

# Invitational Theory and Practice Applied to Resiliency Development in At-Risk Youth



Citation

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## Abstract

*Resilience development is a growing field of study within the scholarly literature regarding social emotional achievement of at-risk students. Developing resiliency is based on the assumption that positive, pro-social, and/or strength-based values inherent in children and youth should be actively and intentionally developed. The core values of Invitational Theory and Practice of trust, optimism, care, intentionality, and respect can be applied to the values in other theories of resilience development. This paper argues that Invitational Theory and Practice also applies to the practices of resiliency development and should be considered a useful theory for culture change in public schools, alternative schools, and other educational organizations that serve at-risk children and youth.*

There is growing evidence regarding how adult mentor relationships support the development of resilience in at-risk children and youth. In traditional societies, resilience was developed in children and youth through hundreds of natural interactions between the child/youth and adults that occurred every day (Brendtro, Brokenleg, & Van Bockern, 2002; Brendtro & Shahbazian 2004). These mechanisms that traditional societies provided youth through mentoring relationships between many adults and children would automatically develop resiliency in youth (Brokenleg, 2007). Longitudinal studies of at-risk youth by Werner and Smith (1992) followed a cohort group from birth to adulthood on Kauai, Hawaii. These studies, collectively known as the Kauai resilience studies, demonstrated that despite significant risk factors, many factors led to positive outcomes by the time the children had reached adulthood. Their findings also indicated that children with supportive and mentoring adult relationships developed resiliency. These resilient youth were found to have successful outcomes in adulthood (Werner, 1993). According to Benard (2004), resilience is the ability of an individual to develop internal personal strengths that allow the person to develop into a positive, pro-social member of the society at large. These personal strengths are based on values that the individual develops and nurtures internally. Benard (2004) found that most theories of the development of personal strengths interpret these values as falling into four categories: social competence, problem solving, autonomy, and sense of purpose. Invitational Theory and Practice as outlined by Purkey and Novak (1996, 2008) has similar values of trust, care, optimism, respect, and intentionality.

At issue is more than just being synonymous; the Invitational Theory and Practice model promotes resilience because it

intentionally develops values. Purkey and Novak (1996, 2008) further discussed the importance of Invitational values permeating within a public school, alternative school or educational organization, not only the relationships between teachers and students. The “Five P’s” of People, Places, Programs, Policies and Processes emphasize that all relationships are valuable within a public school, alternative school, or youth development organization. The connection between relationships and resilience development would make Invitational Theory and Practice useful within student-centered schools, alternative schools, or youth development organizations. Inviting relationships, by nature, will develop resilience.

## Discussion

The National Institutes of Health (NIH) funded one of the first demonstration projects (Hobbs 1982) designed to promote resiliency in at-risk youth geographically near to the location where the International Alliance for Invitational Education was founded. Nicholas Hobbs, who later would become president of American Psychological Association, received funding and founded a program known as Project Re-Ed (Foltz 2011).

Project Re-Ed would also eventually lead to the founding of the American Re-Education Association (AREA) which is still in existence.

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Project Re-Ed was a semi-residential program with students living on campus during the week and going home on weekends. The program also provided counseling, education, and additional services to the families of the youth served.

This therapeutic and academic program was based on the assumption that children and youth who demonstrated difficult behaviors should not be punished by being sent to punitive rehabilitation programs. Instead, Hobbs instead felt that a central concern for negative behavior choices were traumatic experiences within what Bronfenbrenner (1979) referred to as the ecology of the child. The central treatment belief was that change in the ecology could lead to change in behavior. Over time, the result was an improving life for the

student (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Hobbs developed the Re-Ed model as a way to provide a healthy ecology to create internal positive change within the child. In addition, whenever possible, practitioners would also attempt to influence change within the family. Eventually, residential programs for children and youth operated by the Tennessee Department of Mental Health (TDMH) operated using this model, although TDMH no longer operates any adolescent residential programs. The Wright School of North Carolina was another early demonstration program to operate according the tenets of Project Re-Ed (Hobbs 1982), and it is still in operation. Re-Ed programs all follow twelve principles of positive youth development. They are:

- Life is to be lived now, not in the past, and lived in the future only as a present challenge.
- Trust between child and adult is essential.
- Competence makes a difference, and children and adolescents should be helped to be good at something, and especially at schoolwork.
- Time is an ally, working on the side of growth in a period of development when life has a tremendous forward thrust.
- Self-control can be taught and children and adolescents helped to manage their behavior without the development of psychodynamic insight.
- Intelligence can be taught. Intelligence is a dynamic, evolving, and malleable capacity for making good choices in living.
- Feelings should be nurtured, shared spontaneously, controlled when necessary, expressed when too long repressed, and explored with trusted others.
- The group is very important to young people, and it can become a major source of instruction in growing up.
- Ceremony and ritual give order, stability, and confidence to troubled children and adolescents, whose lives are often in considerable disarray.
- The body is the armature of the self, the physical self around which the psychological self is constructed.
- Communities are important for children and youth, but the uses and benefits of community must be experienced to be learned.
- A child should know some joy in each day and look forward to some joyous event for the morrow.

These principles have many similarities to Invitational Theory and Practice's values of Trust, Care, Optimism, Respect, and Intentionality outlined by Purkey and Novak (1996, 2008). A particular connection to make is that these principles consistently require adults to invite positive relationships with students. Hobbs directly addressed trust between adults and children. Intentionality permeates each principle because the principles do something that uninviting texts do not; they tell us what to do instead of what not to do as professionals in youth-serving organizations. Care and respect also are central to each principle. One will notice that each demonstrates that children and youth need to practice positive development and citizenship. Optimism is an interesting connection because no one considers raising children for their detriment, and yet at some point, society

starts to give up on some children. The Re-Ed principles focus on what is right for all children just like the values of Invitational Theory and Practice. While some might argue that Re-Ed is a clinical theory and should remain within the purview of mental health treatment, Foltz (2011) stated, "Re-ED highlights the view that symptoms should be seen as a point of struggle that can be worked through within collaborative relationships with trusted adults" (p. 30). What could be a more apt description of an Invitationally-minded teacher who sometimes teaches and mentors difficult students?

Werner and Smith (1992) indicated the importance of intentionality in developing resilience. The researchers revisited their cohort group of children in the Kauai Longitudinal Study when they were adults age 31 or 32.

They found several elements of resilience that, when provided in childhood and adolescence, directly affected positive outcomes among these people when they became adults. Some examples of positive adult outcomes included completion of high school, ability to maintain relationships with family members, ability to maintain relationships with others, ability to maintain long-term employment, married or in a long-term relationship, and ability to resolve conflicts. Despite the at-risk nature of the children (now adults) from the Kauai study (Werner and Smith, 1992), many were able to have positive outcomes in early adulthood due to several protective factors that have Invitational implications. The first set of protective factors involved a positively social temperament that “elicited positive responses from family members and strangers” (p. 192). The second set of protective factors included ties with parents and/or other adults that encouraged “trust, autonomy and initiative” (p. 192). The third set of protective factors included a support system outside the family that “rewarded competence and provided them with a sense of coherence” (p. 192). A direct connection exists between Invitational Theory and Practice and the development of resilience. At-risk youth who experienced strong and bonded relationships with adults who were themselves inviting provided the necessary protective factors for these at-risk youth to overcome adversity. Trust, care, optimism, respect, and intentionality are the nature of the protective factors discussed within the context of the study. The adults who provided and daily modeled these values to these children as they developed were the ones who became the resilient adults that society expects. Werner and Smith (1992) further discussed the importance of adults in developing resilience in at-risk youth. The higher the number of caring adults clearly provided more protective factors and higher levels of success in adulthood. An influential teacher, particularly during adolescence, also was a recognized protective factor. The academic learning was only part of the equation. The researchers recognized that the influential teacher was also a “role model with whom the student could identify” (p. 178). In other words, the teacher was intentionally inviting.

In a review of multiple theories regarding resiliency, Benard (2004) found four values that resiliency theorists consistently cite as values that promote resilience within children and youth.

The four groupings of values she identified are social competence, problem solving, autonomy, and a sense of purpose. Benard’s (2004) study did not include Invitational Theory and Practice among the various theories of practice that she studied; however, Invitational Theory and Practice certainly shares similar values for developing resiliency and protective factors within youth. According to Purkey and Novak (2008), the values of Invitational Theory and Practice are trust, care, optimism, respect, and intentionality. Practicing care and respect would support resilience development as social competence. The practice of intentionality would promote resilience development through developing children’s problem solving skills. The practice of trust would promote resilience by helping children to internalize problem-solving skills. The practice of optimism would promote resilience through helping children to develop a sense of purpose.

### Conclusion

Invitational Theory and Practice provides a useful approach to developing resiliency in at-risk students. Public schools, alternative schools, and youth development organizations whose goals include developing resiliency within students would find Invitational Education useful in creating an effective organization that promotes change in at-risk students. Professional educators whose work serves at-risk children and youth must be inviting and develop inviting systems in their schools, alternative schools, or youth development organizations in order to also develop resilience in children. The constructs of Invitational Theory and Practice should be considered as part of the culture change when developing a climate that promotes resiliency and academic inquiry.

Just as Invitational Theory and Practice may lead to positive outcomes in mainstream schools, Invitational Theory and Practice can be embedded in the practices of schools with high numbers of at-risk students and alternative schools with positive results. Outcomes for students would include higher levels of pro-social behavior among students, higher academic achievement, and improved social emotional achievement. It would be expected that educators in schools with high risk populations could operate an alternative school successfully using the tenets of Invitational Theory. Invitational Theory and Practice is complementary to other approaches based on the Re-ED model that has demonstrated success in learning environments serving at-risk students.

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