

## Resiliency and Native American Teenagers

John is a 17-year-old Native American. His father left the family when John was four and now he, his mother and younger sister live in poverty struggling to make ends meet. Despite the stresses in John's life he is on track to receive his high school diploma at the end of the school year and plans to attend college in the fall.

Mike is from the same neighborhood with a similar family structure, but unlike John, Mike struggles to make it through each day. He has a criminal record, frequently experiments with drugs and dropped out of school after the 8<sup>th</sup> grade. He appears unable to break the at-risk cycle.

Why is one teenager resilient and another vulnerable? Research has demonstrated that between one-half and two-thirds of youth faced with adversity are capable of transforming their lives and becoming successful, productive adults (Bernard, 1996). These optimistic numbers compel us to seek an understanding of resiliency and how to foster it in our youth.

The term resiliency is used to describe the "human capacity and ability to face, overcome, be strengthened by, and even be transformed by experience of adversity" (Cesarone, 1999, pg 12). Researchers have compiled an extensive list of characteristics, relationships, traits and skills found among resilient youth. The Search Institute of the University of Minneapolis foster resiliency in youth. The external assets include family and adult support, empowerment through service in the community, boundaries and expectations set by families and schools, and constructive use of time in extracurricular activities, church or home. The internal assets presented consist of a commitment to learning in school and home, a positive self-identity, values such as integrity and responsibility, social competencies in decision making, and resistance skills.

Native American culture also provides a framework for fostering resiliency. The Lakota Sioux society identified four core needs that foster resiliency and motivate individuals to reach their potential; the *Circle of Courage*. These fundamental needs include belonging, mastery, independence and generosity (Brendtro, Brokenleg and Van Bockern, 1990).

A sense of belonging is established when students form relationships within family, school and community. Potentially, all of these factors work collectively to form the belief that we belong. Independence is developed as students turn from irresponsible behavior to responsible, independent behavior. Mastery is cultivated in experiences that facilitate success and knowledge. Key components in promoting a sense of mastery are active learning, cooperative learning groups, and stress free, fun surroundings. A spirit of generosity is based in unselfish and giving behavior. Students are encouraged to see the world through others eyes enhancing their ability to be empathetic, ultimately leading to altruistic behavior.

Viewing resiliency theories through the lense of Urie Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, an approach to human development, offers a framework for understanding teenage resiliency. Bronfenbrenner's theory allows for a close examination of human development through the division of five environmental subsystems. Direct and indirect influences on the subsystems are defined and examined.

The first layer, called the microsystem, consists of the interpersonal interactions in an individual's life. The individual has direct contact and interactions with this part of their environment. Examples include family, friends, school and work. Traditionally, this has been the system examined exclusively by psychologists and educators.

Following the microsystem is the mesosystem. The mesosystem is composed of the interrelationships among the various settings of the individual's microsystem

and teacher or the relationship between a parent and their teenager's friends. These relationships are examined in the context of how they impact the individual.

The third layer, the exosystem, consists of the indirect forces on an individual's life. These indirect forces include such factors as a parents' workplace, the school board or extended family. The student does not interact directly with the entities in the exosystem in the exosystem.

Next is the macrosystem. This layer provides the broad ideological and organizational patterns that direct human society. It is composed of the cultural values, customs and societal laws of the individual's community. Examples include an economic recession, war, the media and technological advances.

Finally, the Chronosystem includes a broad picture of the individual's life within a socio-historical perspective. For instance, women in the work force, high divorce rates or a parent's death would be examined to see their effect on the adolescent (Sandtrock, 2005).

The purpose of this research was to examine resiliency factors in Native American teenagers using the structure of Bronfenbrenner's Ecological System's Theory.

#### Methodology

This qualitative study took place on an Indian Reservation in the upper mid-west. The community had a population of 904 residents and was steeped in poverty. Upon entering the county in which the town resided there was an immediate change. Cars merged from a well constructed highway with a shoulder to pull onto, to a small, narrow two lane road.

Prior to entering the studied community there was a buffalo pasture to the left and buildings that housed an old boarding school to the right. Since post-boarding school days the buildings had been renovated into a small institution of higher learning. In town there was only one stop light and stop sign, a few stores, a post office, and three churches. All of the buildings were run down and many of the surrounding buildings were condemned. Areas of the ground were littered with garbage, trash collection was not done on a regular basis; and had to be initiated with a telephone call. The town was a gathering place for people for miles around – this was partly due to the fact that all mail boxes were located in town, requiring a drive to town to pick up mail. Homes in the area ranged from new, low income housing, to a few nicer homes for teachers, to trailers. The median household income was \$23,631. The majority of residents were Native American.

The 9 – 12 high school provided a sense of security for its 416 enrolled students. Cameras recorded any traffic inside the doors and a guard locked the doors once school commenced. Enrollment by grade levels were as follows: 9<sup>th</sup>: 182, 10<sup>th</sup>: 116, 11<sup>th</sup>: 74, and 12<sup>th</sup>: 44. The typical freshman class had 160 – 175 students enrolled. Sixty-five to seventy-five students graduated annually. Due to the low graduation rates teachers often offered extra credit to facilitate graduation. Ninety-eight percent of the students were Native American. All students qualified for free and reduced lunches. Many of the students commuted 20 to 30 miles one way to attend school.

Nine high school students participated in the interview segment of the study. All students were identified by a teacher in the high school to be academically successful, a quality of resiliency. The participants were individually interviewed one time at their high school. Interviews lasted between 15 and 30 minutes. The interviews were audio-taped and field notes were taken.

Interview questions were developed by the lead researcher using a literature review of Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Subsystems, the Search Institutes Risk and Resiliency Theory, and The Circle of Courage. Preliminary questions were then refined by two undergraduate students. Both college students were in the process of completing a secondary pre-service teaching program. The lead researcher and the undergraduates

met frequently to review questions and prepare for the student interviews. One of the students, due to his Native American background and connections with educators on the reservation, conducted all of the interviews.

Sample questions included:

#### Microsystem

1. What are your plans following high school?
2. Do you have a role model? Who? Why?

#### Mesosystem

1. What are your parents' attitudes toward school? Are they involved in your school?
2. What are your friend attitudes toward school?

#### Exosystem

1. Describe your relationship with your extended family.

#### Macrosystem

1. Describe your community.

#### Chronosystem

1. How does the majority white culture impact the Native American culture?

Many of the students were hesitant to provide detailed answers during the interview process. The researchers met, and after trying to relate participants' answers to risk and resiliency theory, it was decided a follow up with a written survey of students in the high school. The ten questions on the survey followed a similar theme to the questions in the interview. Nine of the questions were designed using a Likert scale response format; the remaining tenth question was open-ended. This questionnaire venue was intended to allow time for the participants to reflect on their thoughts and remove any intimidation from speaking to an unfamiliar adult. Two teachers distributed 53 surveys in two required classes.

#### Data Analysis

Answers were coded according to Bronfenbrenner's subsystems. Collaboratively the three researchers searched for patterns and relationships with the answers provided from the interviews. The majority of the data collected from the survey was tabulated and presented in percentage form.

#### Findings

##### Microsystem

The main areas examined within the microsystem support. The majority of students surveyed had plans for their future. Over three-fourths of them intended to continue in school. Another eleven percent planned a future in the military. Only 6% of students had no future plans. All of the students interviewed had plans for college off the reservation, with one boy planning to attend Harvard – a realistic goal for him. When asked what advice they would give incoming freshman their answers revolved around education, “graduate,” “work hard in school,” and other comments that

emphasized the value placed on school in the future life of the individual.

Of the students interviewed all believed having a job was important, but only one student held a job. The others were either involved with school work and extra-curricular activities or had too far a commute to hold a job. This may reflect a combination of good time management skills and a willingness to delay gratification. Many of the students identified as resilient were highly involved in extra-curricular activities – basketball, volleyball, golf, music, and dancing in pow resilient watched TV on a regular basis, even though it was available.

Most students surveyed and interviewed chose a role model from either their nuclear or extended family. The majority (44%) indicated an individual from their nuclear family; mother, father, sibling. Another 21% selected someone from their extended family; grandmas or uncles were routinely mentioned. The remaining students chose coaches and teachers (6%), a famous person (17%) or a friend (4%). The following comments give insight into the positive qualities students identified in their role models, “she is there for me, helps/guides me through situations,” “they’ll always smiles and laughs,” and “he’s a hard worker.”

The positive relationship students had with significant members of their family could be seen in a response to solving a problem at home. For example, “they talk about it” and “they meet half way” reflected the home climate. Family expectations seemed reasonable, as one girl stated, “Rules on the weekend are to know what I’m doing, how long and to call.”

Interestingly, all of the students interviewed chose the same teacher as a role model. He was viewed as someone that supported their academic growth as well as their social/emotional need to belong. This attitude can be seen in the student’s descriptors of the teacher, “laid back” “he respects us and so we respect him,” “he makes sure we understand,” “relates to us,” and “cares about us.”

Indicators of a positive self-concept could be seen in student’s ability to identify an area of achievement. Eighty-nine percent (89%) of students were able to identify something they were good at and many students chose more than one skill. Over half (51%) of the students believed they were good at sports. The other top choices were school (49%) and work (23%). Although some chose activities not related to academics such as life-guard and taking care of people, they were skills they valued. The interviewed students described themselves as “hard working,” “quiet,” and “easy-going.” No negative descriptors were included.

Students were asked to rate on a Likert scale the value they placed in five categories related to resiliency, with 1 being very unimportant and 5 being very important.

Table 1: Student Value of Resiliency Factors

Category	1	2	3	4	5
Having a job	0	2%	10%	17%	71%
Getting an education	0	0	7%	19%	74%
Religious membership	21%	32%	26%	8%	13%
Helping a neighbor	10%	4%	47%	28%	11%
Sports or exercise	9%	6%	9%	42%	34%

Ninety-two percent (92%) of the students believed strongly or very strongly that an education was important; they also valued having a job (87%) and sports/exercise (75%). Interestingly, helping a neighbor, an attribute of empathy and altruism, was considered only of average importance, with 47% selecting a 3 on the scale.

An additional indicator of support and guidance may be seen by examining the shared values and beliefs of the students and their parents/guardians. Table 2 reflects the views the students believed their parents/guardians had of resiliency factors.

Table 2: Students' Perception of Parents/Guardians' Value of Resiliency Factors

Category	1	2	3	4	5
Having a job	0	0	7%	13%	80%
Getting an education	0	0	0%	7%	93%
Religious membership	19%	16%	21%	25%	19%
Helping a neighbor	11%	7%	21%	34%	27%
Sports or exercise	6%	9%	19%	30%	36%

Students believed that their parents' values were similar to theirs. They perceived 100% of parents/guardians to value an education and 93% to value a job. Helping a neighbor was seen as more important to the adults (61%) than to students (39%). Religious membership was also believed to be more valued by adults (44%) than students (21%).

Friends' esteem is important in establishing adolescents' self-esteem. Shared attitudes and values support identity formation. Table 3 represents the students' perceptions of how their friends valued the various categories involved in resiliency.

Table 3: Students' Perceptions of Friends' Value of Resiliency Factors

Category	1	2	3	4	5
Having a job	2%	11%	23%	32%	32%
Getting an education	4%	8%	26%	28%	34%
Religious membership	43%	32%	9%	8%	8%
Helping a neighbor	26%	32%	25%	9%	8%
Sports or exercise	9%	17%	10%	30%	34%

Students believed their friends valued every category less than they and their parents. The area that most closely aligned with their views was sports or exercise, with the belief that 64% of their friends believed it was important, compared to their 76%. Having a job (64%) and an education (62%), while somewhat important to their friends did not reflect the heavy emphasis they placed on an education or job. Student interviews supported the belief that friends did not share their positive attitudes toward school. Helping a neighbor was not perceived as relevant to friends (58%).

### Mesosystem

Several trends were found in the mesosystem school, peers and school, and peers and parents/guardians. Seventy-eights percent (78%) of students believed their friends and parents had a positive association. One thing routinely cited as causing friction between friends and parents was drinking alcohol.

Sixty-two percent (62%) of the students believed that their parents/guardians and teachers had a good relationship. The resilient students' parents/guardians participated at the school; this was evidenced by their

presence at parent/teacher conferences. These students believed their parents/guardians held high expectations that they attend school regularly and expressed “disappointment” if they did not make the honor role.

The relationship between friends and teachers was seen as weak. Their friends’ poor relationship with school can be seen in a variety of ways. Both the students surveyed and those interviewed believed their friends did not value school as much as they did. Other indicators included a high absentee and drop out rate. Twenty-four percent (24%) of students were absent daily and 75% of students typically dropped out of school. Some students complained of a 60 minute bus commute to school contributing to the lack of attendance.

### Exosystem

The exosystem dealt with factors that indirectly impacted the adolescent. The extended family played an unusually important role in the Native American adolescents’ life. Many students chose a member of their extended family as their role model and during the interviews spoke of getting together on a regular basis. Numerous students had an adopted grandma in town or ate meals regularly with cousins. These individuals offered support and guidance to the adolescent.

### Macrosystem

The majority of students surveyed believed their community was very similar to other communities. It was unclear if this reflected an inability to envision a better life or if it showed true contentment with their community.

Students that were interviewed believed laws were constantly being broken in their community, especially drinking and curfew. As one student expressed, “laws are not really enforced.” Even so, they felt safe in town.

### Chronosystem

The biggest issue facing students in the chronosystem was feeling judged by the majority white culture. During the interviews many of the students spoke of being the victim of discrimination when traveling across county lines. They recounted stories of being followed in their cars or while shopping. One student said, “As soon as they see the license plate (indicating county of residence) we’re treated differently.” Some expressed bitterness and anger toward the prejudice, others had almost a feeling of acceptance, voicing the opinion that they were born into this.

### Conclusions and Recommendations

According to resiliency theory and Bronfenbrenner’s existence of individual and environmental factors of resiliency. According to Bronfenbrenner it is optimal when all systems are supportive of the individual, but it is not a prerequisite of resiliency.

The following are recommendations to foster resiliency in Native American adolescents residing on reservations:

1. Goal setting, and in particular career education, should be an integral part of the curriculum.
2. Teachers properly prepared and supported to meet the emotional and social needs of the students.
3. Research based instructional strategies implemented to encourage academics in order to encourage content mastery and a positive identity.
4. Provide a curriculum in concert with the Native American culture to build pride and self-respect.
5. Encourage empathy by fostering programs for peer helpers, tutors, and conflict resolution.

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