

## **Theories into Practice: Building Youth Resilience through School-Community-University Partnerships**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This paper describes the theoretical grounding and implementation of the Pontiac Resilience Project, a subproject of an established community-university partnership. The goal of the Pontiac Resilience Project is to reduce the toxic impact of trauma and Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), to support children's healthy development, and to create a healing resilient community of Pontiac. Our work critically examines the intersectionality of ACEs and childhood trauma as rooted in systemic inequities and historical racism. Grounded in critical ecological perspectives, we outline the praxis and pedagogy underlying our youth efforts of the Pontiac Resilience Project, which is conducted in partnership with a public school district, to inform and mobilize youths. Through a relationship-based participatory approach, youths, ages 15-18, are empowered as community change agents.

**Keywords:** adverse childhood experiences, resilience, youth mental health, school-community-university partnership

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### **INTRODUCTION**

The City of Pontiac, located 30 miles north of Detroit, is nestled within Oakland County, the county with the highest income per capita in Michigan (Roberts & Tanner, 2021). Pontiac made national news in 1971 when ten school buses were bombed by the Ku Klux Klan, opposing the desegregation of schools. Violence erupted in response to the ruling of the class action suit filed by parents of African American students wanting equal, quality education for their children, which led to desegregation bussing (*Davis v. School District of City of Pontiac, 1970*).

Desegregation bussing was a practice in which students were transported within and outside their local districts to achieve racial integration of schools (DeWitt, 2023). Irene McCabe, a White parent activist, worked with attorney L. Brooks Patterson, also White, fought the Judge's forced desegregation order. Judge Damon Keith from the U.S. District Court in Detroit was an African American (Coleman, 2021).

Between 1994 and 2010, General Motors closed or moved most of its plants out of Pontiac. The closing of automobile plants across Pontiac led to the city's financial struggles (Carey, 2009). In 2009, the city's projected deficit reached \$12 million, leading to a "hostile takeover" by the state emergency financial manager (Yaccino, 2013). City officials were fired, public services were outsourced, and city properties were put up for sale (Abowd, 2012). Before the turmoil started in the 1970s, the city had 85,000 residents, most of whom identified as White (Yaccino, 2013). Currently, most Pontiac's 61,000 residents identify as people of color: 50% Black; 9% two or more races; 4% other races; and 19% Hispanic or Latine. Twenty-three percent are White (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021). In addition, almost a third live in poverty. The flipping of the city's demographic population signifies geographical racial segregation in a county where 74.6% identify as White (U.S. Census Bureau, 2022). L. Brooks Patterson, who fought against bussing for racial integration in Pontiac schools, became the Oakland County prosecutor and later, Oakland County Executive, overseeing local policies. He held the latter position from 1992 until he died in 2019 (Wisely, 2019).

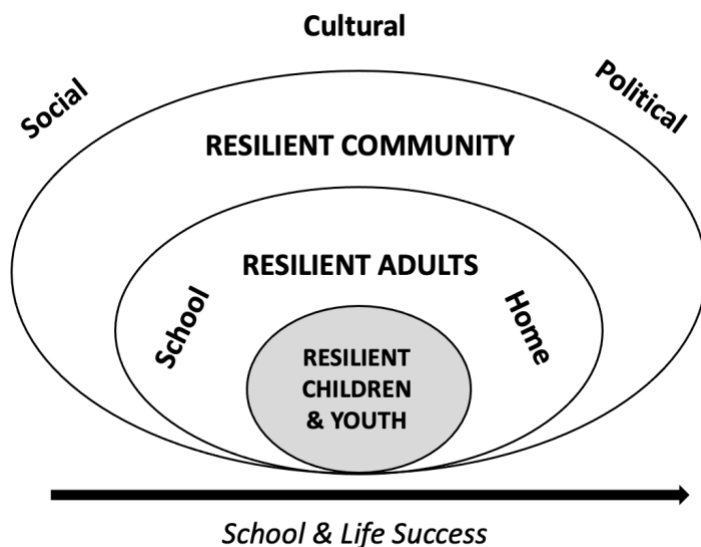
In 2014, amidst a financial crisis, the City of Pontiac formed a "sustainable, mutually beneficial relationship" with a publicly funded university located five miles northeast of Pontiac. Since then, the community-university partnership has been home to over 350 collaborative projects (Blitchok, 2015). This paper describes the theoretical grounding of the Pontiac Resilience Project, one of the collaborative projects of the community-university partnership, and our work with youths, conducted in partnership with the Pontiac School District. By addressing not only personal but also the historical trauma the Pontiac community has long endured, the Pontiac Resilience Project adopts a critical ecological perspective to examine the intersectionality of ACEs and childhood trauma as rooted in systemic inequities and historical racism. Built on Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems model (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; 2005), we incorporate Brooks and Watson's (2019) ecology of racism model and abolitionist thinking (Love, 2019) to derive the critical ecological systems perspective. In the next section, we present the theoretical grounding of the project, beginning with the Pontiac Resilience Project model.

## **THEORETICAL GROUNDING**

### **The Pontiac Resilience Project Model**

In 2017, the early childhood subgroup of the community-university partnership (heretofore EC subgroup), launched the Pontiac Resilience Project with the goals of raising awareness of and preventing the toxic long-term impact of trauma and Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs); supporting children's healthy development; and co-create a resilient Pontiac (Wakabayashi et al., 2020). The project came about

as members began discussing during the monthly EC subgroup meeting how alleviating childhood trauma and adversities is central to improving the lives of children in Pontiac. The EC subgroup is an interdisciplinary network of parents, educators, researchers, members of faith-based organizations, and other community leaders. In its simplest form, the Pontiac Resilience Project model depicts three nested levels the project hopes to impact: resilient community, resilient adults at home and in school, and resilient children and youth (see Figure 1).



**Figure 1: Pontiac Resilience Project Ecological Model**

**At the community level**, the goal is to create a culture and norms where everyone understands the negative long-term impact of ACEs and childhood trauma, and the importance of a safe, stable, supportive, and nurturing environment and relationships for child and youth well-being (CDC, 2019). The early childhood subgroup partners with the Michigan ACE Initiative (<https://miace.org>), a statewide organization, and local community organizations to offer ACE and resilience workshops. We also conducted free screenings of the award-winning documentary, *Resilience: The Biology of Stress and the Science of Hope* (Redford, 2016), followed by facilitated discussions. The film has assisted in educating and informing the community about the impact of stress and trauma on individuals. These sessions have taken place in downtown venues, the public library, schools, churches, and at nonprofit service delivery agencies. The documentary created by the EC subgroup to further spread awareness of ACEs and resilience, Pontiac Strong (2019), demonstrates the importance of this project to the community.

**At the adult level**, the goal is for adults who are trauma-informed and resilience-focused to serve as safe, stable, supportive, and nurturing individuals to children and youths. We work closely with community mental health agencies to connect adults to

services. We also maintain a network of 33 Michigan ACE Initiative Community Champions (MACCs) whom we trained using the science-informed NEAR (Neuroscience, Epigenetics, ACES, and Resilience) framework provided by the Michigan ACE Initiative. The MACCs include a Community Policing Deputy serving Pontiac, the Pontiac School Board President, a Pontiac High School Security Supervisor, a social worker, a community family advocate, an after-school tutor coordinator, community mental health specialists, a Pontiac youth librarian, and parent leaders (see Pontiac Strong, 2021).

**At the child/youth level**, the goal is to promote healthy and resilient children and youth. We work with youth directly. In January 2020, in collaboration with 60 community volunteers, the EC subgroup conducted a school-wide screening of *Resilience*, followed by small group discussions at Pontiac High School. In 2021, following the Oxford High School shooting, we collaborated with the Clarence Phillips Ascend Foundation and their youth ambassadors to create mental health Public Service Announcement videos. In the 2021-2022 school year, the EC subgroup trained seven high school student leaders to become Michigan's first Youth MACCs. The students traveled to Harvard University to share their voices (Tyle, 2023).

Pontiac's history of oppression and racism described in the introduction is part of the social, cultural, historical, and political contexts surrounding these ecologies in Figure 1. Over time, these systems interact to shape youths' trajectories (depicted by an arrow) as empowered Pontiac Youth Community Champions or Pontiac Youth MACCs.

### **Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Systems Model**

Bronfenbrenner's model adds depth and context to the Pontiac Resilience Project model. Bronfenbrenner's model depicts children's development as directly and indirectly impacted by multiple layers of nested contextual systems: microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem. The microsystem is the innermost level and children's immediate environment, such as home or school. Children's interactions with their closest individuals directly shape their development. In the mesosystem, the next level, two or more microsystems interact, such as in the case of home-school partnerships (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The two inner circles of the Pontiac Resilience model (resilient children/youth and resilient adult) both fall into the microsystem. When children or their families interact with resilient children/youth or resilient adults outside of their homes, those interactions would lie within the mesosystem.

Like the mesosystem, the exosystem is formed from the interactions of two or more systems; however, unlike a microsystem or mesosystem, one of those systems lies outside of the child's microsystem, such as a parent's workplace. Thus, the child's exosystem indirectly impacts the child (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The exosystem may resemble the resilient community in the Pontiac Resilience model. The macrosystem is the larger social, political, and historical context in which the child develops (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), which in the Pontiac Resilience model, exists outside the outer circle. More recently, Bronfenbrenner added a fifth system, the chronosystem, or the continuities and discontinuities that impact a child's development over time

(Bronfenbrenner, 2005), which simulates the arrow in the Pontiac Resilience model, depicting youths' future trajectories.

## **Ecology of Racism**

Given Pontiac is a diverse community with a history of oppression, we overlay Brooks and Watson's (2019) ecology of racism framework, which focuses on school leadership and racism, on the Bronfenbrenner and Pontiac Resilience models. Brooks and Watson (2019) identify five levels of racism: individual racism, dyadic racism, subcultural racism, institutional racism, and societal racism. Like Bronfenbrenner's model, the levels are nested and depicted as concentric circles, with individual racism situated at the innermost. Below, we adapt Brooks and Watson's (2019) ecologies to explain our youth effort. By "leaders," we refer to youths empowered to lead as MACCs, not school leaders, which was the original intent of Brooks and Watson.

### ***Individual Racism***

Brooks and Watson (2019) explain that individuals' "attitudes and behaviors in relation to racism begin early, and are shaped by critical incidents throughout their lifetime." These critical incidents (e.g., adverse and positive childhood experiences) are situated at the individual (innermost) level. Youth leaders are guided to reflect on these experiences and exercise their resilience. With help from supportive and competent adults (resilient adults), youth leaders learn to facilitate difficult conversations surrounding racism. They become aware that systemic inequities and historical racism foreground ACEs and trauma in Pontiac. For healing to occur, the Pontiac Youth MACCs thus come to realize that their experiences of being minoritized and marginalized are forms of trauma and stress, which for some, are intergenerational.

### ***Dyadic Racism***

While supportive and competent relationships are key to empowering youths, Brooks and Watson (2019) note that relationships can both perpetuate and abolish racist attitudes and behaviors. Resilient adults, thus, need to not only promote awareness of ACEs, systemic inequities, and historical trauma but also model what supportive and competent relationships look like for the youth leaders. Approaching such awareness from a trauma-informed lens can expand youths' understanding of what happened to them and their loved ones, rather than what's wrong with them. This could lead to healing and empowering relationships.

### ***Subcultural and Institutional Racism***

Brooks and Watson (2019) identify subcultural and institutional racism as the next levels of racism. Subcultural racism acknowledges that there are many subcultures within an institution. Institutional racism refers to inequitable policies and practices, which intentionally or unintentionally bias against one or more groups.

These policies or practices could exist within and across schools. Youths in Pontiac may experience subcultural and institutional racism due to inequities created by the larger institutional system. For example, there is a known difference in the reputation of schools within the district. That is, the students at a selective magnet school (a public school with a specialized focus on academics) demonstrate high academic achievement and success post-graduation. Students at the Pontiac High School, where this youth effort takes place, are often compared against this magnet school. Despite being from the same community, with same racial backgrounds, students at Pontiac High School are often led to feel inferior or incapable to match up with their peers at the magnet school. Multiple anecdotes from the third and the fourth authors, who are native of Pontiac, and former and current employees of the Pontiac High School support this.

Brooks and Watson (2019) emphasize the importance of pretext-context-post text as “temporal aspects” of racism. These temporal contexts of racism explain how racism in education may be shaped, including its “multiple histories.” This aligns with Bronfenbrenner’s fifth system, chronosystem, and simulates how in our Pontiac Resilience model, we depict temporal changes as an arrow pointing right toward youths as empowered and ready to lead (see Figure 1).

### ***Societal Racism***

Lastly, Brooks and Watson’s (2019) societal racism overlaps well with the outermost circle (resilient community), and the social, cultural, historical, and political contexts depicted outside the circles in our Pontiac Resilience Model. An example of the macro-level, societal racism is evident in a seemingly parent-friendly Michigan’s School of Choice provisions. The provisions provide families with the opportunity to enroll in schools within and across districts that are not their own. In the 2021-2022 school year, the Pontiac School District enrolled 3,652 students while 3,682 students attended out-of-districts. Sections 105 and 105C of Michigan’s State School Aid Act allow public school districts to enroll nonresident students, and include them in their count, without approval from the students’ home districts (Michigan Department of Education, 2022). Disparities are exacerbated when Pontiac families with more resources send their children to more affluent school districts outside Pontiac. In 2022, the Michigan legislature approved an increase in per-pupil funding to \$9,150 and a per-pupil mental health funding of \$214. Given the number of Pontiac students who attend out-of-district schools, approximately \$34 million was lost to the surrounding districts. An additional 4,077 students residing in the Pontiac Schools service area attend charter schools, leading to another \$38 million in school aid funds that could have gone to the Pontiac School District. Over 80 percent of Michigan’s charter schools are for-profit and privately managed and thus are not subject to public disclosure laws. Therefore, much of how charter schools spend state funding is unclear (Mauriello, 2022).

Overall, Brooks and Watson’s (2019) framework adds to the Pontiac Resilience model and Bronfenbrenner’s model, demonstrating how systemic inequities, including racism and historical trauma, weave through all levels and contexts.

## **Culturally-Affirming Social-Emotional Learning**

Since ACEs, trauma, resilience, and healing are closely related to social-emotional learning (SEL), we briefly describe our approach to SEL. SEL has been increasingly valued as a skill needed to help students regulate their behaviors and emotions. Recent incidents involving police and youth arrests indicate that minoritized youths are often subject to stricter expectations when it comes to regulating their behaviors and emotions in public (Simmons, 2019). SEL is more than just managing behaviors and regulating emotions. It requires cultural sensitivity and recognition. Rather than limiting youth's reactions, SEL should empower youths to assert their beliefs and culture. ACEs and childhood trauma often impact children's brain development, leading to short attention spans, inability to follow directions, tantrums, and other challenging behaviors in school. Kaler-Jones (2020) argues, "culturally-affirming social-emotional learning relates students back to their ancestry while recognizing and addressing trauma." She continues to explain:

Healing, for Black and Brown young people, should be centered in SEL.... where young people are reminded that they are not just their trauma, but rather all of the ways they continue to dream, imagine, hope, and grow. SEL devoid of culturally-affirming practices and understandings is not SEL at all.

One role of resilient adults, therefore, is to acknowledge youths' anger as legitimate, rather than rejecting or ignoring it. The Pontiac Resilience Project thus guides and channels youths' power toward meaningful activities, and healing, and guide their change.

## **THEORIES INTO PRACTICE**

Our youth effort takes place in the innermost circle of the critical ecological systems perspective introduced in the previous section. The goal is to empower youths to collaborate with peers and community members to ultimately reach all levels of ecologies.

After the school reopened post-COVID-19 pandemic, the co-leads returned to Pontiac High School to work with a small group of students who can serve as our catalysts, that is, the first youth Michigan ACE Initiative Community Champions or Youth MACCs. After a 6-week pilot in early Summer of 2022, we regrouped with ten students in Fall of 2022. Three students rejoined from the summer. The general education social worker (GESW) for the Pontiac High School referred her students to the group. The students then brought their friends and siblings. All students had experienced high levels of adversity, but many also reported having a strong social support network, as assessed using the Children's Hope Scale (Snyder et al., 1997). With a focus on building resilience, the group continued to meet for an hour weekly throughout the school year with the goal to 1) inform students about ACEs and resilience; 2) center student voices; and 3) empower students to lead as Michigan ACE Initiative Community Champions in Pontiac, that is, become Pontiac Youth MACCs.

## **Youth MACC Facilitators**

Besides being co-leads of the Pontiac Resilience Project, we are also adult facilitators of the Youth MACC, and a mix of Pontiac natives and non-natives. Of the four co-leads, two are African American, one is White, and one is Asian. As a multi-racial, multilingual group, we co-construct culturally sensitive and responsive approaches to build youth resilience. We are an early childhood researcher, a psychologist, a former high school teacher, and clinical social workers. We are also Michigan ACE Initiative trainers. The diversity within the team's expertise, thus, enables us to convey the content from multiple disciplinary perspectives with youths' mental health at the forefront. Each of us positions ourselves as a competent supportive adult who serves to amplify youths' voices and empower them as future city leaders.

## **Inform Students about ACEs and Resilience**

First, students participated in weekly sessions to learn about ACEs and resilience in short but in-depth segments. The segments covered topics about neuroscience, epigenetics, ACEs, and resilience or NEAR science. These segments were followed by interactive and youth-friendly reinforcement activities, such as pair sharing, video clips, board games, hand puppets, journals, and Kahoot! Kahoot! is an online gaming system that enhances student learning.

## ***Neuroscience***

For neuroscience, the curriculum focused on the importance of healthy brain development through early adulthood. Students learned how babies' brains build new connections at a dazzling speed, creating complex networks. While brains continue to grow to accommodate critical thinking until early adulthood, after around age 6, they begin "pruning," that is, only frequent and high-impact experiences remain. Our brains, therefore, adapt to the world we live in. The brain of a child who grows up in a warm, happy family, adapts to a peaceful and loving world, whereas the brain of a child who encounters adversities must adapt to a harsh and dangerous world. While both brains are adaptive, each may have difficulty when placed in a mismatched world.

The neuroscience curriculum also explains how our brains respond to stress, including triggers of previous traumatic experiences, and how early experiences impact the sensitivity and intensity of our stress responses. Trauma and adversities impact brain development and the age at which children experience critical incidents, the duration of those incidents, and gender also matter. The Pontiac Youth MACC group breaks down neuroscience information for the students. We use games, videos, mindfulness activities, surveys, and worksheets to enhance youths' awareness of how brains impact stressors and stress response systems.



### ***Epigenetics***

Epigenetics explains how adversity and traumatic experiences can be passed on through our DNA, that is, how they “get under the skin.” It explains how our survival instincts become attached to our DNA, and stressful experiences can be passed down to the next generation. Epigenetics helps us understand the long-term and intergenerational impact of ACEs and trauma, including the depth and complexity of historical trauma caused by societal inequity and racism.

In the Pontiac Youth MACC group, we emphasized the point made in the Michigan ACE Initiative materials that epigenetics also suggests that positive life experiences could influence our genetic readings and reverse the negative effects of ACEs and childhood trauma. We introduce students to abolitionist thinking that focuses on the strengths and assets of culture, including the history of Pontiac’s resistance and resilience. Whether it’s human connections, parent-child attachments, or teacher-student relationships, epigenetics provides hope to sever any generational trauma, and that change can begin with us.

### ***Adverse Childhood Experience (ACE)***

The program focuses on empowering youths to spread awareness of the long-term impact of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) with an emphasis on resilience. ACEs include child abuse (physical, emotional, sexual), neglect (physical and emotional), domestic violence (intimate partner violence), parental divorce or separation, living with an adult who is a substance abuser, mentally ill and suicidal, or incarcerated. The version of the ACE questionnaire that is available widely, therefore, consists of these 10 ACEs. Toxic stress before the age of 18, stemming from chronic or severely traumatic adversities, can damage children’s brain architecture. A landmark ACE study conducted with over 17,000 adults by Felitti et al. (1998) showed that ACEs were highly interrelated. There was a strong graded correlation between the number of ACEs reported and later adult risk behaviors and diseases.

In the Pontiac Youth MACC group, we expand the definition of ACEs to include other childhood traumas, such as bullying, poverty, discrimination and racism. The project adopts the abolitionist teaching philosophy (Love, 2019) to empower individuals and communities to reflect on the enormous resilience that they, their families, and their community exhibit. We discuss their ACEs and trauma are their realities, but what happens to all of us is not our fault but also systemic.

### ***Resilience***

Having ACEs does not mean an individual is doomed for failure; rather, healing can begin at any age (NSC Developing Child, 2004, 2005/2014). For this reason, the concept of resilience plays an important role in the Pontiac Youth MACC group. Research points to the importance of at least one supportive and competent adult in a child’s life. Therefore it is critical that adults who interact with students regularly must be trauma-informed (NSC Developing Child, 2005/2014).

Resilience is “a child’s achievement of positive developmental outcomes and avoidance of maladaptive outcomes under significantly adverse conditions” (Wyman et al., 2000). To buffer adversities, three core systems intertwine – capability (competence), relationships (attachment and belonging), and supportive community (ACE Interface, 2014). We also present the elements of resilience building blocks (Harris, 2018) to promote broader health and wellness for our Youth MACCs; the elements are sleep, safety, nutrition, mental health, exercise, and mindfulness. The students learn not only to take care of themselves and build further resilience, but also to turn their adverse experiences into their strengths as Youth MACCs, to prevent, reduce, and eliminate.

### **Centering Student Voices**

After sessions on NEAR science and follow-up activities, students were asked, “How would you like to share this information to your friends and families?” The students brainstormed their ideas and settled on each creating a TED talk. During the next few sessions, the students discussed a variety of mental health, physical health, and well-being topics that they could choose for their TED talk. These included stress, depression, anxiety, ACEs and resilience, hydration, self-harm, anxiety, and eating disorders. The students were encouraged to connect their topics with what they learned from earlier sessions and conduct internet research. The adult facilitators provided support. Eventually, the students decided to call their TED Talks, “Phoenix Talks” from their high school’s mascot. Adults followed students’ initiatives as they created their Phoenix Talk.

In January of 2023, we heard from the organizers of the Harvard Graduate School of Education’s Alumni of Color Conference (AOCC) that the proposal to present the Phoenix Talk was accepted. The Pontiac School Board approved funding for seven students (5 African American females, 1 African American male, and 1 Hispanic/Latine male) and two chaperones to travel to Cambridge, Massachusetts to present at the in-person AOCC conference. A couple of students who appeared not as “committed” or had discipline issues were initially told they were not allowed to come. This strict policy was grounded on the belief that adults cannot have low expectations for students, just because they are from Pontiac. We incorporated culturally affirming social-emotional learning, arguing that this is not about low expectations, but about providing an opportunity that could be life-changing for the students. The university’s School of Education and Human Services Dean’s Office, and the Department of Human Development and Child Studies provided matching funding.

The students arrived at Harvard Thursday night. For all but one, this was the first time flying on an airplane. On Friday morning, the students attended the panel discussion of the Harvard First Generation Group to learn about tips on college life, followed by the Harvard campus tour. After the tour, the students met with Harvard President Larry Bacow, who is a native of Pontiac, his Chief of Staff, and the Dean of the Graduate School of Education. President Bacow asked each student to introduce themselves by including the name of the street and the neighborhood they live in, which broke the ice. The students asked the President about his journey from

Pontiac to Harvard Presidency. The President told the students not to be afraid to take the opportunities that life will bring to them.

The students' Phoenix Talk, which they titled, "We Hear You: Sharing the Authentic Voices of Pontiac Youths" took place Friday afternoon. We pre-recorded the presentations, and each student introduced themselves and their topics before playing the recordings. They shared how they got involved in the Pontiac Youth MACC group, and what the group meant to them. They discussed how the group has given them a tool to better understand themselves and others. They talked about how they learned to stop and step back to ask, "What happened to you?" instead of "What's wrong with you?" The students shared freely during the presentation. One student explained:

I used to see some of my peers as annoying irritating obnoxious kids, but now, I think everybody has a story. Some people aren't ready to tell it and some people are ready to tell it.... you've just got to be those listening ears. It changed me a lot because now I know I have to listen more and pay more attention to the loud obnoxious kids who are in the school because they might be hiding something. Because the most hurt ones have the loudest and the brightest "vibe," so big that you won't realize anything is wrong with them.

Another student shared a similar impact of the program, "I don't see others as annoying anymore because, basically I see that there's something going on, and they just need to let it out."

While we could not provide financial support for family members to accompany students on the trip, one student's father drove in the snowstorm from Pontiac to Boston with the grandmother and two young children to see his son present. At one point during the presentation, the student tapped his heart and then pointed at his father, gesturing at how his father is his support. Another student, however, mentioned, "For me, I don't really have a role model. I have people I don't want to be like." This same student also explained how "some kids are forced to grow up fast."

Talking about adult support, one student pointed out, "I agree that if more people open their mouth, more people we can help. But some adults have a ultra mindset where they think adulthood causes depression or anxiety. They don't realize that even being in the womb could lead to those.... that's why a lot of kids don't say anything...if [adults] can open their minds a little more with a less narrow-minded path...be trauma trained."

After the presentation, students reported that they felt listened to and that their voices mattered. In one student's words, "I felt listened to... and I wasn't that poor kid from Pontiac anymore."

The students were also able to attend a performance by the Boston Symphony Orchestra on Friday night with guest conductor André Raphael. The concert, a part of the BSO's *Voices of Loss, Reckoning and Hope Festival*, was an oratorio about Octavius Catto, a 19<sup>th</sup>-century African American educator and civil rights activist who was assassinated. Despite the long day, all students were alert during the entire

concert. The students voluntarily searched the internet for more information about Octavius Catto, which they later shared with the adults.

After returning to Pontiac, the students jointly reflected on their time at Harvard. One student summarized the experience as “empowered.”

### **Empowering Students to Lead as Community Champions**

Our Youth MACC training progressed slowly across the entire school year as training simultaneously served as a leadership development and support group. The students and the adult facilitators developed trusting relationships, and each served as a support for the other. Because we worked with the general education social worker who recruited the students, and as she already had established relationships with them, the rest of the facilitators quickly gained students’ trust. Having outside lunch available to the students also seemed to initially attract them to the group. But most of all, the topic garnered their interest and motivation to continue coming. The more we met, the more comfortable they became, sharing how they made better sense of their adversities and reflected on the strengths in their lives. The students negotiated ways to work collaboratively to get their stories out.

While our students were not the typical students who would have volunteered to be in a leadership program, they found their voices as Community Champions. Students proudly presented about their Harvard trip at the School Board Meeting, supported by their families and teachers.

The students will now be trained and certified as Pontiac Youth MACCs to use the ACE materials to help train other youths in Pontiac and the surrounding communities. The Pontiac Resilience Project team has received multiple requests from schools in the surrounding communities, many of which report racial conflicts. The next phase will include revising the NEAR curriculum to further integrate the critical social-cultural/historical lens that can lead to stronger training on dismantling of the oppressive system in Pontiac. The students have now stepped one foot into the middle circle of the Pontiac Resilience model (Figure 1), ready to impact future generations.

### **IMPLICATIONS OF THE WORK**

Our work will have implications for those who teach and support youths, including parents, teachers, and community leaders. The Youth MACC training and support group demonstrates how youths can be empowered as community change agents in a non-threatening and collaborative environment by broadening their world, and through critical conversations about ACEs and childhood trauma. Youths learned to analyze individual and community strengths and challenges from a critical perspective and address their adversities as well as others from historical, trauma-informed lenses. The experience of presenting their work in a space that they felt listened to, motivated them further to become the voices for change in their community. While the program is school-based, we expect that the youths’ impact will reach far beyond the school walls.

## CONCLUSION

When the Pontiac Resilience Project began in 2017, most individuals in Pontiac had never heard of the term Adverse Childhood Experience or ACE. As we began presenting and training about it across the community – in the public library, health clinics, schools, churches, and more – it became clear that ACE and its long-term impact resonated strongly with the people in Pontiac. This work thus began as a community-level partnership and quickly became a core project. The youth effort of the Pontiac Resilience Project began with an idea from the Superintendent of the Pontiac School District who had the vision for a school-wide Pontiac High School event, which we conducted in January of 2020 as described earlier.

Soon after, the COVID-19 pandemic hit, and it effectively revealed both the strengths and challenges of the community. The strength, as many Pontiac residents conveyed, was that the community quickly and efficiently came together to help each other. Despite the support, COVID-19 exacerbated trauma for many residents, including the youths. In recent months, Pontiac has experienced a surge of youth violence. As more federal and state funds are being allocated to students' mental health and social-emotional learning (SEL), we must remember that the onus is not only on individuals, and the goal is not to “fix damaged students.” The effort described in this paper, therefore, critically examines ACEs and childhood trauma within a larger ecosystem, and within systemic inequities and historical racism. To empower youths, they need to know that what happened to them is not their fault and that it is as much a result of a bigger system. We cannot continue to “spirit-murder” our youths (Love, 2019) or conduct damage-centered research that focuses on the “pain and brokenness” of the community (Tucker, 2009). This program was thus designed to inform, liberate, and empower youths to utilize their voices to positively reflect on themselves and to impact their community. As Pontiac Youth MACCs, youths will be a part of a relationship-based participatory effort to learn from as well as educate families and peers on how to become trauma-informed, productive citizens, and lead the change from within.

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