

Resilient Doctoral Students in California: A Reflective Study of the Relation Between Childhood Challenges and Academic Success

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Abstract: This general qualitative study examined how people with Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) were able to navigate adversity and ultimately pursue doctoral programs. The research focused on the academic experiences of doctoral students who had 4 or more ACEs and explored how resiliency helped these participants navigate the educational system. The case study was conducted with 7 participants who all had 7 or more ACEs and went on to be academically successful. Findings highlighted insights into the resilient lives of these individuals. Their historical narratives generated an exploration of the nature of trauma and overcoming adversity. Based on these findings, a discussion incorporates how educators can provide proper emotional and social support systems. Limitations and future directions conclude this study. Visual inspection of a general outcome reading comprehension measure were mixed, seemingly favoring the validated intervention and not close reading. Limitations of the research and implications for use of close reading with students at risk are discussed.

A recent essay published by Meg Jay entitled “The Secrets of Resilience” (2017a) talks about how successful adults overcame difficult childhoods. Jay’s article is a summary of her book *Supernormal: The Untold Story of Adversity and Resilience* (2017b). In both, Jay talks about the commonness of experiencing childhood trauma and still having success later in life. She states that nearly 75% of people have experienced early childhood trauma, such as trauma associated with a death or divorce, bullying, alcoholism or drug abuse in the home, mental illness in a parent or a sibling, neglect, emotional abuse, physical abuse, sexual abuse, having a parent in jail, or growing up alongside domestic violence until the age of 20. Yet many people overcome trauma and achieve high levels of success as adults through resiliency.

Jay’s work and the work of other prominent scholars (e.g., Shectman, DeBarger, Dornsife, Rosier, & Yarnall, 2013) expanded understanding on how people use resiliency to achieve high levels of success. This study is similar to Jay’s in that both look at how people overcome childhood trauma. It is different in that Jay studied ordinary people in a multitude of professions while this study focused on doctoral students in the field of education.

So, how do youth use resiliency to navigate school and the schooling process? Shectman et al. (2013) addressed resiliency in their research, articulating how the recent movement for test score accountability has pushed aside other important human character qualities that define what it is to be successful. They declare that if young adults grow up cultivating and refining solid character skills, such as resiliency, positive-mindset, and grit, they are much less likely to drop out of college and much more likely to become well-rounded, successful, and fulfilled people. Even with national attention, rarely is longitudinal research done to understand what happens to students after they leave school. The assumption is that a large number end up incarcerated (Hockenberry & Puzanchera, 2015). The current study focused on doctoral students who faced these struggles as youth and asked them to reflect on their childhood experiences to help understand what happens with struggling youth who eventually succeed in school.

Youth face many risk factors, such as the adversity factors listed by Jay (2017). Felitti et al. (1998) categorized these as Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs). In their study, Felitti et al. (1998) discovered that a large portion of the population had been exposed to trauma in childhood and categorized ACEs into three categories: (a) abuse (physical abuse, psychological abuse, and sexual abuse), (b) neglect (physical and emotional), and (c) household dysfunction (e.g., mental illness, incarceration of a family member, and separation or divorce). They found that these experiences were related to unhealthy outcomes later in life. People who had a history of ACEs also had effects that influenced poor social, emotional, physical, and mental health.

Additionally, the Felitti et al. (1998) study further showed that, compared to people with no history of ACEs, people with ACE scores of four or higher were two times more likely to smoke and seven times more likely to be addicted to alcohol or drugs. The people with four or more ACEs were also two times more likely to have cancer, two times more likely to have heart disease, two times more likely to have liver disease, and four times more likely to have emphysema or bronchitis. The California Department of Public Health (2016) also found that youth with four or more ACEs were twice as likely to drop out of high school before finishing and four times less likely to graduate college than youth without ACEs. The findings provide a contribution to the literature in that the doctoral student population sample had four or more ACEs, yet persevered in education. Another contribution to the literature was that the sample was largely composed of students of color, some from farm-working families in Central California. The participants of the study and the ways they dealt with ACEs were both unique in that this population receives little attention in research.

Educators also understand that having a positive sense-of-self is also important to academic success (Tinto 1982, 1988; Tough, 2012). Having a positive sense-of-self mitigates addictive behavior, such as alcoholism, drug abuse, and binge eating (Tough, 2012). Furthermore, Tough (2012) stated that as a result, children who grow up

in stressful environments normally find it harder to sit still in the classroom. These children also have a harder time rebounding from frustrations and experience difficulties in following directions, which can result in being suspended from school, all of which have a direct and negative impact on performance in school. Experiences of childhood trauma have also been found to disrupt healthy brain development and negatively affect school success (Felitti et al., 1998).

It is with this understanding of the negative effects of ACEs for youth that we focus on doctoral students who experienced four or more ACEs as youth. Given their challenging circumstances, these at-risk participants should more likely be school dropouts, not doctoral students. According to *Aces Too High* (2016), when a person has an ACE score of four or more, the person is more likely to suffer long-term health issues. *Aces Too High* (2016) reports that a person with four or more ACEs has a 390% increased probability of chronic pulmonary lung disease, a 240% increased likelihood of hepatitis, a 460% increased chance of being severely depressed, and 1,220 % increased possibility of committing suicide.

Prior research supported the *Aces Too High* (2016) findings in that people who had a history of ACEs were at increased risk of depressive disorders (Chapman et al., 2004) and attempted suicide (Dube et al., 2001). There is currently no distinction between the types of ACEs, only the number of ACEs.

The current study attempts to discover insights into the resilient lives of the individuals who overcame their ACEs. Resiliency for these participants is the ability to successfully navigate school and life, despite having faced the intense hardships of adverse childhood experiences. Wang, Haertel, and Walberg (1990) talked about resiliency as being successful despite the extreme hardships endured in childhood. For these participants, extreme hardships were specific to the ACE categories of abuse, neglect, and household dysfunction. Their reflective narratives add knowledge and make a contribution to understanding youth with ACEs.

Research Question

For the purpose of analysis, the research question asked was: How did doctoral students with early childhood trauma change their trajectory to achieve high levels of academic success? Through participants' narratives of how they navigated their academic worlds, insights into how children who were deeply immersed in trauma could become academically successful were obtained. According to Anastasi, Meade, and Schneider (1960), academic success includes factors such as successful grades, academic achievement, recognition for academic accomplishments, and timely graduation. For participants of this study, academic success is defined as the ability to graduate high school, continue on to attain a higher educational outcome, and meet desired college levels. It is through their stories that educators can glean remarkable insights.

Methods

The design for this study was qualitative. Through

interviews, the researcher found plausible explanations of how doctoral students were able to overcome ACEs.

Participant Description

Table 1 provides an overview of the participants. In total, there were seven participants. The sample included two men and five women. Five of the seven identified as Latinx. There was one Caucasian and one African American.

Initially, the research sought participants with four or more ACEs. However, early in the research, it was clear that many of those with a desire to participate had more than four ACEs. This was a unique sample because there was no expectation that doctoral students would be a population where one would find extensive childhood trauma histories. Ultimately, the sample of seven had an average of 8.5 ACEs, out of a possible 10.

Findings

Five major themes emerged for participants with severe childhood trauma relative to academic experiences. These themes remained consistent through grade school as well as the participants' college careers. The themes that emerged in this study include determination in schools for validation, education as means to escape, school activities as opportunities to be dynamic, fear of failure equating to academic success, and non-amical relationships providing normal models of success and interaction.

Determination in Schools for Validation

All seven participants discussed determination through situations in academic settings. The participants referenced this skill 54 times. All seven participants experienced being physically abused in their childhoods, and all seven participants experienced being emotionally abused in their childhoods. Participants throughout their interviews discussed fighting through tough situations to gain validation or fighting against the way things were at home. Education provided the opportunity to display toughness. One example was when Bailey, who is Caucasian and experienced eight ACEs, said:

Navigating through college, it's more than just getting an education. It's being able to validate that I'm capable. Honestly, I think it's just so I don't hear the gibberish that's in my head, the narrative that my mother used to say about "You're a lazy ass," or "You're worthless," or "You can't do anything." Or "Blah, blah, blah."

Bailey's words are representative of how participants used education to validate themselves and gain a sense of worth.

Chandah, an African American who experienced seven ACEs, also fought her way through school as a means to obtain endorsement from adults that she was not receiving at home. She stated, "I love validation. Validation at home was real ephemeral. At school, it was more consistent. It's probably a big reason why I did well in school." The importance of education as a proving ground was very important to students with ACEs.

Delphia, a Latina who experienced 10 ACEs, explained the importance of education as a proving ground this way:

Table 1
Participant Demographic Information

Pseudonym	Gender	Race / Ethnicity	Location Raised	Number of ACEs
Adriana	Female	Latina	Southern CA	7
Bailey	Female	Caucasian	Central CA	8
Chandah	Female	African American	Central CA	7
Delphia	Female	Latina	Central CA	10
Efrain	Male	Latino	Northern CA	9
Francisco	Male	Latino	Central CA	10
Gabriela	Female	Latina	Southern CA	9

Grade-wise, I did well. I excelled in school, again because it was my escape. It was my, if you will, my sanctuary. It was to me my way of fighting against the life that I had at home, particularly with my dad. I was told very often that I wasn't going to make anything with my life and I was a mistake and those things like that.

School was an escape from the abuses at home and allowed students to excel in something worthwhile. Delphia also pushed forward to validate herself. She said,

My father was afraid of me being educated, because if you're educated that means you become stronger in a place that he doesn't have strength. Obviously when I was younger he had strength over me because of course he's bigger and he's a man and all that stuff. If intellectually I was smarter than that, if I became stronger and smarter in that way, that was my defense, if you will. It was no longer this being passive and those types of things. That's what pushed me through.

Education as a Means to Escape

All seven participants utilized escape to help them navigate academic settings. This was referenced 34 times by participants. For all seven, school was a means to escape from home lives filled with trauma. Delphia immersed herself in school and used it as a way to escape her home. She explained:

I was ecstatic when I started school when I was younger because that meant of course escape from the environment that I was in. I think that really education as a whole from the very beginning was the root to my safety and security and being able to have a happier life you can say. (Latina, 10 ACEs)

School not only provided an escape but also a place of safety and happiness.

Adriana ran away to escape the abuse in pursuit of a different academic setting. She discussed the night she ran away:

I remember my dad telling me that at the end of the school year that I was no longer going to be allowed to live there and I would not ever see my brother again, and he told me all the whole typical spiel of what a loser I was, so that night I ran away, because I had goals, and dammit, I was going to make them happen. I don't know why I was thinking that at that time, but all I could think about was I will never finish high school if I stay living with my father. (Latina, 7 ACEs)

Francisco found escape in schools by reading and watching male teachers to see how they acted. He explained:

Since I don't have a mom or a dad, I look at male role models, and I look at people that I inspire to be like. I try to read books like them so I can see how they think like so I can partake in some of these philosophies and maybe try to be that type of man, rather than being the man that I was brought up to be. (Latino, 10 ACEs)

As Delphia quite simply put it, "Home was dirt...school was my refuge."

School Activities as Opportunities to Be Dynamic

All seven participants discussed staying active in their academic settings. Participants were involved in extracurricular work or taking a high number of courses. This was referenced 19 times and manifested itself as a means of staying at school so they would not have to go home, as another way to validate themselves, or to stay

active and keep their mind off the trauma. Chandah made a representative statement when she said:

I was in clubs. Anything I could do to stay out of the house, I did. I was always super involved with clubs and activities. Starting in junior high and then very much in high school. I did band first and then theater. (African American, 7 ACEs)

Chandah, like all participants, was extremely active and busy.

Bailey talked about staying active and busy while in college and beyond when she stated, "I took 21 to 24 units a semester and worked two jobs and graduated with honors with my BA and my MA and a couple of teaching credentials and I've been a workaholic ever since," (Bailey, Caucasian, 8 ACEs). This is very representative of the continuous need to be active, participating, and staying busy. Higher education provided that opportunity. Tinto (1975, 1982) also talked about how engagement in college helped with student retention.

Students with ACEs overcame adversity by being constantly on the go. Classroom and extracurricular activities provided the escape that the participants needed. Weiss and Wagner (1998) explained that abused children are not able to escape from a destructive home environment, yet these participants found a way through school activities.

Fear of Failure = Academic Success

All seven participants talked about the theme of fear in an academic setting. It was referenced 14 times. Participants talked about fear in the educational setting more as a fear of not achieving success, not being able to reach certain goals, or not being able to obtain a level of validation. Chandah explained these fears very well when she said:

I was just really afraid of failing, or being perceived as a failure, so much so that when I was confronted with obstacles I didn't even perceive them as issues. I just plowed ahead. Honestly, I don't feel particularly resilient, just really motivated to not fail. (African American, 7 ACEs)

Chandah's statement is representative of fear for participants. Their fear was not debilitating. Instead, it was motivating.

Weiss and Wagner (1998) discussed fear as the way a person's body reacts physically to trauma. The amygdala responds to signs of danger and the body's distress system is activated. The body sends large amounts of adrenaline to help the child fight or run away. Weiss and Wagner said that children with ACEs often detach or go into a freeze response. For participants in this study, fear was used to move forward, to push ahead, and to validate self-worth.

Nonfamilial Relationships Provided Normal Models of Success and Interaction

Relationships were critical to the success of participants. All seven participants had been physically abused and emotionally abused by their parents. Seeking relationships outside of the home provided participants the support to navigate out of childhood trauma. Sometimes those

relationships came in the form of a classmate's family. A common theme was that participants developed relationships with friends and the families of those friends. Bailey explained that she was able to navigate through school by having several friends with healthy families to figuratively adopt her. She said:

I got a taste of what a family really should look like... I thought I was crazy because my mom would say something in her drunken stupor. Maybe she'd give me permission to go with friends after school the next day and so I'd go with friends and then I'd come home, and I'd get the you know what beat out of me because 'she never gave me permission.' I really thought that I was kind of cuckoo. (Caucasian, 8 ACEs)

Efrain had also found love in the form of a friend's family who took him in, "I felt more loved and more encouraged by them than my own family" (Efrain, Latino, 9 ACEs). The theme of relationships surfaced time and time again with participants. They attributed their success and resiliency to the relationships that they formed. Relationships were a very important protective factor to participants.

Educators played a role in the success of the doctoral students in this study. Educators' roles were also mentioned by Tinto (1988). The teachers who were effective in having a positive impact in the lives of participants saw beneath and beyond the hard exteriors and defensive walls. For Francisco it was a teacher who let him handwrite assignments when she discovered he was homeless. For Delphia it was Miss P. who saw beyond the rough way of dressing, which Delphia admittedly adopted on purpose to put up walls, and invited Delphia to join her on a trip to Stanford. For Adriana it was Mr. W. who told her that he could see through her barriers and thought she had so much to give as a teacher. Efrain was wrongfully placed into a special education class by one teacher because he did not speak English, yet the special education teacher quickly built his self-efficacy back up when she gave him a position of prestige. Chandah was not as much of a challenge for teachers because she undoubtedly was a pleaser. However, she identified several educators who allowed her into their worlds so that she could escape hers. Gabriela was bounced around from one foster home to another, yet she recalled a teacher who kept track of her and would bring her back to the school for assemblies and events. She said, "I still felt part of the school. When people took the time to do that, I knew I was not nothing." The district eventually allowed Gabriela to stay in one school despite her living in revolving foster homes.

To develop relationships with people living in trauma, one must understand that a paradigm shift must occur. Francisco summed up the need for a paradigm shift in this way:

For people that are in trauma, it's hard for you to see how resilient you are because people continue to oppress you. Until you can get out of that cell or you can remove that blindfold over your eyes, it's hard for you to see how resilient you are or for you to believe how

resilient you are. I think that our world does a really good job of judging people, and it makes it hard for people to be resilient because when you judge people, it's hard to be resilient, especially when you already have people telling you that you're not good enough. I think that, in order for these things to work, we need to have a paradigm shift a shift of caring within our community. We need to have a philosophy shift. We need to really watch what we tell our kids. (Latino, 10 ACEs)

It is also critical to understand that developing relationships takes time. Most students living in trauma who enter the school system develop defenses. Adriana explained her situation like this:

This occurred, I can remember, as early as kindergarten. I remember first day of kindergarten I was in trouble because I wouldn't let my mom brush my hair, so I was in trouble, so I was slapped that morning and I can remember that, but by the time I got to probably second grade... I started to learn how to turn that off, so if my father or my mother would hit me, the physical pain for me, I didn't feel it as much as I did when I was younger because I learned how to make myself numb. (Latina, 7 ACEs)

And Delphia explained:

Being that I was abused a lot in all manners, growing up I dressed a certain way, which as to present a defense, so dressing baggy. It's just the culture. You have to dress to push people away, if you will, to armor yourself... I wasn't flamboyant and talkative. I wasn't like that. I was very reserved and kept to myself. I had a hard exterior. Yeah, I looked like I was pissed off all the time, mainly because I was. I knew that I wasn't dumb. (Latina, 10 ACEs)

Despite the obstacles clearly outlined by participants in this study, each one of them mentioned, by name, an educator who was able to skillfully navigate the participants' walls of defense to make an impact.

Discussion

It is a myth that many people who experience childhood trauma are naturally resilient and, therefore they do not need help because they have internalized mechanisms that allow them to overcome this trauma. Jay's (2017a) research clearly shows resilient people do need help because of early trauma, and despite their will to succeed, they also need support. This support is in the practice of forming positive relationships and having caring people who are willing to lend a hand through their life journeys. It is these types of support systems that make a difference for resilient people.

One example of a recent research study on continuation high school that has had a direct impact is Bessey's (2017). Bessey developed and implemented the four R's: relationships, relevance, rigor (building self-efficacy), and reflection, which have been a model for helping youth with

the experience of trauma. The four R's have helped Kings Canyon High School gain recognition (by having the highest test scores in Central California for continuation schools) for their focus on helping resilient youth.

Because of the work of Jay (2017a, 2017b) and Bessey (2017), it is clear that educators have a great stake in ensuring academic success for all children, especially at-risk youth. Despite living with extreme stressors, participants in this study would be considered resilient. Educational programs and policies that understand the effects of chronic stress and promote resilience may be able to contribute to student success. By examining these successful individuals who have overcome adversity, despite enduring ACEs, this study hopes to enlighten educators with insights into resilience that will have an impact on educational practices.

Participants tended to keep thoughts and emotions to themselves, which is problematic for educators who wish to help. At-risk students learn at an early age to suppress their feelings and close in the walls around themselves. However, each of the participants described educators in their lives who were able to overcome the barriers and develop meaningful relationships.

Being able to recognize the signals of students living with trauma is important in providing them the assistance they need. Schools must devise ways to identify students at risk. Schools that have social workers or psychologists on staff who can refer or provide at-risk students with proper social and emotional supports are essential.

Educational systems must help students develop self-efficacy and build self-worth. Participants in this study reported not having very high self-worth just as Tough (2012) explained that traumatic incidents in children could produce feelings of low self-worth. He also went on to say that feelings of low self-esteem could lead to addictive behaviors and self-destructive behaviors, such as heavy drinking, drug abuse, overeating, and smoking. Participants in this study did not engage in self-destructive behaviors. Rather they focused their energy into validating they were worthy. Educational systems played a major role in providing a platform for participants. They felt that the more education they had, the worthier they became. The participants in this study expressed a great fear of failure in their academic lives. Educators must work to improve the self-efficacy of at-risk students. Providing students with relevant and challenging assignments benefits their growth. Assignments should be just rigorous enough to stimulate the at-risk student, but not so rigorous that it paralyzes them.

All seven of the participants were emotionally and verbally abused in their homes; they came to school to escape those abuses. They had been told they were stupid and unworthy in their households; schools should provide the environment where students are guided to feel intelligent and worthy. Linda Darling-Hammond (2010) talked about students' willingness to commit to school and their own futures and the fact that it is interwoven with their perceptions whether their schools and their teachers believe they are worthwhile investments. Tinto (1975, 1982, & 1988) found that successful integration into an institution required a student to achieve levels of sufficiency in both

academic and social domains. Tinto went on to explain that drop outs occurred when students felt isolated or unable to connect either academically or socially.

Educators must develop relationships. Participants admitted to putting up barriers as a self-defense which could push educators away. At times, certain teachers were viewed as a threat by the subjects of this study. According to Weiss and Wagner (1998), repeated ACEs can affect the systems of a person's body and eventually a person's entire life. Children in these situations respond to every situation as if it is a threat. However, every single participant referenced an educator who made a difference in their lives. Relationships were important to the success of participants. Educators who took the time to see through the participants' walls were able to make a positive impact in the lives of participants. This task is not always easy and takes patience, time, and unconditional support. Children who live in trauma often put up huge barriers to keep people from reaching into their core. The importance of relationships continues well into college where research found that students who did not drop out of college were helped along the way by member(s) of the institution (Tinto, 1988).

Educators must learn to help at-risk students set goals differently in a safe environment. Participants were adaptive, resourceful, and active as they navigated in and out of their chaotic worlds. This is encouraging for educators. Establishing school environments that are safe and provide activities for at-risk students is critical. It should also be encouraging to educators that participants were adaptable since Luthar, Cicchetti, and Becker (2000) found that resilience was developmental and changing. This finding suggested that the positive adaptation and development could be taught and could lead to greater resilience. Students living in trauma could be helped to set goals. Educators need to be careful when helping at-risk students set goals and objectives. Participants in this study set goals to validate themselves and prove others wrong. Educators who are constantly having students set nonchallenging goals to obtain a higher score on a test or to settle for an average grade might find students with ACEs unreceptive.

Schools must provide many cocurricular or extracurricular opportunities for the at-risk student. Participants in the study expressed an overwhelming need to stay active. Staying busy not only provided participants with the ability to keep their minds off trauma at home, but also provided them an opportunity to physically be away from the abusive household.

Educators need to make a paradigm shift in the way they work with children who live in trauma. Viewing education through the eyes of these individuals who survived childhood trauma makes one do some embarrassing self-reflections. How many times have educators asked a child to take out a piece of paper and write about "What I did this weekend?" or "What I did this summer vacation"? Would Bailey, Efrain, and Chandah write about how they spent the weekend hiding in a closet to avoid being beaten? Would Adriana, Delphia, and Gabriela write about how they were handed over to a sexual predator? Or would Francisco explain his struggles to survive on his own because both

parents were incarcerated and both of his brothers had been murdered? Educators must approach assignments as if all their students live in trauma. This practice would allow all students to benefit. However, assignments directed explicitly for students of traditional upbringing can truly harm students in trauma and cause shame, emotional suffering, and isolation.

There is reason to believe that youth in schools, particularly continuation schools, come to educators with multiple ACEs that complicate their abilities to navigate the schooling process. Students navigate schools despite cultural and linguistic differences, and they navigate schools with intense focus and desire to succeed despite carrying the trauma associated with ACEs. The seven doctoral students who participated in this study and reflected on their childhood trauma and their resiliency offer understanding and hope for what is possible if at-risk students are viewed as assets with the ability for high levels of academic success, not problems to be fixed.

Limitations and Future Directions

The population of doctoral students who had four or more ACEs was not an easy population to locate; however, additional research with a larger national sample size could prove to be beneficial in adding additional insights into resiliency and ACEs. The participant population of this study was primarily raised in California. The researcher sought candidates from four California State Universities with different geographical locations inside the state of California. Future research across different states and different educational settings could further develop the findings of this research.

This research focused on themes and references from participants and did not focus on differences between the types of ACEs experienced, nor the number of ACEs experienced, by the participants in this study. The researcher observed that participants who had been sexually abused tended to be more emotional during the interview and they also tended to be more guarded in academic and social settings; however, these differences were not explored. Future research into participants with different types of ACEs might provide deeper insights into how best to support children living in trauma.

The participants in this study were a diverse group of students: two Latino males, three Latina females, one Caucasian female, and one African American female. Future research of singular populations, such as African American males, could provide additional insights specific to culture or ethnicity.

Research into ACEs pointed out long-term health concerns for people with ACEs. Participants in this study also expressed fears about their future. A longitudinal study of the seven participants would be helpful to determine if the same resiliency skills which helped them navigate into doctoral programs transfer into long and healthy professional lives.

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