

Resilience, Race, and Preschool Expulsion



By Rachel Wagner, MSW

I have been working in the field of early childhood resilience for over 20 years. For as many of those years, I have been tormented by the epidemic of preschool expulsion. In my late 20s, my first real social work position was in an expulsion preschool, where we served children who had been dismissed from at least three other preschools before coming to us. Later, when I dedicated my path to early childhood mental health consultation, I saw myself in the business of preventing preschool expulsion by promoting the social and emotional well-being and resilience of children. I gravitated toward the strength-based work of the Devereux Center for Resilient Children (DCRC), and found their focus on the environment, family, and within-child protective factor building a refreshing approach for supporting young children who used behaviors that adults find challenging. I loved this approach and eventually found my career home at DCRC, where I've now been for over 12 years.

When Dr. Walter Gilliam's groundbreaking national study was released, exposing expulsion rates in state preschool programs, the findings asked us to explore not only the way we meet the social and emotional needs of young children, but how our implicit bias plays a role. The data showed that 4-year-olds are 50% more likely to be expelled than 3-year-olds, Black preschoolers are 3.6 times as likely as White preschoolers to be expelled, and boys are more than four times as likely as girls to be expelled. This led to a further examination of what is now called *the 3 B's (Big, Black, Boys)*, and how these characteristics are directly linked to the likelihood of expulsion. Implicit biases can be understood as automatic and unconscious stereotypes that influence judgments and decisions regarding others. In the study, teachers watched a video of preschoolers and were asked to identify potentially challenging behaviors. On average, educators watched the Black boys in the video more closely, and sometimes flagged them as displaying challenging behaviors. What participants did not know was that the video featured no challenging behavior. These findings indicate that many of the underlying causes of preschool discipline may not be rooted in challenging behavior, but rather in adults' decision-making flaws.¹

Around the same time that people in our field were talking about the expulsion study, we also began having more meaningful discussions around trauma. These conversations encouraged me to reflect on the interconnectedness of expulsion, implicit bias and trauma, and about all of the children I have encountered during my long career who had been expelled from their preschool settings. Anecdotally, I can confirm that *the 3 B's* research was in fact true, and that almost all – if not all – of those children had experienced trauma. And, aren't expulsion and disruption in attachments, routines, and care additional forms of trauma or toxic stress? It is a hard reality to acknowledge that our preschool environments are often traumatizing or re-traumatizing many Black children due to the systemic role implicit and explicit bias play in our educational infrastructure. As a community of early childhood leaders, we must respond to this powerful information with compassion, a willingness to learn and a readiness to engage in solutions.

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The early years for children of color and children who have experienced trauma are critical for supporting a lifelong capacity for resilience. Understanding resilience among African American youth requires acknowledging their experience in the United States, and appreciating the continuing legacy of oppression and discrimination that affects their daily lives.² I recently read an enlightening piece about epigenetic trauma, as well as a challenging commentary on “grit” in the African American community. In light of what I have learned, I have been compelled to explore Devereux’s resilience-focused resources with a lens on race. Our team at DCRC has begun these conversations by reading some of this important and challenging work. We recognize the complexity of this conversation and I understand that this piece only scratches the surface. We invite you to learn with us and share some of your wisdom as well.

As I dig deeper, I still know for sure that promoting children’s protective factors and reducing behavior concerns is an important part of the preschool expulsion conversation. However, I also believe that there is an opportunity to make a more direct connection between protective factor building and the unique experiences of Black children. This is an opportunity to individualize on a deeper level. Individualized resilience efforts are not a new concept, but we have yet to challenge ourselves to fully explore individualization specific to race. Thoughtful and intentional resilience work may even help create authentic understanding and connection between children and their educators, therefore reducing the chances of expulsion. But, more work must be done to directly address implicit and explicit bias, and to change policies that perpetuate oppression in our preschools. For the past 20 years, the Devereux Center for Resilient Children’s focus on resilience has always been done with a lens on cultural and linguistic sensitivity, but like all research-based programs, we can and will do more to ensure our resources meet the needs of populations made vulnerable by oppression. We embrace these efforts, and invite you to join us!

If you would like to read along with our DCRC team, check out the following resources:

- Resilience in African American Children and Adolescents A Vision for Optimal Development. American Psychological Association, Task Force on Resilience and Strength in Black Children and Adolescents, © 2008 by the American Psychological Association <http://www.apa.org/pi/cyf/resilience.html>
- “Grit Is in Our DNA”: Why Teaching Grit Is Inherently Anti-Black
<https://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2019/02/13/grit-is-in-our-dna-why-teaching.html?cmp=SOC-SHR-FB&fbclid=IwAR0kPk8fPjlcQV-111txXdca1PIVxF3LsAdSchbXeFRFUx8116I7iIJ9Iq0>
- The Epigenetics of Being Black and Feeling Blue: Understanding African American Vulnerability to Disease
https://www.huffpost.com/entry/the-epigenetics-of-being_b_4094226

If you are interested in learning more about what other leaders in the field are saying about anti-bias efforts:

- <https://www.naeyc.org/resources/topics/anti-bias>
- <https://www.naeyc.org/sites/default/files/globally-shared/downloads/PDFs/resources/topics/Statement%20from%20NAEYC%20on%20Implicit%20Bias%20Research.pdf>
- <https://www.zerotothree.org/resources/series/preventing-expulsion-from-preschool-and-child-care>

Citations:

1. *New Data Reveal 250 Preschoolers Are Suspended or Expelled Every Day*, Rasheed Malik - <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/early-childhood/news/2017/11/06/442280/new-data-reveal-250-preschoolers-suspended-expelled-every-day/>
2. *Resilience in African American Children and Adolescents A Vision for Optimal Development*. American Psychological Association, Task Force on Resilience and Strength in Black Children and Adolescents, © 2008 by the American Psychological Association. <http://www.apa.org/pi/cyf/resilience.html>