EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP

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Havens of Resilience

Nan Henderson

Schools are natural environments for helping all children cultivate the resilience that resides within them.

I am alive and thriving because of the resilience-building power of schools. When I was trained as a school social worker in the 1980s, no one was yet talking about resilience. But when I discovered the emerging resilience research in the early 1990s, I realized that I had overcome the significant wounds from my alcoholic, abusive, and violent home because of school. School was my haven, my solace, the alternate universe I stepped into most days with relief. School counteracted the trauma of the rest of my life.

Research shows that schools are filled with the conditions that promote resilience (Werner, 2003). These include caring, encouraging relationships, role models, and mentors (Theron & Engelbrecht, 2012; Thomsen, 2002; Walsh, 2012); clear and fair boundaries and structure (Benard, 2004; Theron & Engelbrecht, 2012); exploration of other worlds and possibilities (Birdsall, 2013); stories of overcoming adversity in literature, films, and history (Walsh, 2012); and basic human respect and dignity that too many kids like me do not find in their troubled homes (Benard, 2004; Thomsen, 2002).

Resilience research also answers the question I asked myself many times after I grew into adulthood—a question that every educator has asked at one time or another: Why is one student who's dealing with serious stresses, even trauma, able to overcome these conditions and succeed, while another student cannot? To answer that question, I had to understand the process of resilience.

The Importance of Protective Factors

How exactly does a student become more resilient? And how can schools most effectively capitalize on their power to promote resilience? The short answer is, a student's resilience is fostered when his or her *internal* and *environmental protective factors* are strengthened. These protective factors can buffer, ameliorate, and mitigate the effects of risk and stress, propelling the student to academic and life success (O'Dougherty Wright, Masten, & Narayan, 2013).

All caring adults in a school are potential agents of protective factors. First, they can notice and reinforce students' internal protective factors—such as "easy temperament, good reasoning skills, self-esteem, and internal locus of control" (Benard, 2007, p. 209). By engaging students in conversations and other interactions, they can help them recognize and grow these traits. Second, they can create classroom and school cultures that are infused with environmental protective factors like those already listed—regular structures, routines, civility, and caring.

The conditions that are prevalent in schools naturally support both internal and environmental protective factors. That

was my experience starting school in the late 1950s. The order, the inherent respectful boundaries, teachers' expressions of caring and commitment to how I was doing, and the opportunity to express my human uniqueness were all so different from what I was experiencing at home that I began to believe I was a valuable, capable human being in spite of the trauma of abuse.

I'm quite sure my teachers had no idea what I was going through at home. Even if they had known, they could not have convinced my parents to get the treatment they needed. Educators cannot eradicate poverty, remove neighborhood gangs, stop cultural violence, heal parental addictions, or prevent the myriad of other types of stress, risk, and trauma that many students face daily. Yet my teachers, like most teachers, did much to foster my resilience without even knowing that they were doing it.

By becoming more aware of the influence of such protective factors and making a commitment to strengthen them, school communities can become even more powerful as resilience-building organizations. This awareness can also empower educators who feel discouraged by their inability to remove the adversity in their students' lives.

Resilient Kids Credit Their Teachers

Emmy Werner and Ruth Smith (1992) conducted an acclaimed study of resilience. Known as the Kauai Longitudinal Study, this research followed a group of 505 children born on that Hawaiian island in 1955. One-third of the children experienced four or more risk factors that suggested they would struggle with success in life—for example, perinatal distress; chronic poverty; dysfunctional, chaotic families; parents' divorce; and family drug or alcohol abuse. Yet one in three of the children in this high-risk group "had developed into a confident, competent adult" by age 18 (p. 2). After following these children for three decades, the researchers found that five-sixths of the high-risk children in the study had overcome the adversity of multiple stresses and trauma by their early 30s.

Indicators of this resilient outcome included an absence of earlier "negative adaptations" to adversity, such as substance abuse, criminality, and mental health issues. In addition, the resilient outcome included evidence, meticulously documented from several sources, of positive personal relationships, gainful and successful employment, life balance in the form of hobbies and leisure activity, and the expression of positive expectations for their personal futures. The researchers concluded that these resilient individuals

> grew into competent, confident, and caring adults whose educational and vocational accomplishments were equal to or exceeded those of the low-risk children. … As a group, they worked and loved in contexts far different from the traumatic domestic scenes that had characterized their childhoods. (Werner & Smith, 1992, p. 192)

Werner and Smith concluded that protective factors are more powerful in the lives of children than are the stressful life events these children encountered. The researchers also found that teachers and schools were among the most common sources of protective factors for children in their study who overcame adversity. And the most powerful protective factor in schools was the caring, supportive relationships that students had with all types of educators.

In a testimony to the power of educators as resilience builders, when many of these children reached adulthood they mourned the loss of the one or two educators who had made the difference for them more than they mourned the loss of their own family members. "What went out of their life was a person who looked beyond outward experience, their behavior, their unkempt—oftentimes—appearance and saw the promise" (Werner, 2007, p. 20).

Mirroring Strengths vs. Imposing Labels

One of the most effective resilience-building actions educators can engage in is to dig for and reflect back to a student his or her strengths—the internal protective factors that students have often honed during times of stress. Resilience researchers Steven and Sybil Wolin (1993) write that according to child development experts, how a child's self-concept develops over time depends on the environmental *mirrors* in that child's life. Optimally, these mirrors are caring, kind, and affirming and meet the child's developmental needs. But too often, children who experience abuse, neglect, and other childhood traumas find in their mirrors the message that they are unwanted and unlovable.

Wolin and Wolin concluded that the single most powerful environmental protective factor is one or more caring, believing alternate mirrors. Many children find such a mirror at school—a teacher, counselor, nurse, bus driver, school secretary, or volunteer who communicates, "I see what is right with you, despite your struggles. And I believe what is right with you is more powerful than anything that is wrong."

Resilience research is challenging the risk orientation that has been prevalent in schools in past decades, which resulted in many students being labeled as at-risk (Baizerman & Compton, 1992; Brown, D'Emidio-Caston, & Benard, 2001; Werner, 2007). In reality, every student, no matter how troubled, has strengths that he or she can call on, even while he or she may be exhibiting serious challenges.

I have pondered many times how resilient I would be now if the knowledge of my home environment had boxed me into an "at-risk" label throughout my school years. Longitudinal studies like the one by Werner and Smith, which show the innate, self-righting capacity inherent in each person, raise serious questions about the usefulness of such labels. It's more useful to search for even small indicators of a student's strengths and then provide the mirroring,

encouragement, reinforcement, and opportunities that will enable those strengths to flourish. In the process, a student's self-concept shifts from "I am a problem" to "I have strengths and talents and capabilities in spite of my problems!"

Several personal characteristics show up repeatedly in the resilience literature as especially powerful individual protective factors. These factors provide a list that educators can use to become more effective mirrors of students' strengths (see "Internal Protective Factors That Foster Resilience"). Researchers emphasize that no one has all of these strengths; the list is not meant to be a checklist. Rather, each student has a handful of these strengths that can become the lifelines for their resilience.

Riverside, California, educator Kiera Fliones described to me how she discovered the power of implementing the protective factor approach:

> I was teaching a very difficult group of 6th graders and was running out of energy and hope. I had them go through the list of personal resiliency factors looking for their top three. We discussed them beforehand and talked about how each may help them to bounce back from difficulties in their lives.
>
> I was unsure of the impact this little exercise would have. I had several students whose initial response was, "Yeah, right. I don't have any of these!" However, after a few days of class discussion, assignments to share with parents, and one-on-one time, every student had chosen at least two they already had. We then discussed how to make them stronger. …
>
> My classroom became a much different place. Before, I was focusing on what was wrong with my class. After our work together, each student had at least two "strengths," or as one student put it, "I have two things I do right!"
>
> This same student was a huge behavioral challenge for me. I was so fearful about her entering middle school. As of the last time we spoke, she was each of her teachers' favorite student! Her SAT9 scores went up 259 points overall. Another student who was always getting in fights is now the student who is welcoming new students to school and is taking all her friends to church!
>
> The trick, I believe, was focusing on what the individual students had going for them. (Henderson, 2007, p. 189)

Creating a Safe-Haven School

Recent research shows that a positive school climate contributes significantly to academic success, especially for struggling students in urban schools. In a comprehensive study on the importance of school climate, Perkins (2006) focused on the effect of school climate in 108 urban schools in 15 school districts across the United States. The study found that an improvement in the key elements of school climate led to higher student achievement, higher morale among students and teachers, more reflective practice among teachers, fewer dropouts, reduced violence, better community relations, and increased institutional pride (Bryant & Kelley, 2006).

What are these key elements of school climate? According to research sponsored by the Council of Urban Boards of Education (CUBE) and the National School Boards Association (NSBA), they include (1) feelings of safety among staff and students; (2) supportive relationships within the school; (3) engagement and empowerment of students as valued members and resources in the school community; (4) clear rules and boundaries that are understood by all students and staff; (5) high expectations for academic achievement and appropriate behavior; and (6) trust, respect, and an ethos of caring (Bryant & Kelly, 2006; Elfstrom, Vanderzee, Cuellar, Sink, & Volz, 2006; Perkins, 2006).

These key components of a positive school climate align well with the six key environmental protective factors diagrammed in the "Resiliency Wheel" on p. 24. The Resiliency Wheel is a succinct visual summary of the most potent environmental conditions that show up across the body of resilience literature, including the studies cited in this article. In fact, I have found all or most of the components of the Resiliency Wheel in almost every report of a program or strategy that is assisting struggling children or youth.

Schools can use either the key components of school climate identified by CUBE and NSBA or the key environmental protective factors identified in the Resiliency Wheel to assess how well they are supporting student resilience. Educators should regularly ask all stakeholders in the school community how they are doing in classrooms and schoolwide in each of these areas (Henderson & Milstein, 2003).

By claiming their roles as agents of protective factors, educators (and all caring adults in schools) can create schools that are havens in which resilience can flourish. Such schools boost the success of all students as they encounter the inevitable adversities of childhood and adolescence.

The Resiliency Wheel
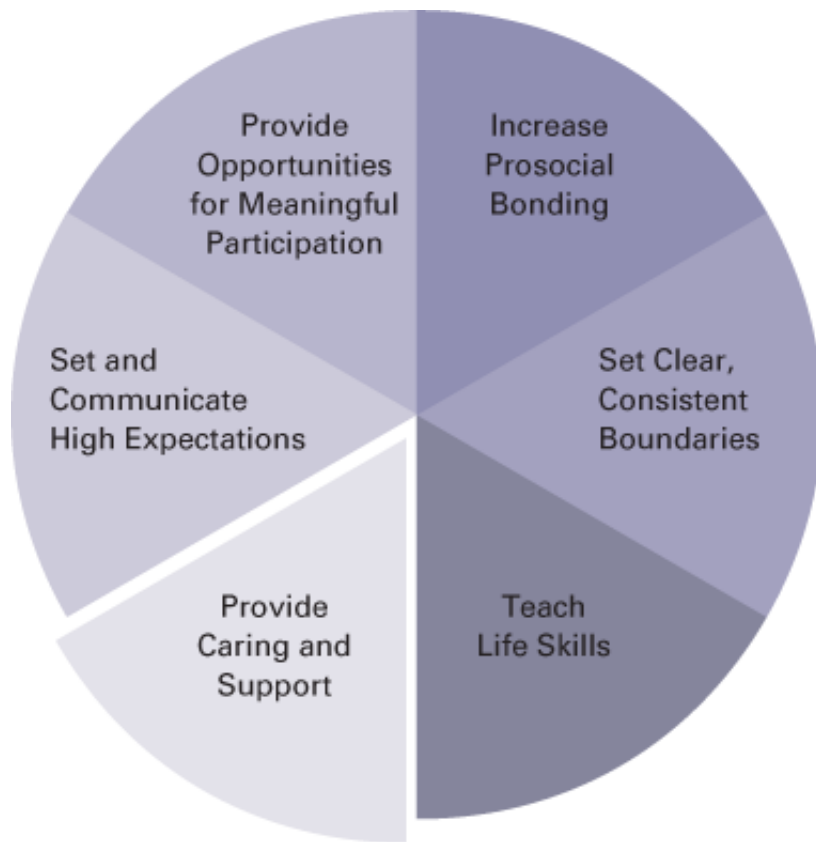
Note: The Resiliency Wheel is a visual synthesis of resiliency-building conditions documented in the body of resilience research. "Caring and Support" is highlighted because it is the single most powerful environmental protective factor. All of the other conditions are actions that grow out of providing genuine caring and support.

—Nan Henderson

Internal Protective Factors That Foster Resilience

Relationships. Is sociable; able to be a friend; able to form positive relationships.

Service/Helpfulness. Gives of self in service to others or a cause.

Life Skills. Uses life skills, including good decision making, assertiveness, and impulse control.

Humor. Has a good sense of humor, can laugh at difficult situations.

Inner Direction (Internal Locus of Control). Bases choices and decisions on internal evaluation.

Perceptiveness. Has insightful understanding of people and situations.

Independence. Can distance himself or herself from unhealthy people and situations. Has autonomy and is able to go his or her own way.

Positive View of Personal Future. Is optimistic; expects a positive future.

Flexibility. Can adjust to change; can bend as necessary to positively cope with situations.

Love of Learning. Shows capacity for and connection to learning.

Self-motivation. Has internal initiative and positive motivation from within.

Competence. Is good at something; has personal competence.

Self-Worth. Has feelings of self-worth and self-confidence.

Spirituality. Has personal faith in something greater.

Perseverance. Keeps on despite difficulty; doesn't give up.

Creativity. Demonstrates expressiveness through artistic endeavor and/or by using imagination and creative thinking or other processes.

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