

# Poetic Expressions:

## Students of Color Express Resiliency Through Metaphors and Similes

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Adolescence marks a turbulent period in human development. Young people (ages 13–18) experience a host of cognitive, physical, and psychological changes (e.g., puberty, egocentrism, identity formation, peer grouping; Hauser & Kasendorf, 1983). From a psychosocial perspective, adolescents are engaged in a conscious and unconscious search for an autonomous identity as they seek to understand their social roles in life (Erikson, 1968; Marcia, 1980). Their relationships with adults and peers influence their beliefs and opinions about their world during this search (Muuss & Porton, 1999). Hence, the socialization of shared knowledge and experiences with significant others partially construct the adolescent identity (Davies, 1993).

Researchers have noted that, for adolescent males of color<sup>1</sup>, the maelstrom of pubescence, combined with the difficult task of discovering a social role, is exacerbated by the psychological stresses of hypermasculinity, stereotyping of minority cultures, and the perception of “otherness” in a predominantly White society (Kunjufu, 2001; Spencer, 2001; Tatum, 1997; Wilson, 1992). Within school and nonschool settings, scholars have examined the links between these stresses and such phenomena as academic disidentification, dropout, delinquency, adolescent parenting, sexual violence, depression, suicide, and homicide (Ferguson, 2001; Fine, 1991; Gibbs, 1988; Noguera, 2003; Ogbu,

The after-school City School Outreach youth program captured the attention of high school male students by offering them a physically and psychologically safe environment to talk about issues they faced. The students of color who attended the program used various forms of creative written expression (i.e., poetry, spoken word, and hip hop) to document and share their lived realities as African American and Latino youth. An analysis of their writings and subsequent interviews revealed a variety of coping strategies and resources that these resilient adolescent males of color used to transcend adversity in their environment. When adolescent males of color have a strong sense of cultural pride and awareness, they are able to construct a healthy self-concept that assists them in acts of agency and resistance against negative psychological forces in their environment. These students used familial and nonfamilial support mechanisms, such as peers, church, and mentors, to assist them in reducing the stressful impact of racist stereotypes and community fragmentation. In light of these findings, teachers who wish to serve as a source of resilience in the lives of youth of color must make a concerted effort to acknowledge and appreciate differences and commonalities that exist among African American, Latino, and European-based mainstream culture. By building a healthy attitude toward their own culture, young people achieve the greater sense of direction and personal coherence needed for positive identity formation. When educators provide time and space for youth to examine and articulate their lives, social and intellectual climates form that can enrich and enliven their educational process.

## Summary

1987; Rodriguez, 1993; Solomon, 1988). Undeniably, much of research literature related to adolescent males of color frames this social group as low-achieving and high-risk.

Although we are recurrently apprised of the odds stacked against African American and Latino males, we are rarely presented with studies that highlight their ability to competently move beyond the risks that they encounter. Pollack (2005) stated that “American society has not yet sufficiently studied the experiences of boys and young men and thus has come to misunderstand how they truly feel and who they really are” (p. 68). Unfortunately, the pervasive societal impression of males of color continues to be grossly characterized as cold, deviant, animalistic, and dysfunctional (Cose, 2000; Dohrn, 2000; Madhubuti, 1991). The intent of this study is to offer a glimpse into the lives of adolescent males of color, peeling back the layers of those blanketed by such descriptions.

The work presented here elucidates the individual epistemologies of African American and Latino youth by focusing on how they demonstrate resilience in their environments, as well as how they resist larger, negatively constructed images of their respective cultures. In my work with these young people, I find such representations to be gravely imprecise, as well as unreliable and unhelpful in comprehending the complex and fully human lives that they lead. Positioning their words and feelings at the center of this sociological inquiry enables us to see them more completely and adjust our perceptions of how we view them.

As an African American who works closely with these boys, I fully recognize my position as a “cultural insider” in this research. Like them, I have also felt stigmatized as a male of color living within the larger, societal narrative of the marginalized other. Hearing their stories, I am reminded of my own adolescent years, where I too grappled with an ethnic identity within the nexus of social spaces that I occupied—school, home, church, and neighborhood. Arguably, it is the insider position that can create problems of personal bias when collecting data, when making sense of qualitative findings, and when presuming knowledge about participants (Ayers, 1990). Without question, there is a relative

level of empathy that connects me to these young men. However, there are limitations to my investigator status in that I do not share the same socioeconomic background, understanding, or personal history of how they have dealt with adversity in their own lives. Furthermore, it is each participant's text and testimony that informs me and urges me to rethink what resiliency looks like against the backdrop of shifting cultural dynamics—the kind of dynamics that bare reasonable contrasts between these students and myself, despite our shared gender and ethnicity. Thus, by honoring our personal differences, recognizing their distinct “narratives of identity” (Errante, 2000, p. 16), and gaining insight into how these boys name and rename their realities, insider bias is reduced and objectivity increased.

## Resiliency: Descriptions and Conceptual Frameworks

Descriptions of resiliency are variant across the research literature. Although no clear-cut definition of the term exists, it generally refers to a set of qualities that enable an individual to successfully adapt and transform in the face of adversity. Literature on adolescent resilience focuses more on the social and psychological forces that help individuals rise above difficult situations that would otherwise add to dysfunction. Levesque (2002) noted that resilience is identified through two main criteria: “First, there must have been a threat to the individual, such as the extent to which they live in a high risk environment. Second, the individual must have adapted or developed in a competent manner despite the adversity” (p. 161).

Research findings on adolescent resiliency reveal that whether individuals are able to cope with adversity depends on the environment in which they develop and the characteristics of the individual (Buckner, Mezzacappa, & Beardslee, 2003; Felner, Aber, Primavera, & Cauce, 1985). Hence, definitions of resilience and prosocial adaptive behaviors are not homogenous. They differ across culture, ethnicity, gender, age, and socioeco-

conomic status (Gilgun & Abrams, 2005). In other words, what may be an adaptive coping method for someone living in a high-risk community may be a maladaptive strategy in a more secure environment. Likewise, “people who come from backgrounds of privilege and physical security may develop a sense of entitlement that is maladaptive in other settings” (Gilgun & Abrams, 2005, p. 59). In any case, resiliency must be understood as a feature of both the individual and the environment—relative, flexible, and changing.

Studies on resiliency among African American and Latino youth are relatively scant in the research literature. Even though there is an abundance of work that focuses on why youth of color either fail or succeed academically (Cammarota, 2004; Conchas, 2001; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Juarez, 1996; Majors & Billson, 1992; Osborne, 2001), there is little research that concentrates on the dynamics that build resiliency within these young people. There is even less research that incorporates their voices into the discussion (Pollack, 2005). Given this limitation, the work of Hill (1998), Spitler, Kemper, and Parker (2002), and the ideas of other writers will be used to help unravel the multilayered nature of resiliency among young men of color.

Briefly stated, Hill’s (1998) study on low-income families of color examined resiliency through three central lenses: individual, family, and community. At the individual level, Hill’s theoretical model identified a strong sense of self-esteem and self-concept that served as protective mechanisms to assist youth in resisting negative influences such as low academic performance, substance abuse, and delinquent activities. At the family level, Hill pointed out that the resilient child comes from a home setting with effective communication, positive interaction, and strong family values. At the community level, Hill underscored community networking (e.g., the use of extended families, neighbors, nonparental adults, friends, spiritual/religious organizations) as a contributor to building resiliency. These three perspectives may intersect and serve as a collective, protective mechanism for youth and their families.

In their study of social barriers and resources in the lives of at-risk African American youth, Spitler et al. (2002) maintained that adolescents are more likely to achieve personal success when they have supportive relationships with family members and other adults. Spitler et al. described additional aspects of resiliency, including emotional security, positive feelings of self-worth, and an ability to control success and failure. Spitler et al. asserted that it is whether those resources are made available to the family (e.g., community networks, church involvement) that determines an adolescent's success or failure. Central to the frameworks of both Hill (1998) and Spitler et al. is the importance that the individual exhibits a high level of esteem and social competency. Although both works have an African American orientation, parallels will be drawn between African American and Puerto Rican boys in this research.

As previously stated, interpretations of resiliency vary across culture in both a micro and macro sense. For that reason, this research builds on the cultural ambiguity of resiliency by exploring this phenomenon within the framework of three teenage males' interactions with and responses to their social and cultural world. The students featured here employed various forms of written expression (i.e., poetry, spoken word, and hip hop rhymes) to document and voice their individual realities as African American and Latino youth. Their writings prompted this study by evoking questions regarding what strategies and resources adolescent males of color utilize to transcend circumstances that they deem as oppressive and what factors help advance their resilient natures. With this in mind, the next section discusses the research study methodology.

## **The Research Study: Location, Methods, and Data**

This study occurred at Lansing High School (LHS). LHS serves approximately 400 students and is located in an economically disadvantaged inner-city neighborhood. The student body

is roughly 60% Latino (Mexican and Puerto Rican) and 40% African American. Students either live in the immediate community or reside in close proximity. As a result of poor student attendance, high suspension rates, low standardized test scores, severe student behavioral problems, and insufficient parental involvement, LHS faced the impending threat of being closed by the city's board of education.

LHS housed an all-boys program called City School Outreach (CSO). School staff and community members who were concerned about male students' indifference towards academics and discipline combined forces to create the program. CSO was designed to capture the attention of students by offering them a physically and psychologically safe environment to talk about their problems. Program meetings were held for one hour after school twice a week. Because participation was voluntary, attendance fluctuated with meetings and never reached more than 10 students. Despite this low turn out, a core group of 4 boys attended regularly—3 of whom are featured in this study.

CSO meetings served as a cathartic space for young men to vent their feelings about topics pertinent to their lives—substance abuse, domestic violence, police brutality, race and racism, gang recruitment, teenage sex, and life after high school. By employing free writing and group dialogue activities, members shared personal stories that disclosed the various pressures and demands that they were receiving from voices in their respective environments (i.e., parents, teachers, friends, and media). I was one of the facilitators that helped organize program activities. The lives of these boys resonated with the adolescent experiences of other program facilitators and me, and we recognized CSO as a valued space for boys to express their thoughts, voice their cultural narratives of other, and collectively develop strategies for individual problems.

In one of our after-school sessions, I introduced a topic that went largely unaddressed by the school's curriculum: stereotypical images of people of color in society and in mass media. I asked students to question cultural politics and social differences

as they presently knew them. As students became increasingly engaged in group dialogue, it was apparent that this activity enabled them to discuss and analyze, in their own language, existing sociopolitical inequities that they openly regarded as problematic. In a subsequent meeting, I asked the boys to bring a self-composed piece that artistically conveyed their feelings on the subject. They could express themselves in any writing genre in which they felt comfortable. The works (three of which are examined here) assertively challenged popular social perceptions of African American and Latino youth who are considered at risk.

Although the three student writings that are featured in this study were comparable to those of their peers, their selection was based on consistent program attendance and the participants' willingness to talk about their artistic pieces in more depth. Although the fourth core member openly discussed his work in CSO meetings, he was not interested in being tape recorded or providing an interview for this research. Of course, all four boys were informed that participation was voluntary and any reluctance in offering personal commentary for this study was understandable and would not impact their relationship with CSO or any of its members.

This inquiry used an interpretive design to better understand students' personal perspective. Thus, all data (i.e., writings and interviews) were treated as a form of discourse to be interpreted. An interpretive design, as Schwandt (as cited in Racher & Robinson, 2002) noted, is necessary when trying to understand "the complex world of lived experiences from the view of those who live it. . . . The focus is on the process by which meanings are created, negotiated, sustained, and modified within a specific context of human action" (p. 469).

My interpretative methods included on-site research, sustained social interaction with participants, nonstructured interviews, participatory data analysis, and interpretations of subjective meanings found within student commentary and writings. Sustained social interaction with the three participants essentially occurred over LHS's 2003–2004 academic



year, primarily in CSO meetings. Nonstructured interviews served as the chief method of data collection. Each participant was individually interviewed for approximately 30 minutes on one occasion. The interviews were tape recorded and transcribed. Participants were asked several background questions related to home life, their in- and out-of-school interests, and ways in which they would describe themselves. Nonstructured interviews were also used to acquire student commentary about their work, allowing for a better understanding of the writings. Participants were informed that pseudonyms would be used and that their interviews would be transcribed and edited. In order to preserve their unique voice, individual vernacular and colloquialisms were kept intact.

The interpretation and analysis of the student writings came in three phases. First, after document collection, I examined and familiarized myself with the student texts and searched for significant themes. These themes were primarily filtered through the theoretical lenses of Hill (1998) and Spitler et al. (2002). The second interpretation and analysis phase functioned to maximize objectivity by collaborating with students and asking them to explain their text (i.e., various metaphors and messages) and to reflect on their mindset at the time of writing it. This teamwork approach served to expand my thoughts on the writings in question, to rethink my personal impressions about the authors, and to understand more fully how adversity and resilience played out in their lives. The third and final analysis phase corresponded to the interpretation of both student text and interviews in combination with the conceptual framework.

## Derrick Redefines Himself

Derrick was 17 years old and described himself as “curious, funny, and energetic” (personal interview, March 2, 2004). He did well in English and social studies, but was struggling slightly with algebra (personal interview, March 2, 2004). His hobbies included photography and writing poetry. Derrick resided with

his mother, father, and older sister in an apartment building located only blocks from the school. He had been in CSO since its inception during the second semester of the 2002–2003 academic year. He reported finding the program to be helpful in voicing personal issues. At the end of the school year, he graduated from LHS and attended an out-of-state university. His church held an “off to college party” (personal interview, March 2, 2004) for him, where funds were raised to help pay for his flight. He called his poem, “Misperceptions.”

Clutched purses on elevator doors behind suspicion.  
 Underneath submission sometimes you prejudge a Negro  
     because of the misperceived vision.  
 “First fired, last hired,” a Negro wrote.  
 Now, you nod up and frown at them damn Negro folks.  
 We rise through feces and then stepped on the dirt.  
 Pimp smacked the avenue and then did the Jerk,  
 The Bus Stop, the Jitterbug and then headed back to the  
     fields to do your work, On the field where you raised  
     our mother’s skirts  
 And stuck a plow in our culture.  
 We tried to grow but we couldn’t see past the white  
     vultures,  
 Forcing us into their culture.  
 Shots fired at our heroes and now we’re placed in a Dob  
     hat  
 With gator shoes and a dime sack.  
 The promise of it was to make our lives better  
 So little Johnny wouldn’t have to rock a passed down  
     leather in gorilla weather, And he still does.  
 But now he rocks it in a hip hop, charismatic shrug,  
 And in the seams of his pocket you can indicate the  
     drugs.  
 I can’t tell you little Johnny’s story because you might  
     misperceive the intellect, Might confuse his concept  
     for reject, but I guess that’s just misperception. (col-  
     lected from student on December 9, 2003)

When asked about his mindset at the time of writing this poem, Derrick stated:

I wrote this piece at a time in my life when I really started to think and was changing and seeing what was happening around me. I wasn't really hanging around some of my friends that I grew up with. They weren't thinking the way I was thinking. They were thinking negative about the hood, themselves, and just life. I was thinking more positive about all that. It was a time when I was undergoing a transformation, becoming more critical. (personal interview, March 2, 2004)

Derrick's comments above indicate that he had already been engaged in a process of redefining the sociocultural meanings of his identity. From "clutched purses" (a metaphor denoting society's fear of African Americans) to "Johnny's story" (allegory expressing the general perception of urban youth), there is ample evidence of Derrick's realization of racial stereotypes, historical injustices, and the present-day struggles that African Americans face.

Derrick further commented:

With this entire piece, I was really trying to say that Blacks came from a negative situation; we were slaves and underwent a lot of negative things. How dare somebody assume anything about us when we made something positive out of all the negative that happened? We kept going. Misperceptions and stereotypes influence me not to succumb to them, even though some can be bad. I mean, everything isn't a stereotype just because I'm Black and I like hip hop and soul food. (personal interview, March 2, 2004)

From this statement, it is apparent that Derrick is conscious of negative societal attitudes towards his racial group. He is able to cope with this adversity, in part, because he has developed a

positive sense of self (or racial identity) through a kind of “cultural connection.” The multiple uses of the pronouns *us* and *we* hint of this and suggest that this young man finds fortitude in knowledge of his culture. Stressing the weight of this vital resource, Graham (2001) claimed that awareness of culture

provides the vehicle for affirming humanity and resistance . . . where falsehoods that have been told about Black people can be challenged and through this process knowledge can be used to assist families and young people in finding solutions to problems in their everyday lives. (p. 70)

Because that self-worth hinges partly upon the knowledge and expectation that he is able to make an important contribution to his family or community, a strong cultural base not only serves as a protective barrier that contributes to resiliency, but also enables a student of color to develop positive views about himself, which can lead to better performances in and outside of school (Hill, 1998; Kunjufu, 1995; Phinney, Cantu, & Kurtz, 1997).

Consistent with Hill’s (1998) framework, a strong self-concept functions to guard the individual against negative influences, such as racial stereotypes, that can destroy self-perception. Derrick’s ability to positively transform his adversity can be viewed as an expression of individual power through the negotiation of an adaptive nature. It can also be seen as a personal act of agency that helps free him from the constraints of social adversity. Curtis-Tweed (2003) maintained that “to form a sense of agency, people of African descent must rely on self-perceptions, independent of the images reflected by the dominant culture or by those who shape the dominant culture” (p. 401). In this context, Derrick defied ethnic stereotypes by not internalizing their distorted messages and surrendering to their general acceptance as truth. As he phrased it in his poem, “Underneath submission sometimes you prejudge a Negro because of the misperceived vision” and “I can’t tell you little Johnny’s story because you might misperceive the intellect, might confuse his concept

for reject, but I guess that's just misperception" (from the poem "Misperceptions" collected from student on December 9, 2003).

Observing Derrick's resilience at the family and community level, there is no question that support systems (e.g., his parents, older sister, extended family, church members) aid this young man in advancing his situation (i.e., his imminent venture into higher education). However, given the scope of this article, I focused on his involvement in CSO. I felt a discussion of the program offered further insight into community factors that promoted Derrick's "transformation." For instance, when asked about his changing mindset, Derrick stated,

My new perspective came from things I saw on the streets, read in books, and learned in CSO. Everybody comes to a time when they know something's not right, and they start questioning it. The program helped me with that. (personal interview, March 2, 2004)

CSO provided an in-school space where boys could gather and experience a level of intimacy that the regular classroom did not provide. Derrick's participation in CSO gave him the opportunity to vent his personal concerns while, at the same time, developing a kinship with peers and mentors (personal interview, March 2, 2004). These outcomes are consistent with Hill (1998) and Spitler et al. (2002) who regard supportive, nonfamilial relationships as a major protective barrier for at-risk African American and Latino youth. Hall (2006) also recognized the fundamental need for role models in the lives of youth of color, particularly for those who live in harsh conditions or who have limited access to positive images.

Although CSO was a space for boys to gather and be themselves, equally important to its operation was the curriculum that tapped into the cultural side of students. As adult males of color who were aware of the strength that is derived from knowing one's heritage, we introduced literature and activities that prompted the boys to question and rethink their cultural role in society. By drawing connections between their culture

and everyday experiences, we noticed that many of them began to employ cultural awareness as a tool to analyze negative circumstances that they dealt with on a daily basis. Derrick's poetic text and personal commentary is just one example of his use of cultural awareness as an adaptive coping method. Two additional examples are presented below.

### Brian's Call For Action

Brian was 16 years old and described himself as "courageous and energetic" (personal interview, March 4, 2004). His commitment to academics kept him on the honor roll, and his above-average height assured him a position on the school's basketball team. Brian enjoyed music, watching TV, and being active in his neighborhood block club (personal interview, March 4, 2004). Through his association with the club, Brian was engaged in neighborhood clean-up projects and organizing block parties. Brian lived with his mother, aunt, and younger brother. Through regular CSO visits, Brian found a place to openly share his feelings regarding school, family, and life (personal interview, March 4, 2004). He called his hip hop verse, "It's On You."

In my hood, we call it home.

You can gather on the corner or like some, choose to  
stand alone.

I don't condone puffing chronic or smoking crack.

Brothers being scripted, but don't know how to act.

What's the facts?

What's up?

What you going to do?

Hustle your hood for cheddar or stay your ass in school?

It's cool.

I know you going to do what you do.

I choose to represent for those who couldn't choose.

Don't snooze.

Every brother ain't sniffing blow.

If I represent one, then I'm the one with control.  
 What's the power on my block?  
 Who knows?  
 Is it the Man, TV, or my neighborhood foes?  
 Look at your watch.  
 Peep the time and check the date.  
 We got to deviate, conversate, illuminate, retaliate.  
 Make chains of hope and not hate.  
 This rhyme be food for your soul.  
 It's time to save lives and decrease the death toll. (col-  
 lected from student on December 9, 2003)

In response to his writing, Brian remarked:

The rap is basically about growing up and the things I've seen. I grew up on the west side and there's drugs everywhere you turn. Drug dealing and violence is something that always happens and people neglect to mention how they sometimes grow up around that stuff. It seems to be a constant cycle and people don't know how to break it. That's why I wrote, "Brothers being scripted and don't know how to act." You can be part of the problem or part of the solution. You know, you can follow the script or you can flip it. (personal interview, March 4, 2004)

Brian's hip-hop lyrics and comments above reveal that he is also aware of destructive societal influences and displays a sound capacity to withstand the risks that they pose. Brian perceived these social dynamics as cyclical, referring to them as "being scripted" or what is also termed *script-based knowledge*—a concept that helps explain the connection between internalized deviant behavior and subsequent manifestations of that behavior (Vorrasi & Garbarino, 2000). Yet, instead of performing these scripted acts, Brian's words suggested that he is resisting them. Jordan (2005) observed that although resistance is not typically considered a component of resilience, for those marked as "other" (i.e., women, persons of color, gay males, and lesbians),

“the capacity to develop resistance to the distorting and hurtful influences impinging on them as a function of their marginality (and also contributing to their marginality) is essential” (p. 80).

Brian went on to state the following:

Unlike what a lot of people believe, not all Black folks are on drugs. Even if everyone thinks that, then I’m saying I’m not. I’m choosing to continue the struggle that folks like Dr. King and Malcolm X went through. I’m choosing to represent with those who couldn’t choose. . . . The rap is calling for change. And, if you really want to make that change, you have to get with others and organize for it to happen. The choice is ours as people of the community. It’s really on us. (personal interview, March 4, 2004)

From these poignant words, Brian resisted the negative social beliefs of his racial group. He clearly perceives his world as positively transformable and, in one sense, has begun to act upon it by means of cultural awareness. Evidence of this is seen in his embracing of historical role models like Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X—African Americans who embody a spirit of resilience and ethnic pride. Brian also demonstrated a personal act of agency. From the data collected, we witnessed him rising above his direct environment and the larger societal relations of power that he identified. This is apparent in Brian’s questioning of entities that he perceived as having an influence on his block, as well as his entreaty for community members to stand together against these forces (“Make chains of hope and not hate.”).

Consistent with Hill’s (1998) model of resiliency at the individual level, Brian’s resilient nature is, in part, edified through his internalization of personal responsibility and the significance that he places on education. Hill maintained that students showing a commitment to their schooling generally have more positive outcomes. Education, for Brian however, not only made him a presence on his school’s honor roll, but also served as a means of rethinking and reshaping his world. He believed that this was realized by first seeking consciousness through education, which



held the potential of later becoming a community enterprise involving divergence, dialogue, awareness, and protest (“It’s time to deviate, converse, illuminate, retaliate.”).

Looking at the family and community level, Brian felt that organizing amongst community members was part and parcel to wielding change in one’s environment, which most likely explained his involvement in CSO and his block club (personal interview, March 4, 2004). Indeed, his membership in these organizations may have served to expand his orientation towards schooling and community activism, as well as his own resiliency. Spitler et al. (2002) affirmed that adolescent involvement in both formal and informal community support groups is a significant factor in building resiliency, because young people can gain multiple supportive resources to guide them in making smooth transitions from adolescence into adulthood.

With regard to the value of community support groups, the network that existed between school staff, mentors, and neighborhood residences conveyed a strong sense of community connectedness to CSO student members. Research indicates that when students begin to see more connections between school and family, they begin to show not only an improved attitude toward their education, but also a greater regard for community and citizens (Berkowitz & Bier, 2005; Spitler et al., 2002). Certainly, the knowledge that Brian has gained from both school and nonschool support groups has encouraged him to emerge as a creatively active force, opting to figuratively “flip the script” within his environment. Put another way, Brian is resisting maladaptive behaviors by promoting a way of life that razes the status quo and breaks cycles of self-destruction and community disintegration.

## **Living Outside the Box: Rolando’s Story**

Rolando was 17 years old and described himself as “an Afro-Puerto Rican” (personal interview, March 9, 2004). At school, he did well in social studies, but struggled in mathematics (personal

interview, March 9, 2004). Rolando's hobbies included reading, writing, and playing video games. He shared a three-bedroom apartment with his mother, younger sister, and his one-year-old son. Rolando claimed that the support he received from his mother was invaluable in helping to rear his child. He stated that he wanted his son to avoid the pressure of street and gang life that he endured (personal interview, March 9, 2004). He titled his work, "Statistically Speaking."

Yo' Boriqua!  
 What's up?  
 That's what I usually hear, when I step outside now.  
 It's kind of funny because before I found out about my  
     culture, my nickname used to be Mookie.  
 That's what they used to call me in my barrio known as  
     Lansing.  
 So how does society see me?  
 Black, problem;  
 Puerto Rican, more problems.  
 Education, not possible because of past generalizations.  
 This is how I see it.  
 Black—better education.  
 Puerto Rican—more education.  
 Life—better get back cause I got the attitude of an  
     African American, a Rican, plus I'm a Pisces.  
 Open your eyes and peer deep into my insides to realize  
     my skin is brown, but I got Puerto Rican pride.  
 So if defining statistically by letter had to be my test, well  
     then—  
     S—statistics,  
     T—talk,  
     A—about,  
     T—the,  
     I—ignorant,  
     S—suggestions,  
     T—that,  
     I—idiots,

C—casually,  
 A—accept,  
 L—learning,  
 L—less,  
 Y?

Because when it comes to accomplishing my goals, I've completed my quest. (collected from student on December 9, 2003)

When asked to comment on his spoken word text, Rolando explained:

This poem is about my life, being adopted and accepted by two different cultures. . . . It's about how society generalizes me or perceives me. What do they see me as on the outer shell? We [society] quickly label people with statistics, defining who a person is based on their race and classifying them. This poem is also about looking outside of that, going outside the box. I'm not going to fit inside anybody's category and be what they want me to be. I'm going to be something better than that—I'm going to be me and I'm still going to be accepted. (personal interview, March 9, 2004)

Rolando's writing, and his clarification of it, provides further insight into how adolescent males of color show resilience in challenging the broader, socially constructed identity of youth of color. Like Brian, Rolando also urged society to wake up ("Open your eyes and peer deep into my insides.") and become aware of racial characterizations that unfairly label and homogenize individual epistemologies. Mindful of his bicultural heritage and the social stigmas attached to it, Rolando refused to be placed inside a proverbial box. Instead, he chose to define himself by his lifestyle. In his fight against being labeled, Rolando demonstrated a kind of reflexivity that defied the institutionalized practices of the dominant culture that seek to silence and obscure ethnic identity (Delgado-Bernal, 2002).

When asked about the bicultural references in the text, Rolando remarked:

I define my culture as my lifestyle, how I live being African American and Puerto Rican. It's just the way you go about living your life and culture, celebrating things of culture and showing pride. . . . Most of what I know I've learned outside of school, talking with my friends—some are African American, some are Puerto Rican. We came to the conclusion that we have similar pasts and present struggles. We're treated unequally by society, you know, different privileges like we're underpaid in the workforce. It was worse back then, but we still have to grow in some places. I think we'll all grow if we stick together. (personal interview, March 9, 2004)

Observing Hill's (1998) individual level, Rolando has clearly internalized positive values (i.e., cultural pride and esteem) that protect him against negative influences and social pressures. However, Quiroz (2001) noted that for Latinos, whether bicultural or assimilated, trying to construct an identity within the dominant culture is not easy. These individuals face "an ongoing dilemma of negotiation, resilience, and angst (Quiroz, 2001, p. 333). Ogbu and Simons (1998) claimed that, despite the predicaments associated with identity construction, "minorities are also autonomous human beings who actively interpret and respond to their situation. Minorities are not helpless victims" (p. 157). From Rolando's own words, we can see that he is not helpless in opposing conditions associated with the racial mark of "other." Indeed, he is able to "interpret and respond to" his differentiated status by declaring, "I'm going to be something better than that—I'm going to be me and I'm still going to be accepted" (personal interview, March 9, 2004).

Looking at Hill's (1998) family and community level, Rolando expressed that he receives adequate financial and emotional support from his mother and younger sister (personal interview, March 9, 2004). He also stated that a majority of what

he knows about his culture was learned outside formal education (i.e., from friends; personal interview, March 9, 2004). As previously discussed, the supportive nature of nonfamilial relationships act as a protective barrier, as well as a determinant of success for African American adolescents (Hill, 1998; Spitler et al., 2002). The comments that Rolando makes regarding his friends should be underscored here. This adolescent male found a degree of strength in the collectiveness of those who share “similar pasts and present struggles” (personal interview, March 9, 2004).

Hall (2006) claimed that peer circles often serve as locations for sharing social and cultural information that youth of color consider legitimate and valuable sources of knowledge. This is particularly true if students perceive schools and classrooms as sites that undervalue their cultures, languages, and experiences. For adolescent males of color, peer groups can be tremendous knowledge bases that foster resiliency, most notably in the absence of adult role models (Wolin & Wolin, 1995). Franklin (1994) described the following situation:

For the Black male experiencing much conflict in attempts to separate from his primary group<sup>2</sup>, the Black male peer group often serves as an anchor. He often finds refuge with those who are undergoing the same conflicts, apprehensions, pleasures, and preparation for adulthood . . . the peer group slowly becomes more and more a significant self-validating agency supplanting, for a time, the primary group's importance to the Black male. (p. 13)

From talking with his African American and Puerto Rican peers, Rolando has constructed a greater understanding of his bicultural heritage. One of the key factors of resiliency among youth of color is that they not only have a positive self-image of themselves, but they also find emotional security with others (Spitler et al., 2002). Rolando's peer group experience has expanded his knowledge of his dual culture and enhanced his positive feelings related to self-esteem and self-worth—two

essential components in resiliency (Buckner et al., 2003; Hill, 1998; Levesque, 2002).

## Implications for Research

In view of the limited research on resiliency among African American and Latino boys, the contribution of this qualitative work rests in its ability to bring the marginalized voices of young males of color to the center of sociological discourse. Their experiences readjust our preconceived notions surrounding their identities, focusing less on pathology and more on promise. Although the preceding discussion investigates the personal perspectives of adolescent males of color, acknowledging these narratives as valid sources of knowledge, it also offers an additional lens to look through in comprehending the multifaceted nature of resiliency within a sociocultural context. The qualitative methods used in this study provide an alternative direction in the generation of theory, as well as the implementation of future inquiries, related to resiliency among African American and Latino children and adolescents.

This research suggests that when adolescent males of color have a strong sense of cultural pride and awareness, they are able to construct healthy self-concepts that assist them in acts of agency and resistance against negative psychological forces. The three young men in this study indeed illustrate a burgeoning autonomous identity that is socially and culturally rooted in family and community. The resiliency models of Hill (1998) and Spitzer et al. (2002) informed the analysis of student writings and commentary. Their work, as well as others, gave insight into how these boys, stereotypically portrayed as helpless and dysfunctional, are able to competently and self-sufficiently transcend adverse situations and influences.

Also evidenced in the findings are the students' use of familial and nonfamilial support mechanisms (i.e., peers, church, and mentoring resources) to assist them in reducing the stressful impact of racist stereotypes and community fragmentation. It

should be noted that, as pubescent boys, their oppositional stance should not be viewed as some form of teenage angst. Quite the contrary, it is apparent from their writings and commentary that these young men possess a strong sense of direction, self-esteem, and self-worth—qualities viewed as essential aspects of resilience (Buckner et al., 2003; Levesque, 2002).

Researchers must continually unpack how resiliency is defined and how it looks across cultures, acknowledging it as a relative and amorphous phenomenon. While this study lightly addressed socially and culturally relevant school curriculum as an instrument for building resiliency, future inquiries could explore curricular practices on a deeper level. Research on educational activities that center on writing and critical literacy as vehicles of voice and agency may prove favorable in understanding resiliency within socially and culturally specific locations and actions.

Additional areas of research could also build on the idea of resistance being an aspect of resilience (Jordan, 2005), specifically amongst school-aged males of color labeled as antisocial or deviant. In this context, research would be dedicated to understanding breaches in classroom academic affairs (e.g., arguing with teachers, sleeping during lessons, cutting class) as demonstrations of resiliency within youth who are defying oppressive institutional forces (e.g., classroom rules and regulations). Although such school violations are generally understood as delinquent, culturally they could be viewed as a form of protest that aids young people of color in building internal protective barriers against adversity.

## Implications for Practice

Once again, the young men of color featured in this article represent a larger body of voices that exist within the margins of curriculum discussions and policymaking decisions. Educators, administrators, counselors, and youth workers should strive to bring these realities into the center of their daily practices. Their knowledge and willingness to share their experiences can

strengthen the understanding of how youth of color utilize their aptitude and talents to live, cope, and survive in both school and nonschool settings. By valuing their insights, we not only assist these students in further developing their resilience, but we also provide others with the opportunity for enhancing practice.

It is clear from participant interviews and writings that these young men are striving to maintain a positive cultural identity, in spite of their awareness of stereotyped ethnic notions. They are also consciously resisting society's tendency to categorize them based on social and cultural norms. Within school settings, the research literature reports that African American and Latino students, primarily males, are commonly perceived as more aggressive and are punished more frequently than their White counterparts (Bireda, 2002; Dohrn, 2000; Hall, 2006; Irvine, 2003). Ethical educators must make a conscious effort to resist the inclination to cast blanket assumptions over youth of color. To that end, teachers and administrators must come to terms with their own social and cultural biases. If educators choose to serve as a source of resilience in the lives of youth of color, then they must make a genuine effort in acknowledging and appreciating the differences, as well as the commonalities, that exist among African American, Latino, and European-based mainstream culture.

Second, just as adults need to reconcile their own cultural biases, so do children and adolescents. Recognizing that attitude is an aspect of identity, it follows that by building a healthy attitude towards one's culture, young people can achieve the greater sense of direction and personal coherence needed in successful identity formation. As observed with Derrick, Brian, and Rolando, knowledge of cultural heritage proved to be a self-affirming and fortifying instrument in helping these boys to be agents of individual and social change. Hence, teachers and administrators can develop curricula that offer all students access to honest information about their respective histories and cultures, and how each intersects with the other. Such access may serve to build strong student self-images and positive attitudes toward peers. By creating spaces of multiple discourses, educators can engage



young people in exploring the diversity of thoughts, identities, and ways of knowing that work together in shaping their world.

Lastly, the above inquiry emphasizes the essentialism of student voices. When schools provide students with a breathing space to openly express their identities, they create an atmosphere that advances certain resiliency-building factors—a sense of belonging, feelings of safety and security, mutual respect, and a high self-esteem that is supported by adults (Henderson & Milstein, 2003). The after-school program discussed in this study employed a curriculum that utilized voice as a tool of expression and self-empowerment. In CSO, group dialogue served to increase students' prosocial behaviors while mutually constructing knowledge between students and facilitators. By providing spaces for youth to articulate their lives, educators can reduce student resistance and silencing and build social and intellectual climates that enrich and enliven the educational process.

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## End Notes

- 1 For this research, males of color specifically refer to that gender within African American, Latino, and/or Chicano ethnic groups. People of color, in general, is an inclusive category including African, Asian, Hispanic, Native American, and third-world people.
- 2 The primary group for African American males reflects mainstream societal values, but from the perspective of the African American community. Although these values espouse equality, freedom, and democracy, they are seen as “ideal rather than real” (Franklin, 1994, p. 13).

