Resilience in Schools and Curriculum Design

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Nan Henderson

Resiliency studies offer evidence of what educators have long suspected and hoped: more than any other institution except the family, schools can and do provide environments and protective conditions that are crucial for fostering resiliency in today's children and youth (Henderson & Milstein, 1996, 2003). Several fields related to resiliency affirm the power of educators and schools in fostering resiliency in all children, and show that the factors that promote resiliency can be readily available in schools. They also connect fostering resiliency to academic success, increased school safety, and student social and emotional well-being for students who are experiencing extreme stress as well as students simply experiencing the typical challenges in today's high stress world (Benard, 2004; Blum, McNeely, & Rinehart, 2002; Perkins, 2006).

How Does a Child Become More Resilient?

Benard (2007) states that resiliency is an inherent part of the human organism, not just descriptive of a few "super kids" but an inborn capacity for human self-righting that exists in all. She notes that effectively facilitating the self-righting process

requires an increased focus on the promotion of protective factors that enhance student resiliency, rather than a more meticulous focus on student "risk factors." Protective factors buffer, ameliorate, and mitigate the impact of risk and stress and also propel children and youth to healthy self development.

Schools are by nature filled with protective factors; however, schools as organizations and educators and other caring adults within the schools often unknowingly impart protective factors without specific knowledge of the processes that produce them. For schools to become more effective as resiliency-building institutions, all "stakeholders" in the school community need a better understanding of protective factors as a crucial component of student overcoming and student academic and life success.

Students overcome adversity in two ways. First, they draw upon their own internal strengths, which include sociability (building relationships); involvement in service to others; utilization of life skills, including a sense of humor, self-motivation, and distancing from unhealthy situations; maintaining an inner locus of control; having a positive view of one's personal future; feelings of self-worth and self-confidence; perseverance; creativity; and spirituality (Benard, 2004; Benson, 1997; Higgins, 1994; Werner & Smith, 1992; Wolin & Wolin, 1993). Second, involvement in environments that provide environmental protective factors fosters student resiliency (Benard, 2004; Henderson & Milstein, 1996, 2003). Educators are agents of protective

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Fig. 23.1 The resiliency wheel: environmental protective factors that foster resiliency

factors in two ways: First, they can see the individual strengths in each student, and engage in interactions and processes to help these strengths grow (recognizing, as Wolin and Wolin, 1993, note, that even two or three individual strengths become life lines of resiliency). Second, they can create learning activities, classrooms, and entire school communities that are rich in environmental protective factors. It is these environments which are the focus of this volume. These environmental protective factors are diagrammed in a model called the Resiliency Wheel (see Fig. 23.1; Henderson & Milstein, 1996).

In the seminal study of risk and protective factors by Werner and Smith (1992), which continues to follow a group of 700 children born in 1955, children with several risk factors at birth (including being born to teen parents, into poverty, to a mother addicted to alcohol or another drug, into a family with a history of violence, to parents diagnosed with mental illness, and/or without prenatal care) demonstrated increased resiliency as the cohort matured, showing life outcomes increasingly similar to their peers in the study who were not assessed as high risk at birth. By the time the "high risk" group reached

age 32, only one in six were still struggling. Werner and Smith (1992) drew this conclusion about the power of protective factors:

> Our findings and those by other American and European investigators with a life-span perspective suggest that these buffers make a more profound impact on the life course of children who grow up under adverse conditions than do specific risk factors and stressful life events. They appear to transcend ethnic, social class, geographical, and historical boundaries. Most of all they offer us a more optimistic outlook than the perspective that can be gleaned from the literature on the negative consequences of perinatal trauma, caregiving deficits, and chronic poverty. They provide us with a corrective lens—an awareness of the self-righting tendencies that move children toward normal adult development under all but the most persistent adverse circumstances (p. 202).

Werner (1996, 2003) reinforces the power of educators as agents of protective factors: "Teachers and school were among the most frequently encountered protective factors for children in the Kauai Longitudinal Study who overcame the multiple odds of poverty, perinatal stress, parental psychopathology, and family dysfunctions" (p. viii). She adds:

> But it's not the trappings of the school—the building, the bricks, the resource rooms [that make the difference]. It seems to be the model of adults that [students] find in the schools. That comes right back to you, whether you are a teacher, or a counselor, or a school nurse, or whatever. One of the wonderful things we see now in adulthood is that these children really remember one or two teachers who made the difference. And they mourn those teachers when they die…some of those teachers more than they do their own family members. Because what went out of their life was a person who looked beyond outward experience, their behavior, their unkempt—oftentimes—appearance and saw the [student's] promise (1999, 2007, p. 20).

Resiliency, School Climate, and Academic Success

The importance of creating protective-factor rich schools is validated by recent research on the power of school climate to improve academic success, especially for struggling students in U.S. urban schools (Perkins, 2006). This research, the most comprehensive published to date on the

importance of school climate, focused on the impact of school climate in 108 urban schools from 15 school districts across the U.S. More than 30,000 students from 110 self-identified ethnicities or national origins were included in this research, sponsored by the Council of Urban Boards of Education (CUBE) and the National School Boards Association (NSBA).

Key components of a positive school climate are synonymous with the environmental protective factors diagrammed in the Resiliency Wheel. These include the following:

- Feelings of safety among staff and students.
- Supportive relationships within the school.
- Engagement and empowerment of students as valued members and resources in the school community.
- Clear rules and boundaries that are understood by all students and staff.
- High expectations for academic achievement and appropriate behavior.
- Trust, respect, and an ethos of caring (Elfstrom et al., 2006; Perkins, 2006).

The CUBE study found that an improvement in these key elements of school climate led to higher student achievement, higher morale among students and teachers, more reflective practice among teachers, fewer student dropouts, reduced violence, better community relations, and increased institutional pride (Bryant & Kelley, 2006). Whether termed key components of school climate, or key environmental protective factors, it is clear students do better, academically, socially, and emotionally when surrounded by these factors. Such evidence led to Perkins' (2006) recommendations that schools should assess these elements in their annual evaluations, and purposely work to improve one or more of these key areas based on their findings.

Other recent studies confirm the importance of these environmental characteristics as protective factors in schools. The National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (ADD Health) is the most comprehensive study of American youth ever undertaken. Commissioned by Congress, and funded by 22 federal agencies and foundations, this study involved in-school surveys of more than 90,000 American adolescents in grades 7–12.

In addition, several thousand of these students were selected for more in-depth research that involved in-home interviews between 1994 and 2008. Results show: "When middle and high school students feel cared for by people at their school and when they feel like they are part of school, they are less likely to engage in unhealthy behaviors. When they feel connected to school they also report higher levels of emotional well-being" (Blum et al., 2002, p. 5).

Resiliency research is challenging the "at-risk orientation" prevalent in schools in recent decades: "By the mid-1990s, findings were reported describing the stigma of labeling young people as having something wrong with them before they had demonstrated failure. The implementation of the model itself had become a way of labeling young people as being at risk for a multitude of negative outcomes with or without just cause" (Brown, D'Emidio-Caston, & Benard, 2001, pp. 6–7). This resulted in many schools that a majority of students were identified as at-risk (Baizerman & Compton, 1992). Blue-Swadener and Lubeck (1995) pose the question of whether "the term 'at risk' is ever justified or serves children and families" (p. xi).

With longitudinal studies such as the one by Werner and Smith showing the innate, self-righting capacity inherent in each person, the idea of boxing students into labels that often hinder that process is now being seriously questioned. Some educators questioned the "at-risk" label approach even before research findings questioned it and have realized they were using recommendations from resiliency research in their teaching practice before knowing such research existed (Henderson & Milstein, 1996, 2003; Werner, 1996, 2003).

Turn Around Teachers

With the evidence that it is one-to-one personal relationships that are the most powerful resiliency builders in schools, Benard (2000) coined the term "turn around teacher." One reason teachers may hold so much power to influence resiliency is that "resiliency research points out over and over that the transformation…exits not in

programmatic approaches per se but at the deeper level of relationships, beliefs, and expectations" (Benard). Teachers are in prime roles for creating these resiliency relationships, often spending more "quality time" with children each day than parents or other family members. Teachers can more consciously use the enormous power they have to build "bounce-back kids" by following these research-based suggestions for "turnaround teachers" (adapted from Henderson, 2008):

Turnaround teachers:

1. Provide caring and connection:
   - Convey the message they are "there" for a child or youth
   - Communicate unconditional caring about the child or youth
   - Meet the basic survival needs of students and their families
   - Communicate caring availability, unconditional positive regard
   - Regularly offer simple kindnesses such as a greeting or smile
   - Convey the messages "you matter" and "it does not matter what you have done in the past"
   - Do not take students' behavior personally
   - Show compassion, seeing students' pain and suffering beneath negative behaviors.

2. Build competence through resiliency beliefs, high expectations, and social/emotional learning:
   - Communicate a fundamental belief in students' innate competence and self-righting capacities
   - Challenge students to achieve beyond what students believe they can do
   - Recognize existing strengths and competencies and mirror these to students
   - Use these strengths in intervening to ameliorate challenges and problems
   - Teach "metacognition" – how thoughts and feelings influence behaviors
   - Teach that internalized environmental messages (thoughts) about not being good enough, smart enough, rich enough, etc. can be overcome
   - Facilitate students learning other life skills such as anger management, assertiveness, communication skills, goal setting, and conflict resolution.

3. Let children and youth contribute and participate:
   - Allow students to participate very actively in all that happens in school
   - Encourage students' involvement in creating and maintaining classroom rules and school policies
   - Asking for students' ideas and using their creativity in dealing with any classroom or school problem
   - Create a physically and psychologically safe and structured environment for student participation
   - Make learning more reflective and experiential (such as in service learning, cooperative learning, and project-based learning)
   - Involve students in curriculum planning and evaluation strategies
   - Utilize students in the governing of the classroom and school (Benard, 2000; Higgins, 1994; Thomsen, 2002; Werner, 1999, 2007).

Creating a greater understanding of the enormous power they have as agents of student resiliency is a motivating force for educators to focus on becoming more effective as "turn around teachers." Furthermore, according to Benard (2000), the term applies to any adult who interacts with a child in school, who becomes a "turn around mentor" with the same impact as a "turn around teacher."

Curricular, Structural, and Programmatic Strategies

Although resiliency research repeatedly confirms relationships between a student and a teacher (even if unbeknownst to the teacher) to be among the most important protective factors in a student's life, it also suggests the importance of curricular and programmatic strategies (Benard, 2004; Werner, 1996, 2003). Given the importance of such relationships, the onus is on schools to ensure that every student has a caring and supportive relationship with at least one adult at his or her school.

Caring and Support

Caring and support is promoted in schools when educators find ways for students to experience support similar to a "healthy extended family" (Werner & Smith, 1992): people work together, play together, and help one another. Providing this crucial environmental protective factor also necessitates intervention services (e.g., in the form of student assistance programs), and approaches to discipline that keep students connected. Student-run conflict mediation programs, peacemaking circles, and peer courts are examples of this type of discipline.

One powerful way to make students feel more cared for is to engage them in many small group instructional and support activities, which allow for personalization and the "extended family" experience. These approaches include cooperative learning, adventure-based learning, and service learning – all of which are inherently resiliency-building opportunities. They offer not only caring and support but also other environmental protective factors as well, especially opportunities for meaningful participation, prosocial bonding, and life skills training.

High Expectations

"Turn around teachers" are strength-based teachers, who mirror strengths back to students, and see students' strengths as more powerful than problems. They refuse to engage in boxing students into self-defeating categories that do not convey the fullness of a student's potential. Organizationally, schools can be most effective in providing this protective function by eliminating tracking, the "labeling and segregating practice that hangs on in schools despite two decades of scientific studies documenting its negative effects" (Benard, 2004, p. 75). James, Jurich, and Estes (2001) found that schools that are closing the achievement gap refuse to "dumb down" or limit opportunities for lower-achieving students.

A high expectations approach to learning that transcends the narrow definition of student success now prevalent in this era of "high stakes testing" is Gardner's (1983) work on Multiple Intelligences. Gardner initially identified seven primary brain-based ways that students learn (Thomsen, 2002). Later he added an eighth intelligence (Gardner, 2000). According to Gardner, the eight forms of intelligence are verbal-linguistic, logical-mathematical, bodily-kinesthetic, musical, interpersonal, intrapersonal, spatial, and naturalist. Most schools emphasize just the first two, contributing to the difficulty students experience developing other intelligences at school. Thomsen (2002) explains:

> Kids can be smart in many ways. The educational system may recognize that fact, but the knowledge is not always put into action. In most cases, teachers are trained to teach without truly perfecting ways to use the eight intelligences to help students learn. Assessments that they use, both standardized and teacher created, mostly rely on linguistic and verbal or mathematical intelligence…It is important not to give up on students who are having trouble reading and writing (p. 69).

A recognition that students can "be smart" in multiple ways puts the protective factor of high expectations for student success into practice. The message, "Together we will find the way that *you* learn best," can be communicated through one-to-one conversations, and through a process of student assessment and teaching approaches that honor students' potential for success. Other strategies to convey this same message include learning that includes the arts, music, nature and ecological hands-on experiences, movement activities, and service learning projects. In addition,

> As part of recognizing each student's unique strengths, high expectation education capitalizes on students' life experiences and cultural contexts. Not only do students find their experiences and cultures embedded in rather than 'decorating' the curriculum, but their teachers understand that how children learn is influenced by the basic organization of their culture….the expectations communicated to students whose home language is not English should [also] validate students' home language (Benard, 2004, p. 78).

Opportunities for Meaningful Participation

Many of the recommendations for schools to become "high expectation schools" also entail schools providing opportunities for meaningful participation. Providing meaningful participation for students means seeing them as resources rather than problems, and collaborators in the school community rather than simply recipients of service. Small group processes, all types of service projects, and adopting a school wide attitude of giving students "voice and choice" in their daily experience at school are all ways of providing the protective factor of meaningful participation.

Providing this protective factor also means asking students in as many ways as possible for their ideas about school, their learning process, and how to solve the school's problems. This can be done even in elementary schools where students of all ages exhibit a wisdom that most often goes unrecognized unless adults in the school prioritize asking for student input. One way to do this is to ask students to identify three or four issues or challenges they experience in their classroom or school and then brainstorm all that is "right" about their school. Next, children can be asked, "How can we as a school use what is strong here to intervene with these challenges?" When asked to train and consult in public schools labeled "persistently dangerous" in New York City, I refused to do so if student input was not a key part of the process. Children as young as eight were acutely aware of the problems in their schools, expressed empathy and concern for their teachers, and pleaded with their principals to become part of the solutions to the violence in their schools.

In Albuquerque, New Mexico, students are routinely trained and used as conflict mediators in elementary school, and are the first to be called if there is a conflict on the school campus. Two students per school period put on conflict mediation vests and are the first on the scene in playground or other school skirmishes. An unexpected outcome of this program has been students taking this process home, teaching it to their families, as well as mediating neighborhood conflicts (Henderson & Milstein, 1996, 2003).

Thomsen (2002) notes that a "transformation…occurs when students are offered the opportunity to do something that is…useful. Children and adolescents almost always jump at the chance…to contribute in some way" (p. 58). She goes on to offer many practical suggestions for doing this in schools including brainstorming with students jobs and responsibilities they can perform that contribute to the smooth running of the classroom, or that contribute to the strengthening of the environmental protective factors in schools.

Prosocial Bonding

Children and youth who bond to positive people, engage in prosocial activities, and are involved in supportive schools and other organizations, experience protection against the negative behaviors and activities that pull on all students, even in elementary school (Hawkins, Smith, & Catalano, 2004). Therefore, most of the above suggestions for creating protective factor-rich schools are also useful in facilitating prosocial bonding. Students who have a caring connection with at least one supportive, strengths-oriented adult in school will be more bonded to school. Prioritizing family connection to school is a way to further bond students, and involving the family in student learning furthers student bonding to the process of learning (Benson, 1997).

Blum et al. (2002), in their analysis of the Attention Deficit Disorder research, conclude that bonding to school is increased by good classroom management, smaller school size, the absence of overly harsh or punitive discipline, greater student participation in extracurricular activities, and students' positive friendships at school with varied social groups. Since extracurricular activities can provide all six environmental protective factors named in the Resiliency Wheel, they are obviously important in bonding students to school. Many students candidly admit they come to school primarily for the social connections they experience there and for extracurricular activities. In 2006, the American Academy

of Pediatrics (AAP) issued a warning about the repercussions of reduced child play time, including recess at school. The report concluded that the research is clear that play and physical movement are absolutely necessary for optimum brain development and learning: "Play is integral to the academic environment…it has been shown to help children adjust to the school setting and even to enhance children's learning readiness, learning behaviors, and problem-solving skills" (p. 4).

The AAP termed "play and unscheduled free time" protective factors crucial for healthy child development, stating that these factors "increase resiliency for children and youth" (p. 16). Though coming to school for recess has typically been dismissed as irrelevant to learning, this research suggests that students' desire to play may in fact be motivated by an innate need for play's contribution to healthy brain development.

Similar conclusions have been drawn about arts education and related activities (including the visual arts, music, drama, and dance) to academic success. The Arts Education Partnership (AEP), a coalition of more than 100 education, arts, philanthropic and government organizations, funded by a cooperative grant from the U.S. Department of Education and the National Endowment for the Arts, recently reviewed 62 "outstanding arts education studies." The AEP published its conclusions in 2002 showing that student involvement in the arts positively impacts six aspects of education, including basic reading and writing skills and comprehension, mathematics (through music instruction), fundamental cognitive skills, motivation to learn, social behavior, and the overall "school environment." In commenting on the AEP findings, Caterrall (2002) noted that the impact of the arts is especially potent for "economically disadvantaged children" and added, "Notions that the arts are frivolous add-ons to a serious curriculum couldn't be farther from the truth."

Clear and Consistent Boundaries

When students are asked which of the six environmental conditions diagrammed in the Resiliency Wheel they would like strengthened, the most frequent answer is "clear and consistent boundaries." Clear and consistent boundaries provide children and youth with feelings of safety, as well as an external limit that assists them in learning to set internal limits. The best way to set and maintain clear, consistent boundaries is to spend time at the beginning of the school year in a classroom discussion about the rules of behavior that are the class's shared "agreements to live by." Younger students will need more adult coaching and input; older students can brainstorm the entire list, including consequences. Benard (2004) notes: "Unfair and inequitable discipline policies and procedures are continually cited by students in focus groups as a major area for school improvement…classrooms and schools that set behavioral expectations without student input reflect…a lack of belief in children's capacities" (p. 79).

Allowing student involvement in setting and maintaining clear and consistent boundaries in their schools is one way of incorporating several aspects of building student resiliency. Boundary setting helps provide caring and support, high expectations (that students are capable), opportunities for meaningful participation, a route to prosocial bonding to school, and skills training in brainstorming, listening, building consensus, and appropriate conflict resolution.

Life-Skills Training

Life skills range from teaching kindergarteners to stand in line, take a turn, and share to teaching high school students how to apply for a job, select an appropriate college, and effective communication skills. Arguably, all students need to learn cooperation skills, emotional management skills, conflict resolutions skills, assertiveness skills, goal-setting skills, refusal skills, and study skills. This is only a partial list. Each educator assesses what each student needs in life skills training and plans accordingly.

"The process through which we learn to recognize and manage emotions, care about others, make good decisions, behave…responsibly, develop positive relationships, and avoid negative behaviors" (Zins, Weissberg, Wang, &

Walberg, 2004, p. 3) is known as Social and Emotional Learning (SEL). SEL research and related strategies offer one systematic approach to life skills training. Such training helps create a positive school climate. A 2006 article by Torres in the American Association of School Administrators publication, *The School Administrator*, connects SEL, school climate, and academic success. It concludes:

> [That] a strong relationship that exists between social-emotional development and academic achievement cannot be denied. Caring relationships between adults and children in schools foster a desire to learn and a connection to school. When students' barriers to learning are removed, students do better, learn more, and are more engaged… Social and emotional learning programs improve students' behaviors and academic learning. They do not focus on behavior at the expense of academics. The reverse is true. If we ignore students' social-emotional learning, we shortchange students' academic performance (p. 1).

Torres bases his conclusions on a comprehensive research-based discussion of the power of social-emotional learning by Zins et al. They document decades of research on the positive impact of social-emotional learning in schools, and conclude the research findings on the powerful positive impact of SEL are "so solid that they emboldened us to introduce a new term, 'social, emotional, and academic learning or SEAL'" (Zins et al., 2004, p. 19). The "essential characteristics of the effective" social-emotional learning programs recommended include the following:

- Careful planning, based on theory and research
- Teaching SEL skills that are relevant to "daily life" (such as recognizing and managing emotions, respecting others, positive goal-setting, making responsible decisions, and "handling interpersonal relationships effectively")
- Addressing affective and social dimensions of learning by actively building positive attachment to school, strengthening relationships in school, providing opportunities for meaningful participation in school, using "diverse, engaging teaching methods," nurturing safety and belonging in school, and emphasizing respect for diversity

- Linking to academic outcomes through integrating with professional development on academic success, and coordinating with student support efforts (health, nutrition, service learning, physical education, counseling, nursing, etc.)
- Addressing key implementation factors, such as policies, staff development, supervision, adequate resources, and evaluation issues
- Involving family and community partnerships
- Including continuous improvement, outcome evaluation, and dissemination components (Zins et al., 2004).

Conclusion

These programmatic and curricular approaches demonstrate the powerful opportunities schools have to create protective-factor rich environments. Numerous formal studies as well as countless anecdotal reports confirm this power and suggest the strategies that schools can incorporate to become more effective resiliency-building institutions. In so doing, they will also increase student academic success, reduce school violence, and assist the healthy social and emotional development of students (Henderson, 2007, p. 153). Tonya Benally, for example, as a student in an alternative school in Gallup, New Mexico, explained that "school is the only family" she had, and she credited her school with healing her substance abuse issues and depression that had resulted in three suicide attempts. She said, "The only time I felt good about myself was when I went to school. Ms. Hill, our librarian was always nice, smiling, giving us compliments…The library felt like home because she was always there… And [all the teachers] told us, 'We are a family.' We heard that from the principal all the time. That's why I went to school every day. Because people there respected me and talked to me. I don't get that…at home" (Henderson, 2000, pp. 77–78).

The best scenario for students to achieve resiliency is when schools and families work together to cooperatively strengthen protective factors in students' lives. When families hear what is "right" about their children, especially students who are

experiencing challenges at school or at home, they are often more willing to become collaborators with the school. A strengths-approach is a useful way to increase family involvement. Yet, even without the optimum family support, the resiliency research is rich with reports of the power of the "turn around" teachers and mentors students find at school and the protective-factor rich environments there that influence their lives.

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