

**Developing Positive Self-Esteem in Black Children in Light
of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade**

Rev. Dr. Myrna Thurmond-Malone, M.Div., MSCP, ThD, CPC,
CAMS II, CDP
Baptist –Clinical Director, MHT Family Life Center, Adjunct
Professor, Grand Canyon University and Atlanta University of Health
Sciences, and Hospice Chaplain, ATL Hospice
and Palliative Care

1 See www.mhtfamilylifecenter.org

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This article begins with an examination of the impact of racism and prejudice that fostered systemic injustices within our educational systems examining pre- and post-slavery within the context of the trans-Atlantic slave trade. The article will explore the education of Black children considering the trans-Atlantic slave trade and adverse experiences that impact the development of positive self-esteem. Considering the development of positive self-esteem in Black children during the trans-Atlantic slave trade, one must examine the impact and importance of race and cultural factors that speak to the learning environment, a culturally sensitive pedagogy, and relationships. Therefore, the article will give voice to the impact of racism and prejudice, developing self-esteem, culturally sensitive pedagogy, negative and positive environments, and relationships.

I. Impact of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade

As we consider the impact of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, we must consider racism and prejudice and the role each played in the dehumanizing of people both pre- and post-enslavement of Black children and their ancestors.

Harrell, 2000 defines racism as:

“A system of dominance, power, and privilege based on racial group designations
... where members of the dominant group create or accept their societal privilege
by maintaining structures, ideology, values, and behavior that have the intent or effect of leaving nondominant-group members relatively excluded from power, esteem, status, and/or equal access to societal resources.”¹

¹ Harrell, S. P. (2000). A multidimensional conceptualization of racism-related stress: Implications for the well-being of people of color. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 70(1), 42–57. <https://doi.org/10.1037/h0087722>.

Harrell (2000) depicts a correlation between racism and the development and well-being of people of color that impacts the self. Harrell characterizes racism-related stress as the psychological and emotional strain experienced by individuals due to real or perceived racial discrimination. Harrell's research emphasizes the effects of interpersonal racism, institutional racism, and cultural racism, highlighting how each form contributes to the overall mental health and development of Black children, which has a relevant bearing on developing positive self-esteem (Harrell, 2000). Additionally, that prejudice is akin to racism. Jones (1997) states prejudice is "a positive or negative attitude, judgment, or feeling about a person that is generalized from attitudes or beliefs held about the group to which the person belongs" (Winston & Winston, 2020, p. 44). Jones's research asserts prejudice points towards a one-dimensional perception that negates the value, humanity, and character of other people. This rigid view in the context of the development of our children has led to the demise, disregard, devaluation, and lack of self-worth of Black children and the disenfranchisement of Black people.

Children's early development begins with the ability to experience primary sensation and perception. Their system of sensation and perception is developed during the early formative years as they enter kindergarten. However, as they continue to grow and develop, the following continues to evolve: (1) memory, (2) emotions, and (3) decision-making (Tierney & Nelson, 2009). This is significant as we examine the impact of the post-Atlantic slave trade because the foundational forming process of self-perception occurs at an early age, so their environment impacts their outlook, and the experiences during school age greatly impact their emotions, decision-making and how they hold and process their memories of childhood even until adulthood. Tierney & Nelson's (2009) study illustrates the impact that racism and oppression have on brain development, cognitive function, and emotional well-being, which may harm self-esteem, academic success, and the overall early development of children.

Moreover, research on the impact of the post-Atlantic slave trade reveals the effects of racism on the enslaved mother, the birth of the child, and the child after birth. The legacy of trauma and its impact on the development of the self continues to be seen through intergenerational trauma, which is why there was a high placement on education in Black communities (*W.E.B. Du Bois and the rise of Black Education*, n.d.). Black communities understand the importance of self-awareness and learning to be imparted to their children (Wendling, 2018). So, one can assert the impact of early development, matriculation, and environment shaped how Black children identify themselves.

It is crucial to acknowledge and consider the relevance of racial, ethnic, and cultural factors in all aspects of our lives. These factors shape our experiences, perspectives, and interactions with others. By recognizing and appreciating the diversity within our society, we can build a stronger, more inclusive community that values and respects the differences that make us unique rather than hold onto past trauma(s) and lack of authentic narratives that have held us down. We can only genuinely advance and develop authentic and healthy pedagogy for all students if we recognize and value these distinctions. Throughout this journal reflection, I will draw attention to the history of education within the Black community, racism, intergenerational trauma, self-esteem, and resilience. I consider the impact of racism and trauma and the value of educational resilience, which fosters Black children to thrive. I believe this article will begin the conversation of making space and gaining an understanding of the larger narrative, which is often negated when telling the story and history of the trans-Atlantic slave trade. After all, it matters who tells the story.

II. The History of the Educational System within the Black Community

In my writing, I consider the work over the last 70-plus years, that speaks towards promoting awareness of the impact of teacher educational programs highlighting the necessity to understand multicultural education and Afrocentric education that offer

understanding and response through culturally responsive pedagogy. Banks (1994), Asante (2011), Gay (2010), Ladson-Billings & Tate (1995) offer a lens for us to speak to and better understand the importance of examining the Black experience and promoting an understanding of pedagogical and curricular practices when educating and fostering understanding within the educational system within the United States when it comes to the environment of educating Black children.

The remnants of the impact of slavery can be seen in the negative identification embedded in some Black children. I believe this speaks to intergenerational trauma in the sense that Black children may have embodied trauma from one generation to the next...creating a generational misconception of their identity, value, and worth, fostering low self-esteem (Thurmond-Malone, 2019, p. 5). Using epigenetics as a possible mechanism, Yehuda & Lehrner (2018) offer scientific insight into how trauma can be passed down through generations. “Transgenerational Inheritance and Systemic Racism in America” discusses how intergenerational trauma and epigenetics manifest changes that stem from contemporary societal structures and contribute to ongoing disparities in areas such as education, healthcare, employment, and criminal justice. The authors also highlight how transgenerational trauma, particularly in the context of racism, can shape the identities and opportunities of descendants, even if they do not directly face overt racism themselves (Kaufman et al., 2023).

The work of Dr. Joy DeGruy Leary in her book *Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome: America’s Legacy of Enduring Injury and Healing* deals with the embodiment of intergenerational trauma. The traumatic experiences that enslaved Africans and African Americans experienced pre- and post-slavery may speak to epigenetics mechanisms. DeGruy writes, “Trauma is an injury caused by an outside, usually violent force, event or experiences [that] distort our attitudes and beliefs, [which] can result in dysfunctional behaviors [and] impact an individual’s DNA, and the manifestation of the

traumas passed along genetically to future offspring.² The system of slavery was designed to dehumanize and aimed at deconstructing the family structure and self-actualization of the enslaved community and its ancestors. The denial of culture, formal and informal education, marriage, and other atrocities led to ethnocide. By drawing connections between the historical trauma of slavery, the ongoing effects of ethnocide, and the developmental challenges faced by the Black community, the author of *Crime Without a Name: Ethnocide and the Erasure of Culture in America* demonstrates how the impact of slavery on the Black family is a historical and current issue that still affects the Black community and the atrocities they have experienced (Pitner, 2021).

Research shows a link between slavery, education, and the Black community according to Bertocchi & Dimico (2012). Over six-plus decades there has been significant racial inequality in our educational system in the United States. Bertocchi & Dimico (2012) investigation into educational injustice experienced by the Black community from 1940 to 2000 highlights the impact of systemic oppression, racism, and prejudice that is rooted in the enslavement of their ancestors and the necessity for fostering an equitable future for all beginning with the right to adequate and equitable education and resources.

The experience of racism within Black children had nothing to do with age but everything to do with the color of their skin which was and is undergirded by racism and prejudice. The experience of early racism is one product that developed after the transatlantic slave trade, including but not limited to emotional, physical, spiritual, and verbal abuse leading to bullying, violence, trauma, and abuse within the minds and bodies of black children through discriminatory practices within education (Yi, et al., 2002). Thus, denoting the importance of education after slavery within the Black community by Black educators. Post-slavery education was interpreted as a crucial necessity for the Black community, and Black educators played a vital role in providing education after slavery.

² Leary, J. D. (2017). *Post traumatic slave syndrome: America's legacy of enduring injury and healing*. Joy DeGruy Publications Inc., 14.

W.E.B. Du Bois and his work speak to the importance of Black education and the rise in education after slavery. The work and passion of Du Bois demonstrated the resilience of Black children and the role and impact of the environment. Du Bois understood that uplifting the Black mind and soul through education would benefit the Black community and help to meet the needs of the same (Wendling, 2018).

Resilience literature highlights the impact on the positive development within the lives of Black children and their experience of adversity, denoting the resilience and perseverance of Black children despite their experience of adversity, including the trauma of the trans-Atlantic slave trade. Moreover, when placed in nurturing environments with supportive teachers, peers, and parents, we see how they have excelled in the educational system. Therefore, highlighting the importance of safe communities and environments as we engage the minds and spirits of children in the educational system. Signifying it is critical to prioritize building positive self-esteem in Black children to help them thrive (Ungar, 2012).

Between 1861 and 1900 there were about 90 institutions of higher education established to provide education for African Americans due to segregation laws (*Emancipation and educating the newly freed*, 2023). Black schools were established not just to educate but to foster a freedom movement and bring what was invisible to visible. Being reared in this tradition of Black educational institutions founded after the Civil War led to the foundation of the Interdenominational Theological Center that taught theology and the correlation of sacred text and history aligned with relationship, kinship, freedom, self-awareness, dignity, and value that empowered me to embrace and see the resilience within me (*W.E.B. Du Bois and the rise of Black Education*, n.d.).

This is relevant because our attitude of self, and perception of self-determination is necessary as we explore resilience and the development of a cohesive self not founded in the story told by oppressive systems, but the story of love, determination, and resilience that survived enslavement. This attitude of self-determination and the value they placed on education after the trans-

Atlantic slave trade was noticeable then and now through the growth and reach of mass media.

According to Slaughter-Defoe and Rubin (2001), it matters who teaches and the type of environment our children are developed in. Highlighting the impact of positive environments and how they aid in the development of academic success and student resiliency. Understanding the influence of teachers helps to perceive how children are developed and experience academic success and student resiliency in positive environments. Educational learning environments that foster caring, support, and nurturing aid in shaping the minds and spirit of our children. In addition to encouraging students' academic success and resilience, which shows that the teacher genuinely cares, the positive regard that exists between the teacher and students also helps children grow and matriculate throughout school and enables them to deal with and overcome normative challenges related to learning and exposure to negative environmental experiences, such as racism. These findings have been instrumental in engaging the understanding of resilience and positive regard of Black children succeeding and thriving in healthy learning environments. This can be seen today more so on a larger scale as we have a visual representation of Black excellence throughout social media and hearing the stories of students and how they were able to achieve academic success through healthy learning environments although they may have experienced other adversity and life challenges.

Teachers' influence on students' ability to navigate challenges associated with learning and adverse experiences, such as racism, is evident as students' successful progress through their academic journey. After slavery, educated Black women and men, and ministers played a vital role in the establishment of schools, both common educational systems and Sabbath schools to educate Black children and ex-slaves. Post-slavery Black children were educated by Black leaders who cared, nurtured, and offered a culturally informed educational praxis within the Black community and Black principles were a part of the fight for education equality in *Brown vs. Board of Education* in 1954 (Tillman, 2004).

Before Brown vs. Board of Education, teachers, principals, and parents offered positive influence and represented the common good within the Black community. That sought to remedy education injustices although once passed Black principles were fired, demoted, or denied the opportunity to remain in leadership to offer a safe, healing, and educational transformative environment for Black children in the South, thereby shifting the focus of considering cultural norms, interpreting lessons, Black representation in the classroom, and uplifting authentication of a positive school culture, and teacher, parent, community student relationships (Tillman, 2004).

The experience of racism after the trans-Atlantic slave trade is one of the greatest threats faced when developing and sustaining resiliency within Black youth then and now. Because students and youth need to navigate through racist and oppressive systematic systems within Western society. There was a critical need for their resilience to be developed and strengthened. Exploring resiliency will look at the role and influence of teachers, parents, and the community and why it matters who teaches our children, that there is justice, equality, cultural awareness, and nurturing educational transformative environments when considering education and its impact after the trans-Atlantic slave trade for Black children.

III. Building Positive Self-Esteem and Resiliency

Resilience literature points to the importance of providing a positive, culturally sensitive, and caring environment to accommodate an affirming learning environment. Thereby, shedding light on the importance of a culturally sensitive pedagogy that is concerned about the growth and development of all children so that they thrive and succeed in life despite adversity. Drawing attention to formal service provision for social ecologies to support a positive adjustment to life situations cope with these challenges and navigate their academic development (Wang et al.,1997).

Racial identity is important as we examine the impact of education and the trans-Atlantic slave trade. Because self-awareness is connected to worth and value students internalize and use to operate

out of that depicts if they are smart, good enough, or capable of achieving academic success. According to DeCuir-Gunby (2009), O'Connor (1999), and Oyserman, Harrison, and Bybee (2001) examines how the school environment impacts the development of Black students and their ability to recognize their learning capacity. Because when considering one's ability to learn, the environment, resources, relationships, and qualified teachers matter in shaping and influencing students to tap into their inner resilience when navigating the classroom and adversity. Leath et al. (2019) highlight the correlation between racial discrimination and academic outcomes. This draws attention to negative treatment from teachers and peers based on prejudice, bias, and racist attitudes. The authors discuss how the prejudice and racist attitudes of teachers lead to (1) stereotype-based treatment and (2) harsher punishment toward Black children, which impacts the learning environment (Leath et al., 2019). Moreover, experiencing both verbal and physical bullying from peers promotes an unsafe learning environment (Leath et al., 2019).

Teachers, school counselors, parents, and the community must collaborate to provide a safe, healthy learning environment that is culturally aware and concerned about the general welfare of all students to foster intellectual resilience among Black students. The creation of helpful school policies, programs, counseling services, and greater care and awareness of what Black students require to flourish and excel academically are noted by Fraser (2004) and Williams & Bryan (2013).

Masten (2001) asserts a child's ability to adapt helps them to develop resilience. Moreover, the study of resilience and adaptation demonstrates the inner strength within children and the influence of support and positive environments on their ability to adapt and thrive (Masten, 2001). Ungar, (2012) highlights the Social Ecology of Resilience Theory (SERT) to denote how children can successfully cope with difficult life circumstances with the help of their social ecologies when placed in life-giving spaces. Theron and Theron (2013) assert the necessity of positive outcomes for Black children relies on collaboration with teachers and communities concerned with positive outcomes for our children. Through this concern and collaboration, teachers and the community are concerned with the

outcomes of Black children despite their environment and experience of adversity fostering healthy and safe learning environments that promote academic achievement.

IV. Educational Resilience

Recognizing the many facets of resilience literature and focusing on educational resilience, we can understand the development of and impact of relationships and the environment that influence students' ability to adapt, overcome, and achieve academic success despite adversity. According to the American Psychological Association (APA), resilience is “the process and outcome of successfully adapting to difficult or challenging life experiences through mental, emotional, and behavioral flexibility and adjustments to external and internal demand.”³ Whereas Jowkar, et. al., (2014) suggest academic resilience is the ability to achieve academic success despite environmental adversity resulting from early childhood, experience, and environment.⁴ Pointing towards the role of motivation as a significant component of educational resilience.

Developing positive self-esteem in Black children and moving them towards thriving and navigating the academic journey as well as managing oppressive systemic systems is a launching pad when we consider educational resilience and the remnants of racism and prejudice stemming from the trans-Atlantic slave trade. When placed in educational environments that are culturally aware and sensitive, caring, supportive, and nurturing by educators, family, peers, and the community, resilience is cultivated and helps to prepare students for life and academic success (Wang & Huguley, 2012). Wang & Huguley, 2012 highlight two reasons for educational resilience: (1)

³ American Psychological Association. (n.d.). *Resilience*. American Psychological Association.

⁴ Jowkar, B., Kojuri, J., Kohoulat, N., & Hayat, A. A. (2014). Academic resilience in education: the role of achievement goal orientations. *Journal of advances in medical education & professionalism*, 2(1), 33–38.

navigating the experience of adversity and (2) the experience of positive influence within their environment. Their research shows that when a child has a strong support system in school, home, and the community, it aids in their ability to navigate adversity and produce promise. Helping them to achieve academic success despite adversity.

Patrick, et al., (2003) research showed when teachers are authoritative, non-supportive, non-nurturing, culturally insensitive, and non-caring it fosters the opposite pointing to the importance of the learning environment and relationship between the teacher and student. Moreover, pointing to a more extrinsic motivation approach to engage students that allows them to have goals of learning; and through accomplishing these academic goals; it promotes internal and external praise. In contrast, ambiguous environments tend to promote a lack of respect, value, inconsistency, and commitment from teachers who do not encourage student resilience and even prejudice attitudes that negate the value and worth of students.

According to Waxman et al. (2003) and James, et al. (2022) the importance of parental involvement, in addition to the role and impact of educators, produces higher resilience among students and fosters higher aspirations in life and academically. Resilience research literature points to the benefit of supportive classroom environments that promote educational resilience that leads to the development and academic success that helps students manage their academic journey and adversity outside of the classroom.

A teacher's awareness of cultural norms helps create a nurturing classroom where students can overcome challenges and achieve academic success with the support of both parents and teachers. According to Wang & Huguley (2012), there can be variations in the strategies employed to establish, process, and cultivate a supportive learning environment between Black male and female students. This could demonstrate a teacher's understanding of cultural norms and contribute to the development of a supportive learning environment where students can overcome obstacles and succeed academically with the help of parents and teachers. Patrick, et al., (2003) assert a healthy learning environment begins with the classroom environment which, I believe, speaks to the necessity of having qualified, culturally sensitive, and caring teachers to navigate

nuances that can impact a Black student's ability to focus on learning and not their challenging reality outside of the classroom. Nurturing classroom environments helps students develop optimism and their ability to see past adversity and believe in a successful life and future (Cunningham, et al., 2010).

In conclusion, educational resilience and resilience theory research showed that having the support of an adult helps foster academic success and healthy self-esteem in students even when adversity is experienced (Cunningham, et al., 2010). Although research points to the impact of slavery and education among Black students and the Black community, it also draws us to understand how we can promote and process intergenerational traumas, undo societal injustices and inequalities, and promote students' overall well-being by offering cultural awareness, support, and resources to aide in their development and growth, acceptance and self-awareness, and resilience in and out of the classroom.

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