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Poem Title: "I'm Just a Child! Please, Do Not Label Me As Resilient"

Dear Teachers,

I am just a child, please do not label me resilient

I have yet to develop a mental reservoir from which to draw  
strength to handle stress and hardship

I have yet to develop the capacity to withstand or recover  
quickly from difficult situations

I have yet to develop the knowledge to internalize and make  
sense of what is happening

I have yet to gain experience to draw from when confronted  
with challenges

When I grow up, by all means, call me resilient, but for now,  
remember, I'm still just a child

Article:

So often, we as educators/professionals use the word "resilient" to describe a child who manages to make it through a difficult situation and comes out ahead. Yet, we have no idea what the true ramifications of a situation may have been for the child after he/she left us. Yes, he/she might have appeared to have gotten through a difficult situation on the surface, but can we honestly say that as a child, they have the strength and knowledge to draw from, to recover fully, and spring back into shape, unharmed, in line with being "resilient"?

If this was the case, then why, at 66 years old, having retired from a successful teaching career with a Bachelor of Arts in Sociology and a Master's in Education Administration, in an instant, I am right back to my first day of school as a first grader being asked to recite my ABCs? I feel my

palms sweating with an urge to bite my nails when it occurs to me that I don't know what comes after the letter "G." I can feel my throat tightening as the teacher patiently waits for me to continue. I feel embarrassed, ashamed that now the teacher knows I'm not smart, that now the teacher is writing something on her pad that will follow me for the rest of my life, that I'm the only student who doesn't know her ABCs and perhaps never will.

My personal story, as narrated in my first bilingual children's book, *Brave Lolis Learns English/La Valiente Lolis Aprende Inglés*, describes the struggles that I, and often, many English Learners, experience. Have an honest conversation with friends, and you'll be surprised to hear the million and one hurtful and painful stories they encountered as children that have stayed with them. I have no doubt that many of them might have been labeled "resilient" in their youth.

It wouldn't surprise me if some of my teachers used the word "resilient" to describe me as a second-language learner making my way through the educational system in the 1960s. To this date, "resilient" continues to be readily used to describe a vast majority of children as, perhaps, just a common adjective. If I were "resilient," would not these feelings have left me years ago, never to surface again?

I now look back and acknowledge to the world that these 5 minutes with my first-grade teacher 61 years ago impacted and changed the trajectory of my life. I learned from that experience to develop survival tactics that would help me get through similar future situations. I adapted to being quiet, staying under the radar, and not drawing attention to myself in any way. This meant never raising my hand when the teacher asked if there were any questions about understanding a lesson. This meant when asked if I understood a lesson, I ALWAYS shook my head "yes" and prayed the teacher would quickly move on to someone else. I learned never to make eye contact when the teacher was looking for a volunteer to answer questions about any lesson. Dropping my pencil was also a quick distraction. I learned to fake a stomachache and be sent to the nurse before having to take a test or, better yet, fake being sick and staying home. I learned to cheat from my peers if the chance ever presented itself, even if I knew the answer. I needed reassurance that my answer was correct. Writing my spelling words on my hand, on the table, and on small pieces of paper was a common recourse for me.

Going through middle and high school was no easier task, especially when walking into many classes and being told that everyone would have to read a paragraph out loud of whatever chapter we were reading that day. My survival technique was to quickly figure out what paragraph I was going to have to read, read and re-read it, over and over to myself, making sure I could get through it without a hitch when it was my turn. If there were a word I didn't know, I would lower my voice and mumble my way through. Of course, what this meant was that I was completely engrossed in practicing my one paragraph, and I didn't listen to anything that was read before; hence, I was completely lost once I was done reading my part. While these

experiences could certainly be labeled as minor incidents, ones that I would certainly move through unharmed, that was not the case.

Don't get me wrong, my teachers were all genuinely nice to me, but as odd as it may sound, I only remember the names of two of my elementary school teachers and none from middle or high school. I'm sure my teachers did the best they could with the knowledge they had at the time. However, aside from the obvious lack of any real connection or relationship being fostered with my teachers, my inner voice was at the core of my behavior, protecting me from feeling humiliated. While at some point I might have been able to shake off the incident of getting stuck at "G," I instead allowed it to slowly diminish my confidence, leaving me vulnerable without the courage to get past it.

Unfortunately, the longer I went without asking for help, doing it on my own, the lower my confidence. Learning what I could on my own didn't serve me well. While these survival skills of minimizing my exposure might have seemed minor, these same skills paralyzed me and negatively impacted my academic growth. So many times, I wanted to ask for help, but what was even stronger was my inner negative talk and my reliving the embarrassment of not knowing.

While I graduated with a "C" average, the idea of going to college was not in my future. Why would I think college would be any different?

In retrospect, I now know that I was not "resilient at six years old." I didn't have the experience to draw from or the mental reservoir to fall back on. I had yet to develop sufficient knowledge to internalize and make sense of what was happening, learn from it, and grow. At six years old, I had yet to develop the capacity to withstand minor embarrassing movements and quickly recover. I had yet to learn the concept of locus of control, like asking my teachers for help.

It wasn't until my early twenties that I started to recognize how debilitating listening to my own negative voice had been. I started to develop the capacity to understand how to correct my situation and move forward. In my twenties, I started learning to draw from my strengths, channeling my energy toward improving myself and managing the stress of negative self-talk. Around this age, I started acquiring the capability of managing my emotions.

Perhaps some would say I was a late bloomer, so be it. I now know that many of today's children, like me at the age of 6 years old, continue to be left on their own to navigate a slew of disabling psychological and emotional issues under the assumption that they will get through it.

As a retired educator, I now reflect on the many missed opportunities when I might have failed to recognize students who were struggling, be it academic or emotional, trusting "resiliency" to carry them through. What is clear to me now is that resilience is a skill to be taught based on the emotional and developmental stages a child goes through.

Trust me; I know the demands are huge for classroom teachers. How I survived, I wonder, too. I'm sure there were a million and one issues that some of my students were struggling through, but instead, I was too busy trying to get through a lesson before lunch to notice. In hindsight, slowing down the lesson just might have lessened anxiety levels for all of us and allowed my students to process the lesson.

Dear colleagues, let us slow down a little, take a deep breath, and take time to make sense of what is happening around us. Let us take some time to notice the quiet or otherwise labeled disruptive student trying his/her best just to be present. Let us create a safe space where we might give a child time to catch his/her breath and where he/she can be without demands. Let us choose to give emotional support and comfort over a test or worksheet that, in the end, doesn't truly reflect what children know when they are being bombarded with the emotional trauma that they have yet to learn to identify, much less handle it. The amount of time we have with students is so fleeting. Let us make the most of it.

Let us hold off on labeling young children "resilient," lest we miss the opportunity to recognize behavior that clues us into some students' struggles. Let us take the time to ask probing questions that might give us insight into that inner voice/internal dialogue that may be taking place just below the surface. I can't help but wonder if things might have been different for me, had anyone of my teachers noticed a pattern in my behavior and taken a moment to ask what I might have been feeling, guiding me towards self-expression. Let us not be quick to label children; instead, we should be willing to take the time to provide them with techniques and tools to support the development of their self-awareness, helping them process emotions that arise. Let us be vigilant in recognizing signs that demonstrate internal struggles and create environments where children feel safe to share. It costs us nothing but patience to take the time to encourage our children to share their fears and insecurities. This, my esteemed colleagues, can make a difference.