

Turning It All Around: From Risk to Resilience

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For more than a decade public and educational discourse has focused on “children and families at risk” (Swadener & Lubeck, 1995, p.1). Social science research has identified poverty, a social problem, as the factor most likely to put a person “at risk” for drug abuse, teen pregnancy, child abuse, violence, and school failure. Nonetheless, policy makers, the media, and often researchers themselves have personalized “at-riskness,” locating it in youth, their families, and their cultures. Even though this approach sometimes succeeds in getting needed services to children and families, it has led to stereotyping, tracking, lowering expectations for many students in urban schools, and even prejudice and discrimination. Looking at children and families through a deficit lens obscures a recognition of their capacities and strengths, as well their individuality and uniqueness.

Common sense cautions against this deficit approach, and new rigorous research on resilience is disproving it scientifically. Studies demonstrate both the ways that individuals develop successfully despite risk and adversity, and the lack of predictive power of risk factors. Further, they articulate the practices and attitudes that promote healthy development and successful learning in students. Their findings are corroborated by research into the characteristics of teachers and schools, families, organizations, and communities that successfully motivate and engage youth from high-risk environments, including urban poverty (Ianni, 1989; McLaughlin, Irby, & Langman, 1994; Meier, 1995; Rutter, Maughan, Mortimore, Ouston, & Smith, 1979). This digest briefly describes how educators and schools can foster resiliency in all youth.

Positive Beliefs about All Students

The starting point for building on students’ capacities is the belief by all adults in their lives, particularly in their school, that every youth has innate resilience. To develop this belief, educators and administrators need to recognize the source of their own resilience.

All Individuals Have the Power to Transform and Change

Lifton (1994) identifies resilience as the human capacity of all individuals to transform and change, no matter what their risks; it is an innate “self-righting mechanism” (Werner & Smith, 1992, p.202). “Resilience skills” include the ability to form relationships (social competence), to problem solve (metacognition), to develop a sense of identity (autonomy), and to plan and hope (a sense of purpose and future). While many social and life skills programs have been developed to teach these skills, the strong message in resilience research is, however, that these attitudes and competencies are outcomes—not causes—of resilience.

Long-term developmental studies have followed children born into extremely high-risk environments, such as poverty-stricken or war-torn communities; and families with alcoholism, drug abuse, physical and sexual abuse, and mental illness. Researchers have found—remarkably—that at least 50 percent and usually closer to 70 percent of these children grow up to be not only successful by societal indicators but “confident, competent, and caring” persons (Werner & Smith, 1992).

Teachers and Schools Have the Power to Transform Lives

A common finding in resilience research is the power of teachers, often unbeknownst, to tip the scale from risk to resilience. Turnaround teachers/mentors provide and model three protective factors that buffer risk and enable positive development by meeting youth's basic needs for safety, love and belonging, respect, power, accomplishment and learning, and, ultimately, for meaning (Benard, 1991). The factors are these:

Caring Relationships. Teachers can convey loving support to students by listening to students and validating their feelings, and by demonstrating kindness, compassion, and respect (Higgins, 1994; Meier, 1995). They refrain from judging, and do not take students' behavior personally, understanding that youth are doing the best they can, based on the way they perceive the world. Teachers can also help meet the basic survival needs of overwhelmed families through provision of supplies and referrals to social service agencies.

Positive and High Expectations. Teachers' high expectations can structure and guide behavior, and can also challenge students beyond what they believe they can do (Delpit, 1996). Turnaround teachers recognize students' strengths, mirror them, and help students see where they are strong. They especially assist overwhelmed youth, who have been labeled or oppressed by their families, schools, and/or communities, in using their personal power to grow from damaged victim to resilient survivor by helping them to: (1) not take personally the adversity in their lives; (2) not see adversity as permanent; and (3) not see setbacks as pervasive (adapted from Seligman, 1995). These teachers are student-centered: they use the students' own strengths, interests, goals, and dreams as the beginning point for learning, and they tap students' intrinsic motivation for learning.

Opportunities to Participate and Contribute.

As an outgrowth of a strengths-based perspective, turnaround teachers let students express their opinions and imagination, make choices, problem solve, work with and help others, and give their gifts back to the community in a physically and psychologically safe and structured environment. They treat students as responsible individuals, allowing them to participate in all aspects of the school's functioning (Rutter et al., 1979; Rutter, 1984; Kohn, 1993).

Strategies for Building Resilience

A key finding from resilience research is that successful development and transformative power exist not in programmatic approaches *per se* but at the deeper level of relationships, beliefs, expectations, and willingness to share power. Schools need to develop caring relationships not only between educator-student but also between student-student, educator-educator, and educator-parent. Certain programmatic approaches, however, can provide the structure for developing these relationships, and for providing opportunities for active student involvement: small group process, cooperative learning, peer helping, cross-age mentoring, and community service. Overall, schooling that has been a turnaround experience for stressed young people is described by them as being like "a family," "a home," "a community," and even "a sanctuary" (Children's Express, 1993).

School Level Approaches

Teacher Support. Just as teachers can create a nurturing classroom climate, administrators can create a school environment that supports teachers' resilience. They can promote caring relationships among colleagues; demonstrate positive beliefs, expectations, and trust; provide ongoing opportunities and time, in small groups, to reflect, dialogue, and make decisions together (McLaughlin & Talbert, 1993).

Staff Development. Teachers should reflect personally on their beliefs about resilience, and also, as a staff, exchange experiences—both personal and literary—about overcoming the odds. They can read and discuss the research on resilience, including the studies of successful city schools (Polakow, 1994). Reaching a staff consensus about innate resilience is the first step in creating a classroom or school that fosters resilience.

School-Community Collaborations

Fostering the development of the whole child necessitates school, family, and community collaboration. Schools can develop a list of community agencies and match the needs of families with the services they provide.

Classroom Approaches

Teach to Students' Strengths. Starting with students' strengths, instead of their deficiencies, enlists their intrinsic motivation and positive momentum. It also keeps them in a hopeful frame of mind to learn and work on problems.

Teach Students That They Have Innate Resilience. Show students that they have the power to construct the meaning they give to everything that happens to them. Help them recognize how their own conditioned thinking—internalized environmental messages, such as they are not good enough or smart enough—blocks access to their innate resilience (Mills, 1991).

Provide Growth Opportunities for Students. This includes asking questions that encourage self-reflection, critical thinking and consciousness, and dialogue (especially around salient social and personal issues); making learning more experiential, as in service learning; providing opportunities for creative expression in art, music, writing, theater, video production, and for helping others (community service, peer helping, cooperative learning); involving students in curriculum planning and choosing learning experiences; using participatory evaluation strategies; and involving students in creating the governing rules of the classroom.

Self-Assess. Create an assessment tool from the best practices describing turnaround teachers and schools. Assess the classroom and school and ask students to do the same. Identify both areas of strength and challenge.

Use the Resiliency Approach in an Experiment. Choose one of the most challenging students. Identify all personal strengths, and mirror them back. Teach that the student has innate resilience and the power to create a personal reality. Create opportunities for the student to participate and contribute personal strengths. Be patient. Focus on small victories because they often grow into major transformations.

Conclusion

Working from their own innate resilience and well-being, teachers engage those qualities in their students. If they can let go of their tight control, be patient, and trust the process, teaching will become more effortless and enjoyable, and will be responding to recommendations from the research on resilience and on nurturing teachers and successful schools. It is important that teachers realize they are making a difference. When teachers care, believe in, and embrace the “city kids,” they are not only enabling their healthy development and successful learning, but creating inside-out social change; they are building a creative and compassionate citizenry.

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