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Social Connections: Resiliency and Persistence in Post-secondary Learning

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SOCIAL CONNECTIONS: RESILIENCY AND PERSISTENCE IN POST-SECONDARY LEARNING

Abstract

The purpose of this study will be to identify factors in K-12 education that enabled non-traditional minorities to overcome extreme poverty or perceived discrimination and continue their post-secondary education. The sample population of interest will be participants from a pre-selected age group with various ethnic backgrounds, gender representation and socioeconomic levels. Contradictory results exist among studies as to whether the social connections made early in education contribute to minority persistence and resiliency. This proposed study will contribute to the literature on this topic by identifying possible factors of persistence and resiliency within minority populations.

1. Introduction and Rationale

Persistence is defined as the result of students' decisions to continue their participation in the learning event under analysis (Webster, 2003, p. 1445). Contradictory results exist among studies as to whether gender, socio-economic levels, cultural differences, or personal contact with caring faculty can be related to student persistence and meaningful learning. Similar studies on

persistence indicate older students, part-time students, minority students, and working adults have higher dropout rates (Clagett, 1996; Voorhees, 1993). According to Henderson and Milstein (1996), resiliency has six facets which increase student success and persistence in school. These include: caring and support, high expectations, life skills, social bonding with faculty, participation and clear boundaries.

A. *Resiliency Theory*

Bosworth and Earthman (2002) explained that researchers began to study why some students experienced positive outcomes in life despite having conditions, backgrounds and other circumstances that place them at risk for failure. They stated that resilient students are those that thrive under conditions such as poverty, racism, lack of family support, psychiatric illness, alcoholism, or abuse. Benard (2004) described resiliency as an intimate capacity for self-correction and survival in the face of adversity.

Resiliency theory has evolved from the beginning of its study in the 1970s from one of focusing on risks to focusing on what makes youth survive in spite of adversity (Benard, 2004; Bosworth & Earthman, 2002; Dass-Brailsford, 2005; Richardson, 2002). Benard added that resiliency is a universal capacity in everyone. She argued that many of those in the worst of circumstances and at greater risk somehow manage to harness the self-righting ability of resiliency in order to make a decent life for themselves.

Benard (1991) found that in the environment there were similar experiences that resilient people had that helped them overcome environmental stressors. Some of those factors included: (a) taking care of others, or having others who depended upon them; (b) having at least one good relationship with an adult that made a difference in their lives; (c) being involved in activities that brought out their talents; and (d) feeling that they were capable people and necessary.

B. *External assets of resiliency*

Constantine, Benard and Diaz (1999) proposed a resilience framework in which external environmental protective factors are composed of three clusters: caring relationships, high expectations and meaningful participation occurring within four environments: the school environment, home environment, in the community and with peers. The three external protective factors predict the development of the internal protective assets which includes social competence, autonomy and sense of self and sense of meaning and purpose. Benard (2004) warned that even though these external protective factors may be discussed as individual components, they are actually part of a dynamic protective process that must work together. For example, "caring relationships without high expectations or opportunities for meaningful participation foster dependency and co-dependency, not positive youth development.

Caring and support. Henderson (2007) described caring relationships as those that provide oneself and others with "positive regard, love and encouragement" (p. 10). Werner (2007) argued that a close bond with a competent, emotionally stable caregiver is vital for children to overcome adversities. This adult may be in the school, in the family, or in the community. Thomsen (2002) listed the following characteristics of homes, schools, and communities that provide support and caring environments.

High expectations. Benard (2004) stated that schools, families, communities, and peers can contribute to high expectations. She described this development asset as positive messages that communicate an adult's belief in the young person's ability to self-righting. Benard (2004) and

Thomsen (2002) affirmed that adults have the power to help youth understand their innate resilience and then can help them reframe the narratives of their lives from the victim to the resilient survivor through messages of high expectations.

Meaningful participation. Benard (2004) reasoned that creating opportunities for youth participation flows naturally from caring relationships and high expectations. Youth need opportunities to participate in groups or cooperative activities, such as extra-curricular activities, Odyssey of the Mind Teams, and other groups. Youth also need opportunities to contribute and give voice to issues that have meaning to them in their homes, schools and communities.

C. Internal assets of resiliency

Constantine, Benard and Diaz (1999) listed three clusters of internal assets that are the outcomes of the external protective factors previously discussed. These three clusters of internal assets are social competence, autonomy and sense of self, and sense of meaning and purpose. When the external protective factors are in place, they influence the development of these internal clusters of resiliency traits. Within the three internal assets clusters are the following factors: (a) cooperation and communication, (b) self-efficacy, (c) empathy, (d) problem solving, (e) self-awareness, and (f) goals and aspirations.

Social competence. Benard (2004) argued that youth have social competence when they have the skills to form relationships and positive attachments to others. Werner and Smith (1992) called this “easy” temperament and also found that it could predict the ability to adapt (p.200). Benard (2004) agreed that social communication skills enable youth to develop relationships. Cross-cultural communication skills and cultural competence are also important for social competence. Benard maintained that it is important for minority youth to accommodate the dominate culture without assimilating into it. Minority youth are able to accommodate the dominate culture through the internal asset of social competence.

Empathy and caring are other important pieces to the social competence cluster (Constantine, Benard & Diaz, 1999). Benard (2004) stated that empathy is a hallmark of resiliency as it helps to form the basis for caring relationships and compassion. Being able to read the nonverbal cues of others is a skill that resilient youth develop.

Autonomy and sense of self. Benard (2004) described autonomy as the ability to feel a sense of control over one’s environments. It involves an ability to act independently and have a feeling of competence and positive identity (Sidanus & Pratt, 1993; Smith, 1991). Brown (2008) reported that among racial minorities, racial socialization contributes to autonomy and positive identity. Racial socialization is a set of behaviors or communications between parents and children. For example, this communication may involve how Hispanic people should feel about their cultural heritage, or how to respond to bias. These conversations enable ethnic minority youth to develop positively valued ethnic identities (Fuller, 1996; Gay, 2000; Griffin, 2000).

Sense of meaning and purpose. Thomsen (2002) reported that people feel that they are needed by others and have a purpose in life. Werner and Smith (1992) agreed that at some point children from Indigenous tribes who developed into resilient adults carried out some task that prevented others from experiencing discomfort or distress. This act of helpfulness contributed to their future resiliency as adults.

Thomsen (2002) stated that believing that one has a positive future is enough to keep resilient people working toward achieving that future. Benard (2004) agreed that the future-oriented strengths, such as goal direction, achievement motivation, and educational aspiration, help young people succeed in school, provide a feeling that they can control their environment, prevents them from engaging in risk behaviors, and may help them stay in school instead of dropping out.

Most of the resilient youth in Werner and Smith's (1992) study had hobbies and avenues to express their creativity. These interests were of great comfort to some when faced with extreme challenges.

2. Identification of the Problem

What contributing factors inspire and motivate people who have experienced extreme poverty, oppression or discrimination from the dominant society in furthering their post-secondary education?

3. Purpose

The purpose of this study will be to identify factors in K-12 education that enabled non-traditional minorities to overcome extreme poverty or perceived discrimination and continue their post-secondary education. The sample population of interest will be participants from a pre-selected age group with various ethnic backgrounds, gender representation and socioeconomic levels. Contradictory results exist among studies as to whether the social connections made early in education contribute to minority persistence and resiliency.

This study will investigate the following questions:

- 1.) How would you describe your K-12 educational experiences?
- 2.) Did you attend traditional public school, private or charter school for grades K-12?
- 3.) Who would you consider as having been part of your support and in what way did these people support you?
- 4.) Describe how you overcome any challenges during your K-12 education.

4. Methodology

This study will use the narrative approach in identifying possible factors of resiliency in people who have experienced extreme poverty, mental and physical oppression or discrimination. Narratives provide thick, rich descriptions which provide the essence of their individual experiences. Clandinin & Connelly (2000) described narrative inquiry as "the study of some experience" (p. 189). This method will be appropriate because "oral histories... can provide considerable background and social quality to research, and an increased understanding and connection with the present and the past" (Berg, 2001, p. 220). In addition, narratives respond to historical events whose cultural and political ramifications continue to be enacted in the present (Casey, 1996).

A. The Participants

The participants for this study were identified and selected using specific criteria: age ranges of 35-45 years old, their current enrollment in a postsecondary institution majoring in education and were considered by society as non-traditional students. Criterion-based sampling was used in order to obtain a sample that represented "information-rich cases" and that will exhibit maximum variability across various demographic factors because a diverse sample highlights the uniqueness of individuals as well as their shared common experiences (maximum variation sampling, Patton, 1990).

B. Instruments

Data will be collected by means of two in-depth, semi-structured interviews with one being face-to-face and the other interview through email or phone conversations with each participant about their K-12 educational experiences. The pilot study participants will be representative of two different minority groups with whom the researcher is personally acquainted with and who will not be part of the targeted sample. Congruent with qualitative methodology, the interview questions will be open-ended to allow new constructs to emerge that might be limited by a more restricted interview structure (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

C. Procedure

Initial contact with potential participants will be made by an emailed letter and followed up by phone calls or letters. The researcher will examine the meaning and significance of these lived educational experiences which might be factors that led these participants to continue their post-secondary education despite societal stigmas, oppression, and lack of equal educational opportunities.

While the use of narrative inquiry is considered to be a way of discovery, each of the stories will include an understanding of the speaker's self-interpretation (Casey, 1996). This can be problematic and narrative inquirers must be aware that they have to put themselves into the study in order to understand and at the same time claim to have some expertise (Richardson, 2000). Establishing a rapport with participants is critical in a qualitative research where personal interactions are used for data collection. Additionally, Clandinin and Connelly (2000) warned researchers, "relationships are vitally important in what the narrative inquirers do" (p. 189). The researcher will keep a journal, as entries are a "powerful way for individuals to give accounts of their experience" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 102). Journal writing, in the field, can offer the inquirer an opportunity to reflect on what is felt during the research experiences. By "simply asking the participant to tell about their past educational experiences," (p. 13) the inquirer can glean the stories.

Field notes or journal data will also include details regarding the interview site, duration, who was present, participant nonverbal communication, information expected to contribute to data transferability (ability to recreate the interview) and triangulation (use of multiple data sources), which are important criteria in establishing the trustworthiness of the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Polkinghorne, 1995).

D. Data Analysis

Data analysis will be based on the narrative inquiry method of Creswell (2003) and will follow a procedure similar to that of Polkinghorne (1995). Interviews will be transcribed, sent to participants for clarifications and approval or for adding of new information, giving participants the opportunity to further participate in the research (Creswell, 2003). A narrative configuration in qualitative analysis will be well suited for this study because the participants can be understood from their unique perspectives and educational experiences. In narrative analysis, Creswell (2003) states researchers collect descriptions of events and experiences and synthesize them by means of similar themes or stories. Narrative inquirers are required to ascertain similar themes that display the linkage among the data as the stories unfold (Creswell, 2003).

5. Limitations and Implications

The limitations of this particular study are dependent on direct communication with persons who have characteristics, behaviors, attitudes, and other information relevant to the study. With sufficient time, opportunity and resources, this proposed study might have been strengthened by acquiring additional data from significant others, work colleagues, and observations regarding the participants in the study.

In terms of implications of the study for practice, educators should be trained in understanding both pedagogy and psychology which can be combined to create effective teaching however, what seems to be lacking in this assumption is the multicultural acceptance and value of other cultural identities (Banks & Banks, 1995; Freire, 2003; Singleton & Linton, 2006). The results of this proposed study should provide additional information and suggestions of how to promote social resiliency and persistence for continued post-secondary education of all students no matter what cultural group or socioeconomic level they belong to.

As a civilization, credence must be given to all cultural beliefs and uniqueness. In turn, each human being should be given the equal opportunity to learn and to feel confident with his/her own identity. All perspectives should be considered and valued, as everyone contributes to the greater society (Hilberg & Tharp, 2002; Howard, 1999, Penland, 2007).

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