

# Resiliency Attributes Associated with the Educational Achievement among Students of Color with Learning Disabilities: A Conceptual Review

Diann Cameron Kelly

School of Social Work, Adelphi University, Garden City, NY, USA

Email: [kelly5@adelphi.edu](mailto:kelly5@adelphi.edu)

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## Abstract

There are millions of children, across America, who are classified as learning disabled before they complete their secondary school education. The purpose of this study is to identify those resiliency factors that have enabled students of color, identified as learning disabled, to academically and socially succeed in life. These factors are self-concept, family support and access to community/cultural linkages. It is presumed that a Black or Latino, identified as learning disabled, would experience academic success and excellence if the student had a positive self-concept, strong family support, and connection within a particular community or cultural group. It is anticipated that this conceptual review will provide an understanding of the association between resiliency and academic achievement. The dominant thought guiding this review is that academic excellence or achievement is a skill combining positive self-concept, and support from family and the community. This review will have critical implications for social work practice with the learning disabled, and reveal multicultural issues concerning the Black and Latino learning disabled population, who can have greater vulnerability because of their minority status.

## Keywords

Resiliency, Learning Disabilities, Students of Color, Self Concept, Family Support, Community Network

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## 1. Introduction

There are millions of children, across America, who are classified as learning disabled

before they complete their secondary school education. According to the federal statute, [U.S. Government Accountability Office \(1975\)](#), learning disabilities are defined as

“a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language spoken or written which may manifest itself in an imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell or [to perform] mathematical calculations.... The term does not include children with learning problems primarily the result [of] visual, hearing or motor handicaps, of mental retardation, or of environmental, cultural or economic disadvantages.”

([U.S. Government Accountability Office, 1975](#)).

Even with the enactment of the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)* ([U.S. Department of Education, 1990](#)), a number of students within this population do not receive their high school diploma or general equivalency degree (GED) enabling them to pursue productive work roles or higher education ([Allen-Meares et al., 1996](#); [Firth et al., 2010](#)). In addition, a disproportionate number of these students are Black and Latino ([Allen-Meares et al., 1996](#); [Connell et al., 1994](#); [Raines, 1989](#); [Robertson et al., 1998](#)).

The question remains: *are there resiliency factors significantly associated with educational achievement among learning disabled students of color?* The purpose of this review is to identify those resiliency factors that have enabled students of color, identified as learning disabled, to academically and socially succeed in life. Moreover, the results of the review seek to shed some light on the social work practice implications as to the protective factors needed in school settings to promote these resiliency factors among learning disabled students, especially those of color.

The hypothesis is that there are three primary resiliency factors associated with the educational achievement of learning disabled students of color. These factors are self-concept, family support and access to community/cultural linkages. It is presumed that a Black or Latino, identified as learning disabled, would experience academic success and excellence if the student had a positive self-concept, strong family support, and connection within a particular community or cultural group.

## 2. Review of the Literature

The resilient child is one who is able to demonstrate a number of skills and competencies indicating an ability to overcome adversity ([Bernard, 1997](#); [Reid & Hamby, 2025](#)). [Rutter \(1987\)](#), who has written extensively on this subject, states that psychosocial resilience refers to an individual's response to stress and difficulty. According to [Rutter \(1987\)](#), there are protective factors and risk factors in the discussion of resilience. The protective factors are critical to enhancing psychosocial resilience, while the risk factors diminish an individual's ability to overcome adversity ([Reid & Hamby, 2025](#); [Slomowitz et al., 2025](#)).

Stress-resilient children have strong sense of self-esteem and self-concept; their families are cohesive and lack discord or peril; and, the students have access to support systems - either cultural or community - that reinforce the child's social competencies (Bernard, 1997; Rutter, 1987; Connell et al., 1994; Reid & Hambry, 2025; Robertson et al., 1998; Slomowitz et al., 2025).

Resilience is an individual's ability to recover, adjust and adapt in situations where adversity, obstacles or challenges are present (Casali et al., 2024; Reid & Hambry, 2025; Slomowitz et al., 2025). Resilient individuals exhibit good outcomes and successes amid significant risks (Bernard, 1997; Casali et al., 2024). Further, resilient individuals exhibit high levels of social competence, even when under significant pressure and stress (Casali et al., 2024; Cooley & Ayres, 1988; Firth et al., 2010; Reid & Hambry, 2025).

Resilience is how we interact with our environment and the resources we call upon from and contribute to the environment when in stressful situations (Bernard, 1997). These resources, also noted as "*protective factors*" are not just external, but also internal (Bernard, 1997; Casali et al., 2024). They constitute our temperament, social competence, and our problem solving skills, as well as other resources, and these resources are applied when people face insurmountable odds (Rutter, 1987; Slomowitz et al., 2025; Stein et al., 2024).

Resilient youth include youth, who identify as learning disabled, and overcome risk factors impeding success in school (Connell et al., 1994; Robertson et al., 1998). They and other youth exhibit high self-esteem and positive self-concept, and a realistic understanding of their environment, its strengths and limitations (Connell et al., 1994; Robertson et al., 1998). In essence, they understand themselves within the structural and cultural contexts of society.

These youth not only have stable relationships with their parent or parents, but their parent(s) emotionally, physically and financially invest themselves in the lives of their children (O'Connor & Spreen, 1988). Finally, resilient youth are likely to have parents who exhibit good parental efficacy, or the belief that one has a positive influence over the outcomes in their child's life based on their parental investments (O'Connor & Spreen, 1988). Overall, the resilient youth is able to cope successfully in the face of change, adversity or risk.

The following discussion highlight the attributes of the conceptual model of self-concept, family support and community resources.

### **2.1. Self-Concept and Its Relationship to Resilience**

Academic failure is an issue many learning disabled students face (Black, 1974; Allen-Meares et al., 1996). The works of Reid & Hambry (2025) and Slomowitz et al., (2025) have demonstrated a positive correlation between the measurements of self-concept and achievement, even among learning disabled students. Of paramount importance is the work of Piers & Harris (1969) in the area of self-concept.

The Piers & Harris (1969) Children's Self-Concept Scale was developed to examine specific aspects of self-concept, especially in the area of academics. The idea

guiding this examination was that self-concept affects classroom behavior, as well as the expectations and self-efficacy of the child who is faced with different academic tasks (Azam et al., 2009; Black, 1974; Piers & Harris, 1969). The scale has 80 self-descriptive statements, which are worded in positive and negative language using a third-grade level of vocabulary (Piers & Harris, 1969). The median test-retest reliability coefficients were 0.73.

Studies were able to demonstrate that there is a significant relationship between self-concept and academic achievement, as well as a relationship between self-concept and intelligence (Black, 1974). These studies were completed using children who were not identified as learning disabled. Black (1974) proposed that there is a circular process between personality and learning, and that school failure and poor self-concept have a significant relationship. Using a sample of 50 children (25 non-learning disabled; 25 learning disabled), and applying the Piers-Harris Self-Concept Scale along with the WISC test, Black's (1974) study revealed a relationship between self-concept and achievement even among the learning disabled. The mean self-concept percentile score was 59.2 for non-disabled students and 44.2 for learning disabled students, with a mean age of 11 years.

Cooley and Ayres (1988) examined self-concept by using the Piers & Harris' scale. In the study, 93 White children from the ages of 10 to 14 years were examined. Of the sample, 46 students were identified as learning disabled (non-mentally retarded), and 47 students were identified as non-handicapped students. The subjects were recruited from all levels of socio economic status. Also, the learning disabled students each were certified by their school districts as having a learning disability, and an IEP (individualized education plan) was in effect, and the child received 1 to 4 hours of learning assistance or resource room each day (Cooley & Ayres, 1988). In this study, the learning disabled students had a lower mean self-concept score (50.8) than the non-handicapped students (58.3) (Cooley & Ayres, 1988). Cooley & Ayres (1988) supported the research that there is a correlation between self-concept and ability. While the research demonstrates significant relationship between self-concept and ability, how much of the association is attributed to other factors such as family and community?

## 2.2. Family & Community and the Relationship to Resilience

The issue of resilience is critical when discussing the protective factors of family and community. Several research studies demonstrate that socio-economic status, family involvement and community supports have a significant relationship to a child's academic success (Connell et al., 1994; O'Connor and Spreen, 1988).

In their study, O'Connor and Spreen (1988) examined educational and occupational achievement of children with learning disabilities. Using over 200 subjects who were in their adulthood, the researchers found that there is a relationship between parents' socio-economic status and educational achievement. Further, parents' education level as well as employment status can determine the academic success of a student.

Connell et al. (1994) propose that among students of color, primarily Black, “interpersonal contexts shape individuals’ beliefs about themselves within particular cultural endeavors, such as school...” as well as the fact that such beliefs precede actions that determine an individual’s commitment to the endeavor (primarily school) or dissatisfaction with the endeavor (p. 494). For Black children, the school environment and reinforcements are the contexts that shape their beliefs about themselves and affect their endeavors (Connell et al., 1994). Moreover, familial and community contexts shape a child’s belief about themselves.

Using the Panel Study of Income Dynamics (PSID, Connell et al. (1994) confirmed that parental involvement is an important measure in predicting educational outcomes. Moreover, socioeconomic status as well as access to resources was call identified as predictors for educational success (Connell et al., 1994). However, Connell et al. (1994) found that negative outcomes in student school experience can lessen parental involvement and also contributes to negative self-appraisals which can then contribute to negative educational outcomes.

Finally, communities can stifle youth’s development by being socially disorganized. In socially disorganized communities, we find greater anonymity and crime, low trust in public institutions, and low community attachment (Bernard, 1997; Connell et al., 1994). In addition, risk elements in communities include structural deficits in housing, compromised health care systems, or little or no political involvement among community members. Yet, when communities (even those with high numbers of impoverished families) have many social organizations and associations that include youth in the civic-political structure of the community and its governance, communities promote youth’s sense of meaning and their own positive attachment to the community (Bernard, 1997; Kuriakose & Amaresha, 2024; Reid & Hambry, 2025). Pro-youth communities are communities in which a youth is more likely to emerge as resilient and thriving.

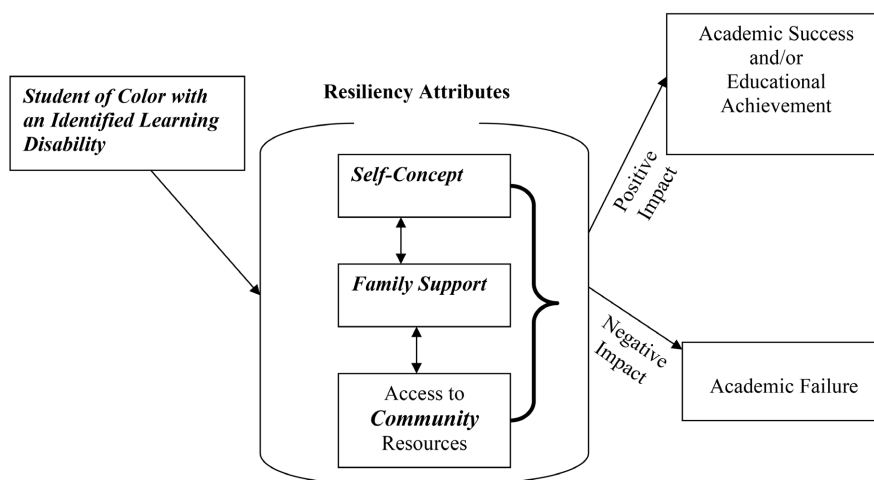
### 3. Conceptual Model

The conceptual model guiding this empirical work is compatible with the theoretical perspectives of Cooley & Ayres (1988) and Connell et al. (1994). If a youth, already vulnerable because of minority status and learning disability, has a positive self-concept, family support/parent involvement, and access to community support, the youth will experience academic success or educational achievement (Connell et al., 1994; Reid & Hambry, 2025; Robertson et al., 1998; Slomowitz et al., 2025; Stein et al., 2024).

The key to this model is the interrelationship between *self-concept*, *family support and community resources* (Figure 1). Therefore, if any of the resiliency attributes are weak or negative, it compromises the strengths of the other attributes, thus, diminishing the outcome of educational achievement.

*Self-concept* is defined as having a positive self-image, whereas the student is involved in sports or other extracurricular school activities, and that the student is not depressed or a substance user, student is not sexually promiscuous or a teen

parent, and the student finds school work challenging but not discouraging. Using Piers-Harris self-concept scale for children as well as the IAR, where each question measures the above definitions, operationalizes this variable.



**Figure 1.** Conceptual model.

*Family support* is measured by parents' attendance at IEP conferences, the number of hours parents assist the child with their homework, the number of meetings a parent has with their child's special education teacher, the number of phone conferences the parent has had with the child's teacher or school official, the amount of money the parent has spent to support their child's educational progress, parent can name child's closest friends, and parent can name the child's learning disability and report several strengths of the child.

The child's membership and frequent involvement in one or more community youth groups, membership and frequent involvement in religious organizations, and the number of community service hours the child performs each semester measure *community or cultural linkages*.

Resilience is not just a trait, but it is also a process (Reid & Hambry, 2025). Resilience is how we interact with our environment and the resources we call upon and apply and contribute to the environment when in stressful situations (Bernard, 1997). Our resources are not just external, but also internal—our temperament, social competence, and our problem solving skills. We apply these resources when faced with insurmountable odds.

The resilient youth is one who has a high self-esteem and positive self-concept, and a realistic understanding of their environment—its strengths and limitations (Casali et al., 2024). They have good problem solving skills, which they use with their environment, and present a great degree of empathy toward others. In essence, they understand themselves within society. Further, these children not only have a stable relationship with their parent, but they also have the experience where their parent(s) have emotionally, physically and financially invested their time, energy and resources in their child (Connell et al., 1994; O'Connor & Spreen,

1988; Robertson et al., 1998). Resilient children are likely to have parents who exhibit good parental efficacy, or the belief that one is a good parent and has an influence over the outcomes in their child's life based on their parenting investments.

Factors contributing to the disproportionate rate of Blacks and Latinos in special education include cultural bias, teacher attitudes and expectations, testing bias, poverty and special education placement processes to determine fit for special education (Codrington & Fairchild, 2012; Ford, 2012). Even when poverty is controlled, minority status is a contributing factor to placement in special education (Zhang et al., 2014). In referring for special education services, teachers' observations and assessments of the student is highly subjective (Codrington & Fairchild, 2012; Ford, 2012; Zhang et al., 2014).

Teacher bias is often based in deficit thinking and the belief that Black students have inherent weaknesses that preclude them from academic success. These teachers perceive cultural differences as deficiencies (Codrington & Fairchild, 2012; Ford, 2012). Instead of observing the child as energetic, they may see hyperactivity; instead of seeing creativity, they may see distractibility; and instead of noting assertiveness, they may see aggression (Codrington & Fairchild, 2012). When teachers make these assessments based on their subjectivity, they are seeing deficits in the child. Codrington & Fairchild (2012) cited a study that examined 364 elementary and middle schools and found that Black and Latino children were two to four times more likely to be referred for behavioral disturbances than White children exhibiting the same behavior. The researchers noted that these referrals often led to suspension or expulsion supported by zero tolerance policies that help create a school to prison pipeline.

Children who emerge from supportive communities, where the value of the community is to protect and guide their youth, you find youth very involved in service activities, and coming back to their "home base" to contribute their time, energy and their resources (Reid & Hambry, 2025). Pro-youth communities are communities in which a child is more likely to emerge as resilient and thriving.

#### 4. Implications

Teachers and school administrators need to be taught to identify the characteristics that are associated with depression and they need to be aware that children who exhibit these behaviors are eligible for evaluations and interventions in the school environment. However, such knowledge will have limited utility in schools where there is insufficient staff to evaluate student psychological needs and to provide intervention services. For example, it will not help the student to be labeled unless the label allows the child to receive appropriate interventions and is not merely stigmatizing. Without available resources for interventions, the identification of a student with risk will have little impact on the school's ability to ameliorate the student's condition and ensure that s/he receives "appropriate" educational services.

## 5. Summary

It is anticipated that this study will provide an understanding of the association between resiliency and academic achievement, and answer the question whether academic excellence is a gift or a skill. The dominant thought guiding this study is that academic excellence or achievement is a skill combining positive self-concept, perseverance and support from family and the community. The data, once compiled and analyzed, will have critical implications for social work practice with the learning disabled, and reveal multicultural issues concerning the Black and Latino learning disabled population, who can have greater vulnerability because of their minority status.

## Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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