recently had the chance to visit Detroit Edison Public School Academy (DEPSA), a new, selective public (charter) school located in the Eastern Market neighborhood of Detroit that has been highly successful. Two buildings service students in grades kindergarten through 8th grade, and 9th through 12th grade. The first thing I noticed was college posters decorated every hall in both of the buildings, advertising scholarships and school statistics at colleges ranging from Wayne County Community College to Harvard University. Accompanied on the walls by motivational signs saying phrases such as “I am going to college!” these children are constantly reminded, starting at a very early age, of the high expectations that are held for them. When coupled with warmth and support from the teachers and other staff, students can actually begin to envision a bright academic future. The children at DEPSA are also incredibly obedient; partially because they are repeatedly reminded of the future benefits their current education will have on them. As

I learned from staff during my visit there, more than 90% of DEPSA graduates go on to college, unlike high schools in the Detroit Public Schools district, where college attendance rates are well below 50%.

I can compare my experience at this school to other schools I have spent time with in Detroit, where these standards are not held to foster academic resilience. Having spent two months working at Phoenix Multicultural Academy in Southwest Detroit where a caring and supportive staff alongside high standards was not present, I witnessed notable differences in the children's behavior. The children were constantly unruly, because that was the environment they were used to, and while there were staff members telling them that their behavior was unacceptable, it was meaningless because these students had been treated as if they weren't going to ever succeed since they entered grade school.

I realize that none of these changes explicitly involve changes to the reading curriculum the children are receiving. DEPSA has adopted a highly acclaimed reading curriculum called Success for All, which is undoubtedly partially responsible for their students' high achievement in reading and writing. I, however, have decided not to include specific curriculum as a component of my proposal for the "next step" in improving literacy, because of too many confounding factors. Specific curricular choices should remain local, because just like the students; schools need to feel like they have an internal locus of control as well. Often times, like what happened with No Child Left Behind, schools will passively resist nationally set standards because they feel like they no longer have any influence over their own school.

Small structural changes like the ones in DEPSA that hold all students accountable to high standards, even if it is only while the child is at school, do have an important impact on

their ability to be resilient. Although more difficult to implement, improving the relationship between home and school has been shown to have the largest impact on resilience (Borsman, 2006). In some instances, when this is not possible due to refusal of cooperation from a parental figure, or because a single parent is too busy providing for the family to spend time with their child, another figure can take on the role of providing a mentoring relationship to a child who needs the support.

Hurd and colleagues made some breakthrough findings in their 2012 study, discovering that having a natural mentor can have profound impacts for an at-risk child's school achievement. Surprisingly, a child that has an "assigned mentor" through some kind of program or intervention has found to have no statistical significance in the academic success and overall resilience as compared to at-risk children without a mentor. A natural mentor, however, has been associated with substantial increases in academic and overall resilience. As Hurd (2012) defines, a natural mentor is another adult already in a child's life apart from the parent who provides emotional support and encouragement.

Most frequently, a natural mentor will be a coach, teacher, or other role model that takes special interest in a child during development. This could involve anything from helping a student develop a particular skill, or make better life choices. Because of the inherent respect the child usually has for this figure, their support can be largely beneficial. One characteristic of a natural mentor that assigned mentors lack is their constant presence in a child's life (Hurd, 2012). Often times, assigned mentors have an infrequent presence and only are assigned temporarily to the child. A natural mentor is also much more likely to be a member of the same community as the at-risk child, which helps earn the child's respect and trust. Although there is



no current evidence supporting this, assigned mentors, if present long enough, could begin to function as natural mentors.

As someone who has been an assigned mentor specifically involved with reading, and worked in impoverished schools, I can attest to how large of a role consistency in presence plays in the success and respect of a child. For a mentor to make a difference in the achievement and ability of a child, they must first earn that child's respect. As an assigned reading mentor to three fourth grade students at Mark Twain elementary in southwest Detroit, I was able to observe how the length of my presence affected their ability to perform on the reading tasks I gave to them. WE READ through the University of Michigan is a program where volunteers like myself were to organize group reading of several short story books in each weekly session with our assigned students. At first, they were a bit shy and I was doing most of the reading for my group, I was not sure how capable of readers they were. However, by about the third week when they began to realize this was going to be a routine, they started warming up to me and engaged in the reading process. As the semester went on my appearance was greeted with enthusiasm, and by the end their reading fluency did appear to increase. While currently there is no research to support it, I truly believe that with enough time, an assigned mentor can take on qualities of a natural mentor.

Everything discussed thus far has pointed to changes with a child's microsystem that can promote academic resilience to help narrow the achievement gap, thus improving literacy and the skills that accompany literacy. One major limitation to my proposal, however, is the individual differences in each community that hinder its ability to be successful nationally. In the 21st century, two major national education interventions to improve literacy skills have already taken place, one under the Bush administration, the other under the Obama administration. Regardless

of their political affiliation, both of these leaders recognized the need to hold our country's students accountable to high standards, a factor that is crucial to resilience and overall academic success.

Unfortunately, both of these programs proved to be largely ineffective because their lens was too macro (Masten, 2014). There are an unthinkable amount of social, cultural, and economic factors that a national intervention must work around in order to be successful. For these reasons, research has shown that even if some educational standards are implemented and some schools are partially funded from the federal level, the local community knows what is best their own schools. The beauty of academic resilience is that it has the ability to be catered not only to individual schools, but to individual students. My plan would be to start locally, fostering academic resilience early-on in elementary or pre-kindergarten schools in Detroit with the lowest literacy levels. If successful, it becomes a model for other struggling schools, but they adopt the proposal based on the specific needs of their own community.

An example of one very successful local intervention that has been recognized by President Obama is Boston Public Schools pre-kindergarten program. The ideology for their Pre-K early intervention is based on research that says children who miss out on the pre-kindergarten experience are coming into kindergarten already behind their classmates, beginning the achievement gap before grade school has even started. Boston Public Schools provides a full day of pre-kindergarten to any four year olds in the district, with no income limits. BPS teachers are also paid the same as K-12 teachers within the district, and are provided with extensive coaching to improve teaching instruction, prior to teaching in an actual classroom. By insuring that all children in their district have the option of free preschool, Boston public high school have seen substantial improvement in grade school performance in both reading and mathematics

since the intervention has been in place (Weiland, 2013). Early exposure to a structured school environment is a protective factor for academic resilience, and no age is too early to begin the fostering of academic resilience in low-income communities.

My proposal would incorporate the best knowledge from the literature I have presented, beginning with a model following the Boston Pre-Kindergarten program. This would include public preschool, which guarantees that children will be exposed to reading earlier, as well as the components of more sophisticated teacher training and higher pay for early education teachers. Second of all, the school would model an orderly learning environment, with consistent high expectations, like at DEPSA. This means having worked with the staff to create a school atmosphere that holds students to positive, yet high expectations, and gives them meaningful outlets to engage in extracurricular activities with non-deviant peers. Starting in grade school, students should be taught the importance of an internal locus of control, and be conditioned with self-esteem affirmation exercises. A staff and student team could monitor the school environment and maintain its positive influence, also encouraging community involvement.

Furthermore, adults in the community will be educated at public meetings about the importance of natural mentors, and if resources allow it, students will be assigned a permanent mentor throughout their grade school experience. It is the hope that with consistent exposure, these assigned mentors would begin to function as natural mentors, allowing these children the benefits of resilience in literacy and other academic areas. As part of the proposal, reading and writing would be assessed regularly. As well as monitoring the success of the program, regular testing would also identify the highest risk students who are not attaining the literacy skills. Those students could be targeted with more specific interventions, like extra tutoring, and also

further assessed for learning disabilities or home issues that might be interfering with resilience and literacy training.

The main obstacles to the program, assuming that we have combated the insensitivity of national policy by starting this locally, would include cost and politics. The cost of the program could be considered an investment, especially when we remember that 40% of the prison population is functionally illiterate. To use a common political metaphor, the program does not just give the poor or disadvantaged a fish, it teaches them how to fish. If the proposal is successful at the local level in Detroit, the success could generate the political energy and funding needed to enact the program elsewhere.

Realistically, promoting academic resilience through individual factors, school characteristics, and awareness of natural mentors would not happen overnight. These are long-term interventions. Especially in school districts like Detroit where teacher burnout is widespread and administration has given up hope, staff is less than enthusiastic to try another “next step” to improve literacy and achievement. Therefore, it is very likely there would be some backlash to the proposal. Despite this, I do believe that with proper presentation of the research and support from the community, creating school environments that foster academic resilience will narrow the achievement gap and improve literacy in our country. If the intervention began in kindergarten or pre-kindergarten, my proposal would run about ten years, essentially until the child has reached high school. That way those who had gone through the intervention could be compared in high school to those in similar communities who didn't. If the intervention proved to have positive effects, similar measures could be imposed to make sure these qualities carried through the high school years, and that literacy rates continued to stay strong.

The inequalities in socioeconomic status in America are not going away anytime soon. As long as these disparities exist, there will always be inequalities in literacy and academic achievement. This is a grim reality, but it is not a hopeless one. Through knowledge and well-designed intervention, we as educators can provide the means necessary to alleviate and narrow this achievement gap. Narrowing the achievement gap means an improvement in literacy in America, a fundamental component of success in later life. While we can't change the external factors that are responsible for the disparities and disadvantages to those who are born into low socioeconomic status, we can make a difference in individual lives.

Academic resilience is more common than we are had previously realized, and we do have control over creating conditions to foster it. Creating culturally sensitive, community-based local interventions are a way that we can begin to increase academic resilience. Academic resilience is one proven way to improve literacy and overall achievement. The end result of a program like mine, that encourages a long-term school based approach to literacy improvement, based on increasing resilience, will be to create an America with true equal opportunity.

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