Reframing Student Oppositional Behavior Through the Theoretical and Ideological Lens of Resistance and Resilience

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Abstract

This critical ethnography explored the experiences of student and staff participants at an alternative urban high school through the theoretical and ideological lens of resistance. The study sought to answer the question, "Why did students in Restorative Justice classes resist engaging in meaningful dialogue or were academically disengaged altogether? The emergent grounded theory was analyzed through the lens of Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Systems Theory and Spencer's Phenomenological Variant of Ecological Systems Theory. Findings include: (1) resistance, when viewed through the lens of resilience provides a valuable theoretical lens for understanding the relationship between students at risk, schools and the broader society, and examining the behaviors (corrective problem solving strategies) youth at risk employ to resolve the stress and dissonance in their lives; (2) the cumulative effects of one's personal, cultural, and historical experiences/events not only consciously and unconsciously shape one's life, but can have a detrimental and enduring impact on all aspects of development.

Keywords: at-risk schools/students, critical ethnography, identity formation, resistance, resilience

Introduction/background

Theories of resistance and identity formation during adolescence have provided valuable insight into the resistant behaviors of marginalized students within the context of social class, race, ethnicity, and/or gender. These insights counter the negative connotations associated with the behaviors (i.e., deviant, defiant, problem youth). Nevertheless, the dominant discourse and response to student oppositional behavior as a form of resistance in America continues to stereotype, stigmatize and alienate these youth, thereby effectively disregarding a student's lived reality and its critical role in relation to the process of identity formation. Subsequently, this critical ethnography explored the meanings student and staff participants ascribed to their experiences at a small alternative urban high school and/or in the classroom through the theoretical and ideological lens of resistance. This article highlights the need to reframe our (e.g., teachers, social workers, community resource officers, and other school personnel) concept of student oppositional behavior through the theoretical and ideological lens of resistance and resilience. This article addresses the question:

> *Why did the students in Restorative Justice classes resist engaging in meaningful dialogue or were academically disengaged altogether?*

Contextual literature

The study situated the lives of American adolescents within the contextual literature on education, poverty, and adolescent development/behavior in America. Thought-provoking scholars highlight the influence of neoliberal ideology on the culture of public education in the U.S. They argue, the systematic reform of America's public education system into replicas of for-profit corporations has successfully failed our children. Moreover, because of federal policies and

practices such as No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and Race to the Top (RTTT), educators in America today are held hostage by standardized testing and accountability (Giroux, 2004; Grande, 2008; Harvey, 2005; Hursh, 2007; Lipman, 2008; Noddings, 2005; Ravitch, 2010; Saltman, 2012). For children already at risk because of class, race/ethnicity, demographic location, immigration status, and/or gender, the current state of education in America not only serves to exacerbate or (re) produce the social inequalities that exist, limiting their possibilities to realize their fullest potential and achieve social mobility; but relegates them to/conditions them for a subordinate role in the workforce (Ainsworth, 2002; Bowles & Gintis, 2011; Cannella, 2008; Hursh, 2007; Kearns, 2011; Lipman, 2011; Ravitch, 2010; Su & Jagninski, 2013).

The existing literature on poverty in the U.S. brought attention to the perils of youth at risk in U.S. society. Numerous analyses detail policy impasses related to debates about self-help ideologies and structural critiques. More critically, a variety of studies also detail the effects of neighborhood and community strain on schooling, along with emerging research that assesses the impact of community forces, like poverty, cognitive development and the formation of identity, and the unconscious normalization of the reproduction of a racialized social class within the structures of schooling (Anyon, 2005; Books, 2000 Bauman & Tester, 2001; Felner & DeVries, 2013; Garbarino, 1995; Giroux, 2004; Jaime-Diaz & Mendez-Negrete, 2021; Phillips & Pittman, 2003; Rank, 2004; Seattle Jobs Initiative, 2015; Steinberg, 2014; Vorassi & Garbarino, 2000).

Theoretical frameworks

The works of progressive educational reformer John Dewey (1916, 1976) and critical pedagogy theorists Paulo Freire (1970, 1973, 1998, 2007) and Henry Giroux (1983, 1988, 2004; 2006, 2012) inspired the theoretical framework for the study. Recognizing how crucial education is to the development of the young and the ongoing revitalization of a democratic society, each of these scholar's unique contribution to a philosophy of education offers valuable insights into the importance of students connecting with the "real world" through experience, critical dialogue, praxis–critical reflection and action, and resistance in the hope of positive transformation of their immediate, if not wider, communities.

According to Giroux (2006), resistance is a valuable theoretical and ideological lens for understanding and thinking about the relationship between schools and the broader society, examining the multiple ways subordinate groups experience educational failure within social structures such as schools and reimagining empowering realities by way critical pedagogy. Giroux (2006) states:

> [The concept of resistance] depicts a mode of discourse that rejects traditional explanations of school failure and oppositional behavior and shifts the analysis of oppositional behavior from the theoretical terrains of functionalism and mainstream educational psychology to those of political science and sociology. (p. 35)

Therefore, through the lens of Giroux's (2006) resistance theory, we come to understand the causes and meanings that undergird how youth experience education failure. Thus, oppositional behavior as a form of resistance shifts from being seen as deviant and learned helplessness to being understood as a form of behavior that reflects moral and political indignation. Moreover, oppositional

behavior is not stereotyped; instead, all forms of oppositional behavior must be critically assessed as to whether the behavior enriches human life or is a destructive force of fundamental human values.

In line with Giroux's notion of resistance, Willis (2003) puts a different spin on oppositional behavior. Oppositional behavior, Willis (2003) theorizes, is the natural albeit unintentional consequences of three waves of economic and technical modernization by way of "top-down" practices and initiatives by power brokers and policy planners who ignore the creative ways youth from "popular classes" (dominated, subordinate, and working-class groups) bring into play the school as the site and instrument through which cultural responses to material conditions are countered (p. 391). Willis (2003) contends that the "bottom-up" responses of youth from popular classes come from a completely different place, informed by different social perceptions, practices, and assumptions. Instead of seeing resistant cultures as pathological, in Willis's estimation, acts of resistance reveal elements of rationality. He states, "These resistant cultures supply cultural forms and shields from stigma to blunt the cruel edge of individualism and meritocracy in capitalist societies" (p. 394).

Conversely, Giroux's (2006) critique of Paul Willis's work, Learning to Labour, illustrates that resistance can also thwart the possibilities for emancipation and social transformation. In Learning to Labour, Willis's 1972–1975 study reveals how a "counterculture" existed among White working-class males or the "lads" from an English industrial midlands school during the mid-1970s that rejected the status given to mental over manual labor, as well as the notion that respect and obedience can be exchanged for knowledge and success (Giroux, 2006, p. 29). For

Willis, this "counterculture" is informed by an ideology of resistance rooted in the shop-floor cultures of their family members and members of their class (Giroux, 2006). Giroux (2006) explains, "The lads oppose this ideology because the counter-logic embodied in the families, workplaces, and street life that make up their culture points to a different and more convincing reality" (p. 29). Although the lads become active agents in the construction of their lives, at the same time, through their rejection of intellectual labor, the lads cut themselves off from any possibility of utilizing critical thinking as a tool for emancipation and social transformation (Giroux, 2006).

The study also drew salient characteristics from the diverse perspectives of adolescent cognitive development to complement Dewey's, Freire's, and Giroux's educational philosophies from the works of renowned theorists George Herbert Mead (1934), Lev Vygotsky (1978), Erik Erikson (1968), William Cross (1971, 1978), Carol Gilligan (1982), Beverly Daniel Tatum (1997), and Laurence Steinberg (2014). Though each of these theorists provides a unique lens from which to understand their respective positions, one common thread runs throughout all their philosophies that link them together: the effects of the social environment on the development of children and adolescents.

The influence of Karl Marx/Critical Theorists

Before continuing, it would be remiss not to point out the far-reaching influence of Karl Marx and the foundational work of Frankfurt School critical theorists Theodor W. Adorno, Max Horkheimer, and Herbert Marcuse on the works of theorists that informed the critical theoretical framework for this study. Both Lev Vygotsky and Paulo Freire acknowledge the influence of Karl Marx's theory of the history of human society on their works (Freire, 1998; Macedo, 1970; Vygotsky, 1978). For

Vygotsky (1978), Marx's dialectical and historical materialism served as the guiding theoretical framework from which he developed his sociocultural theory of higher mental processes. Vygotsky (1978) looks to Fredrick Engels, who describes the concept of dialectical materialism as "The dialectical approach while admitting the influences of nature on man, asserts that man, in turn, affects nature and creates through his changes in nature new natural conditions for existence" (p. 60). To that, Vygotsky asserts a central tenet of dialectical materialism: that all phenomena be studied as process in motion and change. Marx's theory of society, commonly known as historical materialism, as paraphrased by Vygotsky (1978), argues, "Historical changes in society and material life produce changes in 'human nature' (consciousness and behavior)" (p. 7). Brooks (2002), quoting Marx, offers a different yet simplistic definition of historical materialism "It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but, on the contrary, their social existence that determines their consciousness" (as cited in Brooks, 2002, para. 1).

Marx's dialectical and historical materialism influenced Freire as it relates to the oppression of a class of people or social-class analysis (Macedo, 1970). Freire (1970) looks to Marx to illuminate the critical role history plays in the development of human consciousness and human praxis:

> There is no historical reality which is not human. There is no history without men, and no history for men; there is only history of men, made by men and (as Marx pointed out) in turn making them. It is when the majorities are denied their right to participate in history as Subjects that they become dominated and alienated. Thus, to supersede their condition as objects by the status of Subjects—the objective of any true revolution–requires the people to act, as well as reflect, upon the reality to be transformed. (p. 130)

Henry A. Giroux extends the work of Paulo Freire through the lens of the critical theorists Theodor W. Adorno, Max Horkheimer, and Herbert Marcuse, thus adding another layer from which to view contemporary schooling in the lives of youth put at risk (Giroux, 1983; Robbins, 2009). What Giroux (1983) borrows from these critical theorists is: the importance of developing a theory that both reveals and breaks the structures of domination and social control; that analyzes and calls for the processes of emancipation and the struggle for self-emancipation; and, as a central concern, calls for a discourse that acknowledges the influence of history, sociology, the depth psychology on human agency, and structure that is situated under the umbrella of domination and contestation of daily life. Giroux (1983; 2006) asserts, public schooling, in the eyes of the critical educator, did/does offer little chance for social mobility, individual development, and political and economic power for the disadvantaged. Thus, schools function as an instrument of the dominant ideology in reproducing forms of knowledge and skills needed to reproduce the social division of labor (Giroux 1983, 2006).

According to Giroux (2006), critical/radical educators' stance on education originates with Karl Marx's notion of reproduction as its central concept and as a theoretical foundation for developing a critical science of education. Giroux illuminates Marx's theory of reproduction:

> Every social process of production, is, at the same time a process of reproduction …Capitalist production, therefore …produces not only commodities, not only surplus-value, but it also produces and reproduces the capitalist relation, on the one side the capitalist, on the other the wage-labourer. (as cited in Giroux, 2006, p. 3)

For those who espouse a critical/radical theory of education, in order to truly understand the function of schooling is to recognize that schools are not only instructional sites but also, just as importantly, schools are political and cultural sites and sites of struggle and contestations among groups that differ both culturally and economically (Giroux, 2006).

More recently, Margret Beale Spencer (2021) too harkens back to Marx's (1852) assessment of Louis Napoleon's (1851/1852); Napoleon III) coup, which remains as relevant and timeless, as relatable today as it was in the mid-nineteenth century:

> Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living. (as cited in Spencer, 2021, p. 570)

Spencer (2021) suggests that Marx's quote mirrors the cumulative impact of America's history of racism over the late 20th century and the first quarter of the 21st century at the chronosystem-level. Specifically, chronosystem-level conditions of bias contribute to one's human vulnerability as cumulatively experienced risk factors.

Methodological considerations

To illuminate the meanings student and staff participants ascribe to their experiences in class and/or at the school, the study utilized a qualitative inquiry as a mode of research and a critical ethnography approach that employs grounded theory to collect and analyze the data. Critical ethnography embodies the philosophy that researchers must take ethical responsibility to address inequality,

discrimination, bias, oppression, and privilege within the context of history, politics, and economics that play in our lives, as well as our own subjectivity and political perspective or positionality (Madison, 2011). Moreover, researchers are usually socially conscious and advocate for those marginalized in society through their work (Creswell, 2018). This is especially important given that the focus of this study was to learn from the experiences of youth at risk by class, race/ethnicity, demographic location, and/or gender. For these reasons, a critical ethnography approach was employed.

The study drew upon a grounded theory approach to collect and analyze the data leading to the generation of emergent themes/sub-themes (emergent theory) grounded in experiences and perceptions of student and staff participants. The grounded theory approach allows researchers to utilize what they hear, see and sense during interviews; to incorporate their observations, interactions, and materials on the topic or setting in the construction of their data; and themes to emerge naturally from narratives. In addition, grounded theory provides a systematic approach to collect and analyze the data, the goal being to generate theory from a social phenomena. (Charmaz, 2006).

Oppositional/resistant behavior, resilience, and identity formation

A growing body of ethnographic research reveals that for racial and economically disadvantaged youth, there is a positive relationship between oppositional/resistant behavior in the classroom or school setting and one's chosen/valued identity, sense of belonging to their people, acts of agency, self-empowerment, a sense of autonomy, racial expectations, and positive identity formation during adolescence. For instance, Bottrell's (2007) study of low-income youth living in Glebe, an inner-city public housing estate in Sydney, Australia, examined

schooling and truancy and how they relate to experiences outside of school. She found that resistances to schooling were a choice between a "chosen" identity that reflected an alternative "center" that is claimed and desired; rather than an "unchosen" identity that is ascribed by others and assigned by social position. The "chosen" identity provided the youth status, a positive reputation, and a sense of belonging to their people. Bottrell (2007) contends that the youths' resistances are necessary identity work and a sign of their resilience–a positive adaptation despite adversity. Thus, resistances are reframed as resilience. Bottrell's (2009) social analysis of the Glebe study just mentioned, places the ecological framework at the center of identity formation, "The girls' accounts suggest not only the influences of relations and systems, but rather also how such relations and systems infuse and structure identity work and everyday experience and practices" (p. 331).

Hall's (2007) qualitative study of an all-boys program of around 400 Latino and African American disadvantaged youth living in an inner-city neighborhood of a Midwestern city in the U.S. revealed similar results. Analysis of the data showed that acts of agency and resistance rooted in cultural pride and awareness were used to counter the negatively constructed images of their respective cultures and to rise above adversity in their environment. Like Bottrell (2007), Hall (2007) argues that for the three young men in the study, their identity is socially and culturally rooted in their family and community. Based on his findings, Hall (2007) too, suggests that we need to rethink what resilience and resistance look like against the backdrop of shifting cultural background.

Kim (2010) sheds further light on the resistant behaviors of marginalized youth attending an alternative public high school in the U.S. that serves students expelled

from traditional schools for their acts of resistance. Kim (2010) discovered that resistance could be communicated as a self-defensive mechanism, a way to demand meaningful instruction, and a way of affirming one's agency and self-empowerment. A study of educationally and economically marginalized urban high school youth attending an "impact school" in the Bronx, New York, by Nolan (2011), examined oppositional behaviors such as disruptive behavior, gambling, and non-compliance with law enforcement within the context of today's punitive disciplinary practices of zero tolerance and school-based policing (p. 562). The Impact School program targets the city's most troubled schools. Nolan (2011) found that through disruptive behavior, gambling, and non-compliance with law enforcement, the students gained a sense of autonomy within a highly controlled environment, constructed a valued identity that afforded them respect among peers, and made a name for themselves within the school community, and made their dehumanizing school experience more bearable. The ability of these youth to transcend dehumanizing environments adds yet another layer to the complexity of identity formation for marginalized youth.

Resistant behaviors come in many forms and are not bound by race or social class and, therefore, must be examined at the intersection of race, class, and other forms of oppression (e.g., gender, language, immigration status) (Solorzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001). Derived from a more extensive ethnographic study, Allen (2013) sheds light on how six black middle-class male youth balanced academic and racial expectations of their parents with the expectations of being "cool" within their peer culture through tactical acts of resistance and accommodation. What he refers to as, "balancing school and cool" (p. 207). For example, one form of tactical resistance was the use of middle-of-the-road approaches to schooling–doing just enough academically to get by, thus accommodating their parents by putting just

enough effort to obtain the lowest grades acceptable to their parents while at the same time maintaining their cool persona among their peers.

As demonstrated above, studies of resistance, resilience, and identity formation during adolescence have provided valuable insight into the resistant behaviors of marginalized students within the context of social class, race, ethnicity, and/or gender. These insights counter the negative connotations (normative assumptions) associated with the behaviors (i.e., deviant, defiant, problem youth). Nevertheless, the dominant discourse and response to student oppositional behavior as a form of resistance in America continues to stereotype, stigmatize and alienate these youth, thereby effectively disregarding a student's lived reality and its critical role in relation to the process of identity formation. The strength of these ethnographic studies lies in the qualitative experiences reflecting marginalized youth's lived reality and the choices they make to transcend adversity and marginalization to develop a positive sense of identity that is "chosen" and "valued." The inherent inability to generalize study findings and the possibility of researcher bias are limitations of these studies.

Before proceeding with the methods, it is necessary to provide additional context to bring to the forefront other educational approaches that informed this research. The original intent of this qualitative research study was an endeavor to learn from the experiences of youth put at risk who created and engaged in a social justice-oriented civic engagement project that speaks to the context of their lives. More specifically, I expected to understand the qualitative meanings the youth ascribed to their experiences inside and outside of school, how they experienced resistance, and how a critical pedagogical approach to learning and participating in a social

justice-oriented civic engagement project impacted their learning experience. However, as the study unfolded, the circumstances were such that the study was altered.

Methods

Griffith Academy

The majority of Griffith Academy's students came from impoverished families and communities; had either witnessed or been the victim of violent crime or other traumatic experiences; been expelled or asked to leave the previous school(s) or referred to the school for other reasons; and/or previously dropped out of school altogether.

The school was located in a Midwestern state, with the majority of the students coming from a metropolitan area. Additionally, 95 percent of the school's population was African American, whereas the majority of the 22 staff members (n = 19) were White. The majority of the student population was impoverished. The Restorative Justice class had 11 students on its roster, with an average of 2-5 students in attendance daily.

Griffith Academy was chosen because of its philosophy, mission, approach to discipline, and curriculum, which acknowledged the context of the students' lived experiences. For example, teachers developed a culturally relevant curriculum, critical pedagogy informed classroom practices, teachers and staff integrated restorative justice practices into their daily work with students, and the school implemented a trauma program focused on social-emotional learning in collaboration with a Midwest university.

Recruitment and sampling=

The study population was recruited from a small alternative urban high school in the Midwest that served youth who struggled with traditional school settings and were at risk of dropping out of mainstream schooling altogether. Thus, a purposive sampling technique was used to select the study's school. Nine students and 11 staff participants consented to participate in this study. Of the students who consented to participate, seven were students the researcher had developed a relationship with during my time at the school. All of them were in the first or second-term Restorative Justice class, while two students were from the school's general population. Along with the school's Dean, the restorative justice teacher, and the school's counselor, staff members whom the students spoke highly of during their interviews were asked to participate, except for the school's custodian, who asked to be interviewed. The university's Internal Review Board (IRB) reviewed and approved the study.

To ensure the safety and confidentiality of the participants, the following precautions were taken: each participant, and when required, the participant's parent or guardian, was asked to sign a consent form that described the purpose of the research study, possible risks and benefits, and how the data from the study would be disseminated; confidentiality was protected at all times by assigning a fictitious name to the school, as well as fictitious names and corresponding unique numeric identifiers to participants; and all consent forms, audio recordings, and transcripts were identified with the same unique numeric identifier assigned to fictitious names and kept in a locked filing cabinet and a password-protected computer file.

Participant characteristics

Demographic characteristics of the nine 9 student participants included 3 females (2 African American, 1 White) and 6 males (5 African American, 1 White). Student participants ranged in age from 16 to 19 years, with varied living arrangements–one lived with both maternal parents, one lived with her mother, two lived with a grandmother, one lived with his mother in the home of his grandmother, two lived with their mother and stepfather, and one lived in residential foster care. Most (n = 7) of the students' fathers were deceased, incarcerated, or uninvolved in their lives.

The 11 staff participants ranged in age from the late 20s to the late 50s. The majority (n = 7) were middle-aged, with one in their late 20s and two in their 30s, of which 6 were White females and 5 were males (3 African American, 2 White). The level of educational attainment by staff participants broke down as follows: 1 associate degree, 5 bachelor's degrees, 3 master's degrees, and 2 unknown. At the time of the study, 3 staff participants were working toward their master's degrees. Staff participant experience in schools ranged from 3 to 26 years, with an average of 10.5 years. Staff participants worked an average of 4.3 years at the school, which was in its eighth year.

Data collection

Data collection techniques included immersion in the field, participant-observation, field notes, and in-depth semi-structured interviews that utilized open-ended questions to explore the topic under study further while at the same time allowing the participant to direct the flow of the interview (Seidman, 2006). All interviews were audio-recorded on a digital recorder and transcribed verbatim. All interviews took place at the school except for one staff participant, whose

interview took place over the telephone. Interviews began on December 1, 2014, and continued through February 25, 2015. For both student and staff participants, a predetermined set of questions was used as a guide for interviews. Consistent with grounded theory, participants were allowed to discuss their thoughts without restriction, allowing the participant to set the tone of the interview and be respectful of the participant's voice. If/when an opportunity presented itself, the researcher returned to the set of guiding questions. The length of time for student interviews ranged from 25 to 40 minutes, with an average of 35 minutes per interview, while staff participant interviews ranged from 37 to 104 minutes, with an average of 61 minutes per interview. The intent was to utilize a 90-minute format for each interview, as recommended by Seidman.

Data analysis

The study was also informed by the work of Urie Bronfenbrenner's and Margret Beale Spencer's respective theories to analyze the themes that emerged from the data. Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory/bioecological model of human development. Bronfenbrenner (1976, 1979) offers a scientific perspective for research on the ecology of human development that encompasses the developing person, the ecological environment (immediate and larger social contexts), and the evolving interactions between the developing person and his or her environments. To clarify the concept of development is defined by Bronfenbrenner (1979) as "A lasting change in the way in which a person perceives and deals with his environment"; whereas ecological environment is "A set of nested structures, each inside the next, like a set of Russian dolls" (p. 1.). Borrowing the terminology of Orville Brim (1975), Bronfenbrenner refers to these nested system levels as the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1975,

1976, 1977). The chronosystem was added later as Bronfenbrenner continued to extend his thinking to reflect the importance of time as a property of the developing person's surrounding environment, as well as across the historical time in which the developing person lives (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). At the most basic level, the chronosystem is concerned with a life transition. A life transition is identified as being either normative or nonnormative. Examples of the former include school entry, puberty, entering the labor force, or marriage or retirement, whereas the latter include death or severe illness in the family, divorce, or moving. At an advanced level, the focus of the chronosystem is on the cumulative effects of a sequence of developmental transitions that occur over an extended period of the developing person's life course. Simply put, a life transition is the stimulus for developmental change (Bronfenbrenner, 1994).

A dynamic systems theory for examining positive youth development, Margaret Beale Spencer's Phenomenological Variant of Ecological Systems Theory (PVEST) is grounded in the assumptions that throughout the life-course, human development is unavoidably shaped by both objective reality and perception. Therefore, the meanings one attributes to their social encounters (i.e., their perceptions) are ultimately determinative of life outcomes (Spencer et al., 1997; Swanson et al., 2002; Swanson et al., 2003). Because one perceives and acts on their perceptions, the meanings one derives, the responsive coping processes one engages in, and the formal and informal "action plans" one constructs all have important implications for one's actions (Spencer, 2008, p. 696). At the same time, because human variability represents both successes and failures of human coping processes, these processes are unavoidably associated with emotions. For Spencer (2008), these unavoidable life course processes must be addressed; these unavoidable life course processes call for the integration of fundamental human

development thinking with basic phenomenological tenets and ecological perspectives. Accordingly, PVEST provides a conceptual framework for analyzing the dynamic systems of self-appraisal and meaning-making processes within the various contexts of development, such as the school, family, and neighborhood that unfold over time (Spencer, 2008).

The PVEST consists of five components: net vulnerability level, net stress engagement level, reactive coping strategies, emergent identities, and life-stage specific coping outcomes. These five components are linked by bidirectional, recursive processes, forming a dynamic, cyclic model that describes identity development throughout the life course (Swanson et al., 2009; Swanson et al., 2002). The first component, net vulnerability level, is composed of two factors: risk contributors and protective factors. Risk contributors, which function as liability, may predispose one to adverse outcomes, whereas protective factors (e.g., cultural capital) offset corresponding stage-specific risk contributors (Swanson et al., 2002). The second component, net stress engagement level, consists of the actual net experience of situations that pose challenges to one's psychosocial identity and well-being. These experiences are also risk contributors that can be countered by the supports available that help one cope with stressful challenges (Spencer, Dupree, Cunningham, Harpalani, & Munoz-Miller, 2003; Swanson et al., 2002). The third component, reactive coping strategies, are used as corrective problem-solving strategies for dissonance and stress producing situations that lead to adaptive or maladaptive solutions (Spencer et al., 2003; Swanson et al., 2002). Examples of risk contributors and stressors include socioeconomic conditions of poverty, violence, imposed expectations concerning race and gender stereotypes, and larger historical processes such as oppression and discrimination

(Spencer et al., 2003; Swanson et al., 2002). As one employs coping strategies, self-appraisal continues, and strategies that produce desirable results for the ego are retained, thereby becoming stable coping responses. When coupled together, these stable coping responses yield emergent identities (how one views one's self), the fourth component (Spencer et al., 2003; Swanson et al., 2003). What is more, the self-appraisal process is a crucial factor in identity formation and, as such, plays a vital role in life-stage specific coping outcomes, the final PVEST component (Spencer, 2008; Spencer et al., 2003). Swanson et al. (2003) assert, "Identity processes are of critical value in that they provide behavioral stability over time and space. Identity lays the foundation for future perception, self-appraisal, and behavior, yielding adverse or productive (resilient) life-stage, specific coping outcomes" (p. 749).

As Swanson et al. (2002) point out, Spencer's PVEST provides researchers who seek to promote positive youth development a theoretical framework to critically analyze and understand how social, political, cultural, and historical contexts interact with and influence identity formation. What makes Spencer's PVEST particularly relevant with regard to this study is the attention she gives to the unique circumstances of individual-context interactions for diverse youth of color (Spencer, 2008; Spencer et al., 2003; Spencer et al., 1997; Swanson et al., 2002; Swanson et al., 2003).

Data collection and analysis for the study followed the grounded theory approach; therefore, memo writing, initial (open) and focused coding, theoretical sampling, and constant comparative analysis were utilized as strategic methods to generate theory from the data. The goal was to adhere to the rigorous steps of grounded theory while attending to the constant comparative analysis process, thereby

generating concepts from the research data into integrated social patterns (categories and their properties). This allowed for the conceptualization and forming of emergent theories (Glaser, 2002; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The aforementioned grounded theory strategies were applied twice, first with the student participant data and then with staff participant data. The analysis culminated in an analytic framework of student and staff core conceptual categories and sub-categories as outlined below in Table 1 and Table 2, respectively.

Positionality

As a social worker and researcher, subjectivity, reflexivity, and White privilege during the research process needed to be addressed, as they may shape inquiry. Foley (2002) posits that throughout the research process, critical ethnographers must question themselves about their intentions, why they have made the choices they did, and who will be affected as they conduct their research, thus, informing any decision they make in their endeavor of critical research. The present study falls under the umbrella of what Guba (1981) and Lincoln and Guba (1985) refer to as "naturalistic inquiry." Two naturalistic criteria best suited to this study are credibility and transferability. Credibility, which parallels internal validity in quantitative research, seeks to establish that inquiry was carried out in a manner that can lead to the probability that the research findings are said to be "credible" and can be approved by those studied (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Four techniques associated with credibility were utilized; prolonged engagement at a site, negative case analysis, triangulation, and member checks.

Table 1: Final Student Core Conceptual Categories/Sub-Categories

Category	Sub-Category
Student experiences in Restorative Justice class	Attributes
	Approach to learning
	Laughter
	Open
	Pressure
	Teaching tools
Other teachers' approach (i.e., not Mr. Gardner)	Opinions, relevant and interesting
	Gardner teaches
	Critical thinking
Student experiences at Griffith Academy	Size
	Easier
	Love/Like
	Drama
	Care

Table 2: Final Staff Core Conceptual Categories/Sub-Categories

Category	Sub-Category
Griffith Academy's students	
Student challenges/barriers	Systemic educational barriers
	Societal messages
	Neighborhoods/communities
	Residents physically surrounding Griffith Academy
	Griffith Academy's school district
	Home
	Future
Staff challenges w/students	History
	Academic disengagement
	Varied academic abilities
	Tied to their neighborhoods
	Cell phones
	Emotional toll
Staff cultural awareness/sensitivity	Approach to discipline
	Need for Black role models

Emergent themes and analysis

In order to understand the dynamics at play and to situate the student's lived reality within the broader theoretical frameworks that informed the analysis, it is necessary to bring to the forefront the enormity and breadth of contextual challenges/barriers the students and staff face daily. The cumulative effect one's personal and historical experiences/events can have on cognitive, social, emotional, and physical developmental outcomes across the life course. Toward that end, a model of the students' bioecological systems that mirrors the staff and student participants' emergent themes, in Figure 1, and then, in Figure 2, the five basic components of Spencer's PVEST and staff and student participants' emergent themes as either student risk contributors/challenges, protective factors/social supports, or reactive coping strategies/corrective problem-solving strategies are provided as a reference for the discussion that follows of emergent themes and analysis. Select participant narrative/emergent themes that relate to the students' reactive coping strategies/stable coping responses, as bolded in Figure 2, are presented and analyzed using Spencer's PVEST to emphasize the problem-solving strategies employed by the school's students to resolve the stress and dissonance in their lives.

Figure 1: Model of students' bioecological systems: Staff & student emergent themes

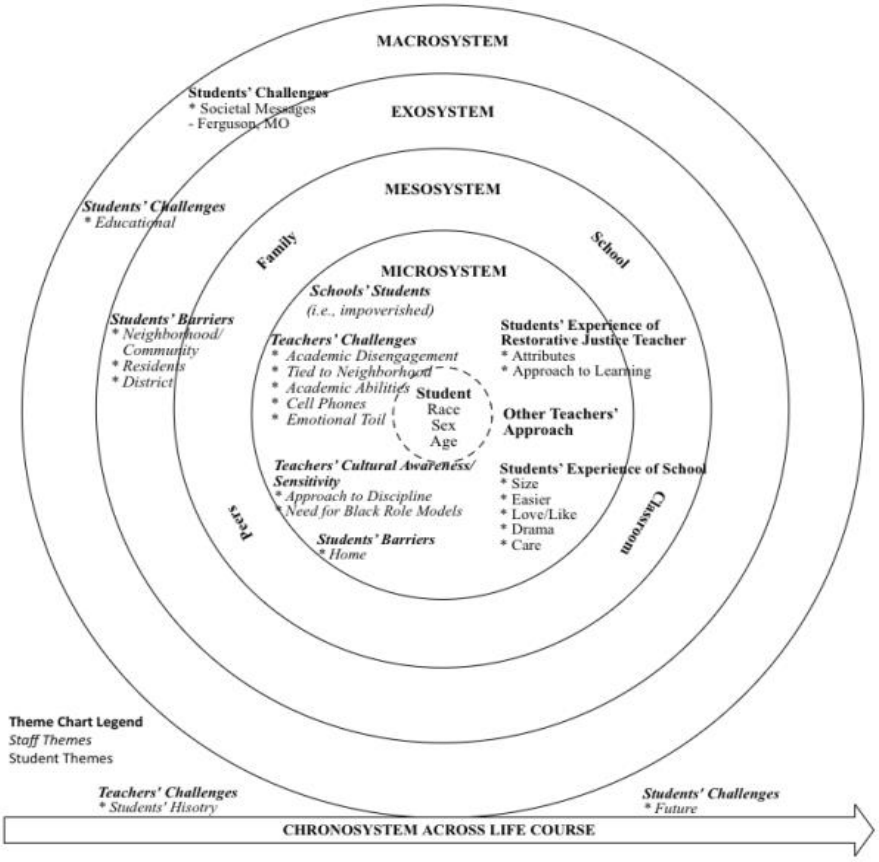
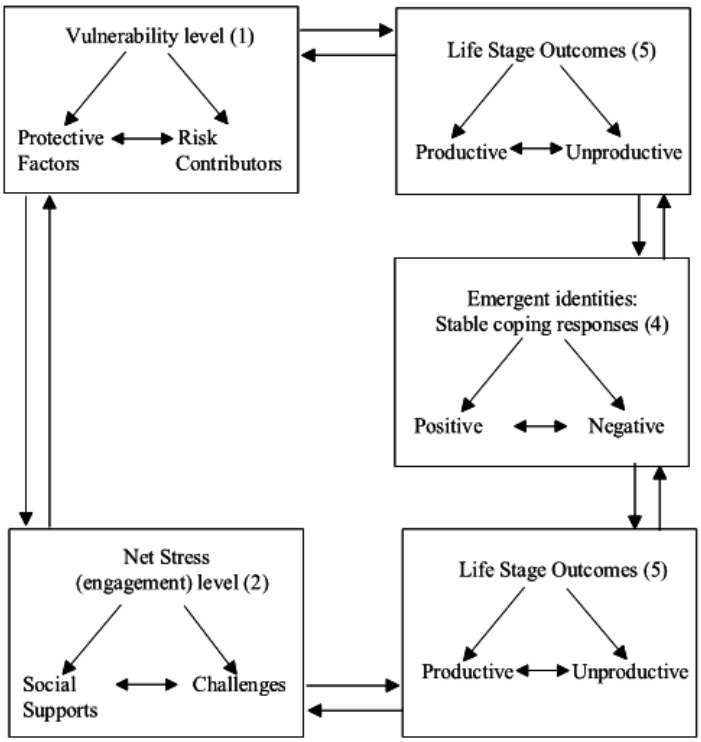


Figure 2: Phenomenological variant of ecological systems theory: Staff and student emergent themes



Students' Risk Contributors/Challenges
Systemic Educational Barriers
Societal Messages
Neighborhood/Community
District Residents
School District
Home
Future
Students' History
Academic Disengagement
Emotional Toll
Other Teachers' Approaches

Students' Reactive Coping Strategies/ Stable Coping Responses
Academic Disengagement
Tied to Neighborhood
Academic Abilities
Use of Cell Phones
Drama

Students' Protective Factors/Social Supports
Staffs' Cultural Awareness/Sensitivity
Students' Experience of Mr. Gardner
Students' Experience of GEC

Theme Chart Legend
Staff Themes
Student Themes

Emergent themes

One objective was to learn from staff what they believe are some of the challenges/barriers that they face in supporting the students' efforts to graduate. For staff, academic disengagement, being tied to their neighborhood, varied levels of academic ability, constant use of cell phones, and student drama were common themes that challenged the staff daily.

Academic disengagement. A lack of motivation and a lack of vision also plague some of the students at the school. Mr. Wales tells me, "Some of them don't have the drive to do better and be successful. They think that just something's supposed to fall from the sky; they're not supposed to work hard for it." He suggests the reason for this is that schools have failed them, and possibly education was not pushed in the home. Like Mr. Wales, Ms. Hanan, too, professes that an obstacle for her is that some students are unable to see the importance of education and how it can impact their lives "That's one of the struggles I see is that a lot of the kids just want to get the work done. And not really seek knowledge or think beyond or do beyond what is expected." A lack of motivation reveals itself in Mr. Ashton's comments about the need for staff to constantly encourage the students to follow the rules, "We're constantly reminding these kids, okay come on guys we got to go to class. We're constantly pushing them, pushing them, pushing them."

Tied to neighborhood. At times, students are so "hooked" into their neighborhoods that it becomes a barrier to academic success for the students. Mr. Gardner, Mrs. Ireland, and Ms. Hale, all speak to this. Ms. Hale speaks about the students' narrowed worldview, a view that is tied to their neighborhoods. She explains, "Even my kids in Central City. I'll take them places in Detroit, and they will never

have stepped foot on the …. campus…The kids they come from very small worlds. They're very hooked into their neighborhoods, and that's not all good." Mrs. Ireland also mentions the students' connection to their community, "It just really saddens me when we start talking about things and they cannot think outside the 999." From Mr. Gardner's experience, trying to get some of the students to think outside their world is almost impossible., There's a couple kids in almost every segment you take that are completely stuck in their neighborhoods, neighborhood view. They're so isolated."

Academic abilities. Varied academic abilities are another challenge/barrier for staff to help students graduate. Based on her daily work with Ms. Hale and Mr. Wales, Mrs. Knight tells me that, along with attendance being a huge issue for staff, some of the students' low reading levels are a source of frustration for teaching staff. It is baffling to Mrs. Knight that the students are ever able to get this far into their education and not be able to read well, which she questions, "How did they get this far? Who passed them? How did that happen? Cause there is testing throughout their whole freekin life. And, somebody had to see that and just said, 'Oh, go ahead.' There's just a total disconnect." Mrs. Ireland tells me she has a couple of kids who cannot read more than at the kindergarten level.

Use of cell phones. While at the school, one of the most disruptive technology students use throughout the day is the cell phone. A day did not go by that Mr. Gardner or the researcher did not have to ask a student to put their phone away during class time. Students would answer the phone at any time they wished. More often than not, students would be listening to music or watching videos on their phones, both with and without headphones. Cell phones were a constant source of frustration while the researcher was in Mr. Gardner's class. Several staff members

bring up cell phones during our interview. Cell phones are a source of frustration for staff members for different reasons, such as keeping student drama going and causing disruptions in the classroom.

Another objective was to learn from student participants about their experiences in the school. One theme that emerged from the students' narrative is that they love/like the school, with the exception of the drama. Staff also note the drama.

Love/like and drama. A consensus among the majority of the students is that they love/like being at the school, and they love/like all the teachers, with one exception, all the drama. Only one student, Sydney, who at 19 years is the oldest of the students the researcher interviewed, was just all right with being at the school, "It's all right. There's just some childish people in here, though." Sydney gives me an example of what he means by childish, "All the drama. There be so much drama and gossip, but I walk past people who gossiping all day." Charline and Yolanda are also bothered by the drama at school. Talking about her experience at the school with the other students, Charline tells me, "It's a battle…It's just the students. They come from different areas. They older, some of them younger…Some of them keep up drama." Drama from outside the school also follows Charline into the school:

> Something happened outside the school, and then they bring it in the school. Just caught up in it…Talk to the wrong people. You think some people are your friends, and they're not. And they go running off telling another person. And they tell another person. And it just gets around.

Likewise, Yolanda has strong feelings about the drama at school, "I came here and

I love the school, but not the students in it…There's so much drama." Yolanda describes what she means by drama, "Drama like, he say, she say things. Rumors, things that's not true, that could be true. But, you know, people just don't know how to mind their own business."

One of the main reasons Mr. Ashton dislikes students having cell phones is because it contributes to the student drama:

> I mean we've had fights, of course, but one thing I say has contributed to that was the cellphone usage. They get into it with somebody in the class cause they're texting somebody out of the class, or even worse, they're texting somebody outside of the school. Meet me up here at the school, and we'll have it out…It keeps that connection and keeps the [drama going].

Ms. Moon also mentions that cell phones contribute to the drama at the school "Because there's some drama. There are people talking, or someone's on their phone, or they're sharing texts." Mr. Bradshaw, sounding quite disgusted at how disrespectful students are at times with the teachers, talks about an interaction he had with a student:

> She was talking; one of the student teachers and the kid just walks out and looks at his phone. I said, 'Really, you walk out when she's talking? Come on. She's talking, she's teaching and you just walk right out of the classroom and look at your phone.' I mean, come-on, that's not respect, that's terrible.

Findings

I used Spencer's PVEST to analyze the emergent themes. Spencer's five PVEST components acknowledge and address the differences in experiences, perception,

and negotiation of stress and dissonance, all of which are critical to understanding the meaning making processes that underlie identity development and outcomes (see Figure 2). Accordingly, from a PVEST perspective, the students' academic disengagement, being tied to their neighborhoods, varied academic abilities, constant use of cell phones, and drama can be described as reactive coping methods used as corrective problem-solving strategies employed by the students to resolve the stress and dissonance (students' risk contributors/challenges) in their lives. Swanson et al. (2002) contend that, especially during middle childhood, self-system development is reciprocally determined by recursive self-other appraisal processes that appear to be unavoidably linked to the experience of stress. Stress requires coping, which leads to stable psychosocial responses that are either maladaptive or adaptive solutions.

Moreover, what is considered an adaptive solution in one context (i.e., peers, neighborhood, home), may be considered a maladaptive solution in another (i.e., school, society). However, both are intended as corrective problem-solving strategies. Stable psychosocial coping responses are linked to life-stage coping outcomes that are either productive (i.e., competency or self-efficacy and resiliency) or unproductive (i.e., academic disengagement, varied academic abilities) in quality. For example, in the short term, corrective problem-solving strategies such as students' academic disengagement, being tied to their neighborhoods, and constant use of cell phones and drama at inappropriate times may be used by the students in response to the multiple risk contributors and stressors in their lives in preserving the self and taken for a sign of resilience; while in the long term, these coping methods may lead to pathological outcomes (Spencer et al., 1997). Spencer, Dupree, and Hartmann (1997) explain:

> Pathology occurs when the self-system "shuts down" in a sense, becomes reactively organized around negative feedback about the self, does not fully integrate all components, or becomes dependent upon maladaptive solutions as 'self-righting tendencies' as its major corrective problem-solving strategy. (p. 821)

In contrast, using corrective problem-solving strategies responses considered adaptive solutions (i.e., general positive attitude) to coping with stress and dissonance increases the likelihood of an achieved identity. An achieved identity is a set of healthy psychosocial processes that will lead to productive live-stage coping products (Spencer et al., 1977).

The findings support my thesis that the students' resistance, when viewed through the lens of resilience provides a valuable theoretical lens for understanding and thinking about the relationship between students at-risk, schools, and the broader society and examining the behaviors (corrective problem-solving strategies) youth at risk employ to resolve the stress and dissonance in their lives.

Discussion

The purpose of this article is to direct attention to and further examine student oppositional behavior. The researcher argues that student resistance (oppositional behavior) to engaging in meaningful dialogue or activities and academics in the classroom setting must be situated within one's lived reality and its critical role in relation to the process of identity formation during adolescence. Through the theoretical lens of resistance and resilience, the researcher examined the relationship between student oppositional behavior (resistance) and its positive role in the process of identity formation.

Although theories on resistance and identity development during adolescence have addressed resistant behaviors for marginalized youth, there appears to be a disconnect in the literature between one's lived reality, the role of the social environment, resistant behaviors, and resilience, and the critical role of each to the process of identity formation during adolescence. For instance, Giroux's (2006) theory of resistance suggests that oppositional behavior as a form of resistance reflects moral and political indignation. Bronfenbrenner (1976, 1977, 1979, 1994) and Bronfenbrenner and Ceci (1994) place human development within the context of a bioecological model that emphasizes the interactions between the developing person and his or her environments and the impact of change and continuity over time on the developing person and within the environment in which the developing person lives**.** Spencer (2008), Spencer, Dupree, and Hartmann (1997), and Swanson et al.'s (2002) PVEST for examining positive youth development, **s**tresses the need to examine how social, political, cultural, and historical contexts interact with and influence identity formation. When considered together, these theories provide a complete explanation of the relationship between resistance, one's lived reality, and the process of identity formation.

Analyzed within the context of Spencer's PVEST, the student's resistance was the result of a pattern of behavior or stable coping responses grounded in the students' everyday experiences that they used as adaptive strategies to survive and cope with the stress and dissonance in their lives. Thus, what may seem like maladaptive responses or resistance toward engaging in meaningful dialogue and academics was a sign of the students' resilience in facing adversity. Put differently; the students used academic disengagement, cell phones, being tied to their neighborhoods, and/or drama as mental distraction or corrective problem-solving

strategies to respond to the multiple risk contributors and stressors in their lives. The repetitiveness of context-linked corrective problem-solving strategies, such as those used by the students, became linked to stable coping responses–one's emergent identity or self-processes (Spencer et al., 1997). This is important because self-perceptions often temporarily influence responses and how one will adapt to cultural contexts across the life course. For the most part, these stable self-perceptions will influence whether one uses or downplays certain abilities (i.e., adopts or suppresses certain behaviors, engages in or shies away from certain activities). This is consistent with Allen's (2013) study, wherein students chose a form of tactical resistance using middle-of-the-road approaches to schooling–doing just enough academically.

Along with changing our thinking about adolescent development/behavior, examining the connection between context, identity formation, and developmental processes is necessary, especially for marginalized youth. From the staff participants' perspective, the reality for Marvin, Sydney, Charline, and Yolanda leaves little to the imagination about the students' objective reality, such as the challenges/barriers across multiple levels of contexts and the ones created by students themselves (see Figure 1). The staff participants' perceptions about the challenges/barriers the students face to graduating strengthen the following overlapping theoretical positions that informed this study: the influence of the macro-, exo-, meso-, micro-, and chronosystem on the developing person (Bronfenbrenner, 1976; 1977; 1979; 1994; Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994; Bronfenbrenner & Evans, 2000; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006); and the realization that throughout the life-course, human development is unavoidably shaped by both objective reality and perception. Therefore, the meanings one attributes to their social encounters (i.e., their perceptions) are ultimately

determinative of life outcomes (Spencer et al., 1997). It seems appropriate to suggest that the students rejected the prescribed identity assigned to them by society for an identity that is chosen/valued amongst their peers, at home, and in their neighborhood. This is consistent with and contributes to the literature's findings on the resistant behaviors of marginalized youth and its positive role in identity formation (Allen, 2013; Bottrell, 2007; Hall, 2007; Kim, 2010; Nolan, 2011); and pushes the literature toward a more complete understanding on resistance-based resilience and its role in identity formation.

The study reaffirms Giroux's (2006) contention that, through the lens of resistance theory, we come to understand other causes and meanings that undergird how youth experience education failure. Therefore, as a form of resistance, the students' oppositional behavior shifts from being seen as deviant and learned helplessness to being understood as a form of behavior reflecting moral and political indignation.

Limitations

Even though this study was well-grounded in theoretical and qualitative literature, some limitations should be acknowledged. Along with the inherent limitations of ethnographic and case study research (i.e., researcher bias), the researcher's lack of research experience with this population and the sample, which is limited by race, age, and socioeconomic status, are also limitations of the current study. For example, the majority of the school's population was African American, impoverished, and adolescent. In addition, the theoretical frameworks used to analyze and interpret the interview data did not capture the critical role resistance plays in identity formation. However, using grounded theory provides a starting point to further understand student resistance in the classroom or school setting.

Despite this study's limitations, the student participant narratives, coupled with the eleven staff participant narratives, the length of time the researcher spent with students and staff at the school, and the emergent themes grounded in the participants' narratives, provide a solid foundation for future studies with youth at risk.

Implications and recommendations

Although theorist frameworks direct our attention to certain features by identifying important variables and relationships among them, they cannot by themselves explain or predict behavior or outcomes. The findings of this study point to several implications for educational theory, policy, and practice, and future research. First, resistance, when viewed through the lens of resilience provides a valuable theoretical lens for understanding and thinking about the relationship between students at-risk, schools and the broader society and examining the behaviors (corrective problem-solving strategies) youth at risk employ to resolve the stress and dissonance in their lives. Through the lens of resilience, resistance can be valued for its positive relationship to the process of identity formation and alter the dominant discourse and response to student oppositional behavior as a form of resistance in America.

Second, the cumulative effects of one's personal, cultural, and historical experiences/events within multiple contexts not only consciously and unconsciously shape one's life but can have a detrimental and enduring impact on the brain and cognitive development, social and emotional development, and identity formation. Another conclusion that can be drawn from this study is that students in the Restorative Justice classes resisted engaging in meaningful dialogue and activities because of their lived reality–a lived reality plagued by poverty,

drugs, violence, abuse, and social disadvantage. To add insult to injury, American youth, especially poor White and minority youth, have grown up in a society that discredits and disregards the reality of their lived experiences, histories, and cultures, hence a likely catalyst for moral and political indignation espoused by Giroux (2006). Lastly, when considered within the context of the latter and the notion that resilience is the process of positive adaption to adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats, or significant sources of stress (American Psychological Association, 2014); then, it can be said that because the students chose a positive identity or sense of self-worth, the students' resistance in actuality is a sign of their resilience in the face of adversity. Consequently, adolescent youth such as Marvin, Sydney, Charline, and Yolanda, in America are at risk by virtue of their social class, race/ethnicity, geographic location, and/or gender.

To this end, recommendations for theory, policy, practice, and future research derived from the implications of the study findings include a theory of education that complements the process(es) of identity formation during adolescence, with specific consideration for youth at risk; reframe the norm around how students are triaged (i.e., identified, labeled, assessed); and reevaluate the way we respond to resistance by reassessing the language, institutional forms and processes, and how we discipline students. Future research should build on existing knowledge and refine our understanding of student resistance through a theoretical lens of resistance-based resilience. Specifically, a qualitative inquiry that focuses on examining students' perspectives of resistance-based resilience, the behaviors (corrective problem solving strategies) at-risk youth employ to resolve the stress and dissonance in their lives, and the role gender differences play in resistance-based resilience,

Conclusion

Taken together, staff and student emergent themes sketch a picture of the complexity of the current reality that presses upon youth such as Marvin, Sydney, Charline, and Yolanda in America. As illustrated in Figure 1, the enormity and breadth of contextual level forces (i.e., macrosystem, exosystem, mesosystem, microsystem, chronosystem) consciously and unconsciously shaped/shape their daily lives and influenced/influence brain, cognitive, social, and emotional well-being and development and identity formation during this stage of their lives. Figure 2 demonstrates the stark reality of overwhelming risk contributors/challenges (stress, dissonance), the protective factors/social supports offered by the Restorative Justice teacher and the school's staff, and the reactive coping strategies/corrective problem-solving strategies employed by the school's students to resolve the stress and dissonance in their lives.

The majority of the youth at the school understand what it means to grow up in poverty and social disadvantage because they have lived it every day of their lives, yet still took pleasure from their humor, music, and clothing, playing basketball, dancing, rapping in each other's ears, or just hanging with their friends. Moreover, students who were not academically engaged still came to school. They came because they wanted an education, and for that period of time in their day, they were safe, provided a meal, could hang with their friends, and were surrounded by caring adults. Three things are clear from this study: the need to reframe our concept of student oppositional behavior through the theoretical and ideological lens of resistance-based resilience; the critical role of one's lived reality in relationship to the process of identity formation; and the need to further our understanding of and response to student resistance.

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