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WHAT WORKS? *Research into Practice*

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How can teachers foster the development of resilience in elementary school children?

Bolstering Resilience in Students: Teachers as Protective Factors

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Resilience Research Tells Us

- All children have the capacity to adapt to the challenges of life when they have the support they need.[1]
- Most young people will develop into productive adults, despite risky environments.[2]
- Resilience is not a magical trait that a few special kids have. Rather, it is "ordinary magic" that is a part of healthy development.[3]
- Supportive environments feature caring relationships, high expectations and opportunities for meaningful participation.[4]

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Deficit-oriented approaches to student success have long been a part of education. They suggest that we can best facilitate development in children by understanding what they lack, be it stable home environments, winning personal traits or other support systems. When academic research on resiliency began in earnest 30 years ago, the focus shifted from a deficit-based to a strength-based model.

Resilience (from the Latin *resilire*: "to bounce back") refers to the capacity to return to good mental health after challenging and difficult situations. Some researchers define it as the return to normal (or better than normal) functioning after exposure to a high-risk experience (such as abuse, trauma or the death of a parent) or environment (such as poverty, systemic discrimination or a "bad neighbourhood"). Resilience allows individuals to manage difficult episodes or chronic challenges in their lives.

Elementary teachers are well positioned to observe students who succeed despite overwhelming odds. It often appears that risk factors in the life of a child are insurmountable; yet, there are many who flourish amidst adversity. Early resiliency research focused on these seemingly anomalous youth, tracking their success into adulthood.[5,6,7] Researchers were eager to determine what innate processes or capacities were helping these students to be successful in spite of the odds.

Changing Notions of Resilience

The first wave of resilience research assumed that youth who exhibited good coping skills in the face of high-risk factors were able to do so through some internal self-righting character trait. It was theorized that a single trait based on behaviour psychology (like "good temperament") allowed children to mitigate

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life's challenges. Accordingly, researchers sought to identify this character trait in order to foster its development in less successful youth. The capacity of these young people for positive adaptation so impressed researchers that they were deemed "invulnerable/invincible" — the assertion being that they could overcome whatever challenges the world might throw at them.[5]

As research progressed, it became increasingly clear that the children's high functioning was not the result of a single trait but, rather, of a combination of character traits and external protective factors. This second wave of research focused on understanding the interaction between the protective factors and the processes that made it possible for young people to thrive in the face of adversity.

The third wave of resilience research focused less on individuals and more on environments. Research indicated that individuals who were more resilient typically developed in environments where promotive factors (i.e. those that promote healthy living) were present. Factors that generally led to good adaptation and development could promote resilience through "prevention, intervention, and policy" (p. 14).[8]

Contemporary Resilience

Over a relatively short time span, research in resilience has expanded significantly and has led to fascinating analyses and conclusions. Bonnie Benard, an important contributor to recent summaries of this body of knowledge, suggests that there are four key messages that have come out of resilience research:

1. *Resilience is a capacity all youth have for healthy development and successful learning.*
2. *Certain personal strengths are associated with healthy development and successful learning.*
3. *Certain characteristics of families, schools and communities are associated with the development of personal strengths and, in turn, healthy development and successful learning.*
4. *Changing the life trajectories of children and youth from risk to resilience starts with changing the beliefs of the adults in their families, schools and communities* (p. 4).[4]

Conceptions of resilience no longer focus on some magical trait that is unique to some children and absent in others. The understanding of resilience began as an internal psychological phenomenon but has developed into a psycho-socio-cultural construct where external factors are also deemed salient. This model of resilience is ecological and constructionist: both one's environment of development and one's personal and cultural elements are critically important.[9,10] Thus, we recognize that all youth have the capacity for resilience, whether it is clear to outside observers or not. These socially-oriented views of resilience have allowed researchers to acknowledge the nuance and complexity of life, and as a result, the understanding of resilience has been enriched by focusing on individuals in their contexts.

Key Protective Factors

Research demonstrates that protective social environments, which provide refuge in high-risk situations, are an important aspect in the development of resilience.[3] Regardless of which social environment children find themselves in (family, school or community), research shows that three protective factors are essential: caring relationships, high expectations and opportunities for meaningful contribution.[4,11,12] Each of these protective factors plays a crucial role in the construction of environments that foster the development of resilience.

The positive development of children is nurtured through relationships that demonstrate care and support in practical and palpable ways.[2,12] These *caring relationships* must acknowledge strengths within children and build from there. *High expectations* for students' performance and behaviour are essential because

Links to Learning

- Resilience is ecological so treat classrooms and schools as an organic environment for growth.
- Ensure that your teacher colleagues and school administrators are aware of challenges children in your classroom are facing or have overcome.
- Resilience is "constructionist" which suggests that it is complex and complicated by personal and cultural elements.
- Scaffolding (support that allows a child to reach beyond his/her independent abilities) is the undercurrent of high expectations.



they help students understand that they have the capacity to be successful. Boundaries are clearly delineated and rich resources (those that allow a child to reach beyond their independent abilities) are made available. Finally, it is critical for young people to have *opportunities for meaningful participation*. These are authentic tasks wherein students can demonstrate their abilities in real-world settings and experience the rewards that come from benevolence.[4]

Seven Strategies for Creating Environments that Foster Resilience

Research has consistently found that schools and teachers play a critical role in the development of resilience in children and youth.[13] Teachers and schools can help to enhance resilience in their students with the following seven strategies:

1. **Affirm relationships by getting to know your students and their non-school environments.** Teachers need to be more aware of the environments where students spend time outside of school. These environments can be enriching or problematic. Getting to know your students and their life contexts (especially faith-based[2]) allows for early intervention when risky issues arise. A simple but effective strategy for the classroom is the posting of a faith day calendar and acknowledging special days as they arrive. Research suggests that the short-term intervention of even a single caring adult can make a profound difference.

2. **Affirm relationships by seeking to understand individual strengths.** Teachers should address the attitude (often well-intentioned) that leads them to seek out and attempt to adjust deficiencies in students. Rather, accepting that each student comes to school with unique understandings, knowledge and awarenesses encourages us to appreciate their strengths. With students who are most at-risk, this can be a challenge. Resilience, however, develops out of existing strengths, so this step is essential. Keeping a log of the actions of your students that impress you can help when there are conflicts.

3. **Affirm relationships by encouraging students to know each other.** Equally important is the need to encourage students to develop positive social relationships with each other. Providing time for each student to be celebrated for who they are and to be appreciated for their complexity (ethno-cultural, social, gender and otherwise) in sensitive context is key to these relationships. Bulletin boards featuring interesting facts about or abilities of students can help to achieve this community connection and foster a sense of belonging.

4. **Set high expectations: Cooperatively build the parameters of the learning environment.** A focus on resilience means using the existing strengths of students to deal with the areas of weakness. Teachers need to acknowledge the challenges that students face, but must still hold them to high expectations. In collaboration with students, teachers can set high expectations demarcated by clear boundaries. Consider developing boundaries in collaboration with students as one of the first tasks of the new school year; this will ensure that students have an operational understanding of rules and policies. Often, the top-down approach to classroom management means that rules that are clear to the teacher ("no cell phones in class") are not so clear to students ("I was using my phone as my calculator").

5. **Set high expectations: Co-operatively build realistic goals with individual students.** Setting meaningful goals means that students will have something to celebrate throughout the year. These goals must be student-focused, student-driven, personalized and documented. Teachers need to be involved in the acknowledgement of milestones. This celebration becomes a systematic element of learning communities where personal growth is lauded within one's social environment. Teachers can encourage deeper learning through opportunities for reflection with their students, using strategies such as student-led interviews.

Tips for Classroom Practice

- Always build from strengths. Using activities that a student likes can get them past the things they don't.
- Schedule one-on-one time to listen to your students. It will give you incredible insights into their world.
- Many students surprise us by becoming highly successful later in life. Ensure that every student gets that chance in your class.
- Explicit "I care" statements from teachers guarantee that students recognize the supportive environment.

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6. **Ensure opportunities for meaningful participation.** A resilience-rich environment will allow for the development of skills and attitudes that should have come from other learning environments. Teachers help to develop critical life skills like conflict resolution, problem solving, and stress management. Opportunities for meaningful participation mean that youth are encouraged to take sensible risks, to make the world a laboratory for exploring the ramifications of their positive actions. Service learning is an excellent way for students to try out their newly-developed life skills. A community cleanup or the creation of a school-based foundation can show wayward students that their actions can help create positive environments out of which others can be strengthened.

7. **Live resilience development as a process.** The development of resilience is a process. When we understand the complexities of the lives of young people, it may seem that nothing can be done to address the significant challenges they face in their lives. The systematic application of resilience principles in the classroom and school may provide a young person with the only/best environment to develop good coping mechanisms. It is a process that is worth it!

In Sum ...

Sometimes, a student will take the time to seek out a former teacher and thank him or her for the positive impact made in the life of that student many years earlier. Such acts of gratitude often come as a surprise to teachers, who never realized what a formative role they may play in the lives of their students. Resiliency often works this way. Teachers provide an environment that enriches young lives. In this environment, students gain the ability to deal with unforeseen challenges with a positive attitude. They are able to work through the challenges and are strengthened because of those difficult situations. Resilience research suggests teachers have an indispensible role to play in generating an environment where every student who enters their classroom can develop the ability to triumph over challenge.

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