Introduction to Resiliency

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Table of Contents

Introduction to Resiliency

**"Life is not a matter of holding good cards
but of playing a poor hand well."**

Robert Louis Stevenson

Overview

"Simply put, 'resilience' is the ability to 'bounce back' from adversity, to overcome negative influences that often block achievement. Resilience research focuses on traits and coping skills and supports that help kids survive, or even thrive, in a challenging environment" (North Central Regional Education Laboratory, 1994, p.1). According to researcher Bonnie Bernard of FarWest Laboratory, "resiliency is simply the natural outcome of healthy human development in which the personality and environmental influence 'interact in a reciprocal, transactional relationship'" (Zimmerman, May 1994, p.1).

University of Colorado professor Dr. Richard Jessor states, "'Lots of kids make it. The question is to identify the insulating, buffering factors, as opposed to just the risk factors. We have to differentiate, even among poor kids'" (NCREL, 1994, p.1). "Rather than focusing on a child's potential for success, the tendency has been to focus on the potential for failure" (Zimmerman, May 1994, p.2). Too often, identification of children at-risk has contributed to their *failure*, rather than their *success,* because of this tendency.

Our society tends to focus on the negative about schools; this can lead to a protective reaction/defense mechanism among our school staffs, who, in turn, focus on the negatives about the children we teach. We point out the deficiencies in the students that come to our schools. We tend to generalize the problems of a minority to become the status of the whole. We focus on what is wrong, not what is right. As a result, we create self-fulfilling prophecies. Each time circumstances validate our preconceived notions, our negative biases are reinforced. However, we should not forget that the research on expectations is clear; when we have high expectations, we get strong results. Likewise, when we expect little, we get little in return. This is the cycle of thinking that researchers and advocates of resiliency-based approaches seek to interrupt.

"Resiliency" or "protective factors" research offers hope, rather that the sense of futility which often emerges when considering the enormity of the obstacles facing disadvantages children and youth. Researchers in this field have identified characteristics common to children who have succeeded "against the odds." These have been termed "protective factors." Protective factors exist within the individual, home and community, which include schools.

1

Resiliency research "challenges educators to focus more on *strengths instead of deficits,* to look through a lens of strength in analyzing individual behaviors, and it confirms the power of those strengths as a lifeline to resilience. It shows what is 'right' in the lives of people, overlooked until recently, which can build a path of triumph over all that was 'wrong.' Most importantly, it indicates what must be in place in institutions, especially schools, for resiliency to flourish in the lives of students and adults who learn and work there" (Henderson and Milstein, 1996, p.3).

Protective Factors Within Resilient Children

Personal

♦ Friendly and affectionate
♦ Sense of humor
♦ Tenacious
♦ Tolerant
♦ Temperamentally "easy"

Emotional

♦ Self-reliant
♦ Independent
♦ Self-controlled
♦ Strong self-image
♦ Positive racial identity
♦ Internal locus of control
♦ Self-motivated
♦ Hopeful
♦ Sense of purpose

Social

♦ Initiate positive activities
♦ "Learned helpfulness"
♦ Sense of responsibility
♦ Socially competent
  - Flexible
  - Adaptable
  - Empathetic

Physical/Intellectual

♦ Competent in at least one skill
♦ Good problem-solving/decision-making skills
♦ Critical thinking skills
♦ Physically active and healthy
♦ Achievement and success oriented
♦ Able to draw cause-and-effect relationships
♦ Like and doe well in school

The presence of these traits serves to protect the child, making him or her more resilient. The absence of these traits does not doom a child to failure. Rather, it presents a challenge for families and communities to develop environments that serve to buffer life's stresses and build success. Moreover, there are other considerations that require the participation of families and communities in nurturing resilience.

Girls and boys show different resiliency patterns. During the first decade of life, males are more at risk due to their physical immaturity and cultural factors associated with gender. This trend is reversed during the second decade when girls are more at risk due to their emerging sexuality and gender culture expectations. Psychologist Jack Block found that the early resilience of girls may not hold during adolescence. "Sustained support" may be needed for females during their teen years, even though they may have previously evidenced characteristics of resiliency (NCREL, 1994).

As with females, the transition from adolescence to adulthood is difficult for Black youth. Johns Hopkins researchers found that Black adolescents have lower levels of drug and alcohol abuse as well as lower rates of depression than Whites, but those differences disappear by adulthood. Additionally, the incidence of suicide among Black youth has increased significantly during the past thirty years (Risk and Resilience, March 1994). Both females and Black males appear to need extra attention during their adolescent years.

Protective Factors in the Family/Home

Nurturing

♦ Positive attention from caregivers during first year*
♦ Early nurturing
♦ Unconditional acceptance from at least one person*

   *may be family or non-family member

Family Relationships

♦ Positive relationship with parents
♦ Close relationship with a sibling

- ♦ Parental support of achievement
- ♦ Structure and rule in the home

Family Structure

- ♦ Intact family structure for first two years
- ♦ Working mother
- ♦ Four or fewer children in the family
- ♦ Children at least 24 months apart
- ♦ Lack of genetic predisposition to risk
- ♦ First born males
- ♦ Two parents in the home during teen years
- ♦ Strong maternal role models for teen mothers

Clearly, we deal with children who do not have all of these factors. Resiliency is not determined by the presence of all of these factors; they serve to enhance the resilience of a child. Protective factors outside of the home can be developed to strengthen a child's resilience.

Protective Factors Outside the Home

Experiences

- ♦ Exposure to mainstream society
- ♦ Access to resources for meeting basic needs
- ♦ Access to leadership positions
- ♦ Opportunities for decision-making
- ♦ Meaningful participation in the community
- ♦ Lack of frequency and duration of stressful incidents

Support

- ♦ Positive caregiver during first year*
- ♦ External support systems
- ♦ Effective feedback and praise
- ♦ Quality attention from a caring adult*
- ♦ Multigenerational support network
- ♦ Personally supportive role models
- ♦ Unconditional acceptance by at least one other person*
- ♦ Clear and enforced boundaries
- ♦ Encouragement of pro-social values
- ♦ Appreciation of individual's unique talents

    * may be non-family or family member

<u>Education</u>

♦ High, realistic achievement standards
♦ Peer support of education
♦ Community support of education
♦ Provision of educational opportunity
♦ Positive school climate
♦ Exposure to caring teachers
♦ Participation in early childhood programs

Fostering Resiliency in Schools

School environments are an important factor in fostering resiliency. Even if they are otherwise at risk, if students come from a strong, supportive home environments "resilience building in schools may be less of an issue" (Henderson and Milstein, 1996, p.34). If the home and community are non-supportive and non-nurturing, "exceptional youngsters may overcome the odds to be successful, but most will require the existence of a supportive and skillful group of educators if they are going to achieve academic and life success" (Henderson and Milstein, 1996, p. 35).

"More than any institution except the family, schools can provide the environment and conditions that foster resiliency in today's youth and tomorrow's adults" (Henderson and Milstein, 1996, p.2.). Emmy Werner found that apart from the immediate family, a favorite teacher provided the most positive adult for resilient children. The teachers' effects were more profound than just simple academic development (Zimmerman, May 1994, p.3). Oftentimes, teachers are unaware of the powerful effect they have had on an individual child.

Unfortunately, knowledge gained from the field of resiliency research has yet to be systematically incorporated into mainstream educational practices. Educators can help increase resiliency in disadvantaged youth with relatively simple, free or low-cost practices. Resiliency research "challenges educators to focus more on *strengths* instead
> of *deficits*, to look through a lens of strength in analyzing individual behaviors, and confirms the power of those strengths as a lifeline to resiliency. . . . More important, it indicates what must be in place in institutions, especially schools, for resiliency to flourish in the lives of students and adults who learn and work there" (Henderson and Milstein, 1996, p.3).

Researchers have suggested numerous strategies that school and district can implement to foster resiliency and increase student success. Commonly suggested approaches include:

<u>School Climate</u>

♦ Provide secure, positive environments
♦ Create flexible learning environments

- ♦ Ensure contact with supportive adults
- ♦ Build on student strengths
- ♦ Celebrate successes
- ♦ Celebrate students' successes with parents
- ♦ Promote cooperation, not just competition
- ♦ Develop and support mentoring programs
- ♦ Convey a sense of caring, trust, and responsibility

Expectations

- ♦ Accept students as they are
- ♦ Believe in the ability of every student
- ♦ Utilize alternative grading approaches
- ♦ Provide challenging, not overwhelming, expectations
- ♦ Exhibit a high regard for cooperation and helpfulness
- ♦ Require community service or service to others

Skill Development

- ♦ Build social competence as well as academic skills
- ♦ Implement goal focused programs
- ♦ Train students in self-motivation
- ♦ Build critical thinking skills
- ♦ Teach problem-solving and decision-making skills
- ♦ Teach cause and effect relationships

Instructional Strategies

- ♦ Develop learning experiences that build on students' prior knowledge
- ♦ Identify and engage the unique interests of students
- ♦ Allow students to operate in their preferred learning styles
- ♦ Seek hidden talent

Experiences

- ♦ Provide for development of self-responsibility
- ♦ Present opportunities
- ♦ Utilize advisory groups
- ♦ Encourage and act on student input
- ♦ Allow students to share talents and skills
- ♦ Provide after-school academic clubs
- ♦ Provide community-based recreation programs

Intervention

♦ Target all youth, not just high risk youth
♦ Provide developmentally appropriate structures
♦ Develop peer support groups
♦ Bring integrated social services into the school
♦ Create circuit breaker mechanisms, such as "responsibility" or "success" rooms
♦ Attack with kindness

Attitudes about at-risk children must be considered when looking at the concept of resiliency. It will take much more than simply sharing research findings and recommended strategies with educators. The beliefs and values we hold relative to children at risk are critical components that must be considered because teacher behaviors are related to their beliefs (Frey, 1987). "Even the best teachers can underestimate the futility they automatically and even unconsciously attach to an 'at-risk' youngster. On the other hand, many teachers, without any special training, simple driven by their true love of children, know instinctively how to support a child's resilient nature" (Zimmerman, May 1994, p. 4).

It will take a concerted effort to incorporate the simple strategies suggested by researchers, as well as common sense, to create the type of institutional change that is necessary to foster resilience. The simple goal is to create quality environments in which success is possible for all.

Perhaps a place to begin is with a consideration of organizational practices and programs that are working and then build from our strengths and successes.

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