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Promoting Student Resilience in School Contexts

This article outlines specific actions that school personnel can take to promote the healthy social and emotional development of students at their schools. These recommendations are conceptually grounded in risk and resiliency theory and in the recognition that environments as well as individuals hold risk and protective possibilities.

Focus is placed on protective possibilities that address the individual risk and resilience domains of autonomy, sense of purpose, social competence, problem-solving, and achievement motivation in classroom, peer, schoolwide, and family-school contexts.

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STUDENTS IN TODAY'S SCHOOLS face day-to-day challenges of living in communities, homes, and school environments that may not provide adequate social and emotional support. Students who struggle academically are at further risk for the development of behavioral and mental health problems (Noam & Hermann, 2002). However, in the past several years, researchers have begun to uncover sources of resilience for students who face a variety of risks. Educational resilience has been defined as "the heightened likelihood of success in school and other life accomplishments despite environmental adversities brought about by early traits, conditions, and experiences" (Wang, Haertel, & Walberg, 1994, p. 46). Categories of individual resilience or protective factors identified by researchers include social and academic competence, problem-solving skills, autonomy, and sense of purpose (Waxman, Gray, & Padron, 2003).

However, contexts play an important role in the development and enhancement of student resilience. MacDonald and Validivieso (2000) propose that environments can promote resilience by providing developmental opportunities and

emotional, motivational, and strategic supports. For students, important environments are the classroom (including teacher behaviors and support), their peer group, the school as a whole, and family support and expectations. Benard (1991) proposed three major mechanisms through which the environment can develop resilience: (a) caring relationships, (b) high expectations, and (c) opportunities to participate and contribute. Conversely, Henderson and Milstein (2003) define general actions that mitigate risk: (a) increase bonding with prosocial individuals, (b) set clear and consistent boundaries, and (c) teach life skills such as cooperation, healthy conflict resolution, resistance and assertiveness skills, communication skills, problem-solving and decision-making skills, and healthy stress management.

Grounded in the principle that environments can promote student resilience, empirical studies of comprehensive prevention programs have identified basic characteristics of effective programs to reduce risk and increase resilience. Effective prevention programs should (a) address a broad range of risk and protective factors, (b) occur early, before the onset of risk related maladaptation, and (c) address multiple contexts (Durlak, 1998). Preventive benefits are also enhanced when intervention targets the family relationships and the school-family connection (Tolan, Gorman-Smith, & Henry, 2004).

However, while comprehensive programs may provide a framework for effective intervention, but they may not inform teachers or other educators about specific actions that they can take as individuals, independent of a comprehensive program, to increase student resilience and address mental health needs.

This article addresses a variety of specific actions that are doable in the context of daily routines and thus can be enacted by educators on a day-to-day basis. We review research that points out effective strategies for classroom, peer, and schoolwide settings to reduce risk and enhance student resilience. Our discussion is based on the premise that protective factors reside in environments as well as individuals; resilience is not just in the individual.

Thus, we will discuss these actions as “protective possibilities.”

Presentation of research about these protective possibilities will be organized with a modified framework, originally proposed by Morrison, Brown, D’Incau, O’Farrell, and Furlong (2005). Table 1 outlines individual characteristics that are possible sources of risk and resilience that particularly impact student performance in an educational setting. These characteristics may be interpreted from both risk and resilience perspectives; they may place a student at-risk for poor school adaptation or, alternatively, may be optimal characteristics to strengthen in order to facilitate adaptation.

Classroom

The teacher in a classroom context has many daily opportunities to capitalize on protective possibilities for the students in his or her classroom. For example, to help students build academic self-confidence, become more engaged and invested in their learning, and develop autonomy and independence, a teacher can emphasize learner-centered practices. Such practices include tailoring instruction to individual needs, using experiential approaches to learning, and emphasizing individual choice and autonomy (Alfassi, 2004). Teachers and students should work together to determine learning goals and evaluate progress on these goals. When given a choice in determining the learning experiences that are meaningful to them, students gain a sense of responsibility and ownership, as well as enhanced self-esteem (Reeve, Jang, Carrell, Jeon, & Barch, 2004). When using learner-centered practices, the teacher becomes a facilitator of student learning rather than the source of all knowledge (Waxman, Padron, & Arnold, 2001).

A sense of purpose is enhanced as teachers ensure that the curriculum is important, interesting, and culturally relevant to students. Students should be provided with learning activities that are challenging, but flexible, so that each individual finds a way to participate

Table 1
Protective Possibilities Associated With Student Domains of Risk and Resilience

Characteristic	Risk to Educational Performance	Strengthen to Enhance Educational Adaptation	Protective Possibilities or Actions
Autonomy	Dependence External locus of control Low self-efficacy	Skills Self-confidence Self-responsibility	<i>Teacher/Classroom</i> Adopt learner centered practices Involve students in making rules <i>Families</i> Establish communication to develop skills and independent work outside of school
Sense of purpose	Hopeless No vision of future	Goals Positive attributions Optimism	<i>Teacher/Classroom</i> Capitalize on student interests Provide activities that are culturally relevant Allow students to contribute time/talent <i>School</i> Offer a variety of extra-curricular programs— involve students in planning Make available career exploration opportunities Provide service learning activities <i>Families</i> Offer services/involve in planning
Social competence	Poor social skills Lacks friends Poor relationships with teachers	Liked by others Ability to initiate positive interactions Empathy, perspective-take Leadership	<i>Peers/classroom</i> Provide opportunities for students to help each other Use cooperative learning strategies Mix peers of varied popularity Build group unity <i>School</i> Offer availability of mentors Encourage connections to school through activities
Problem solving	Impulsive reaction	Thinking before acting Planning skills	<i>Teacher/Classroom</i> Teach cognitive strategies Role play social problem solving strategies <i>School</i> Offer a mediation/conflict resolution program
Achievement motivation	Avoids failure Doesn't try Gives up	Makes an effort Positive attitude toward school Persists	<i>Teacher/Classroom</i> Provide students choice Provide activities with optimal challenge Decrease external incentives Communicate high expectations <i>Families</i> Communicate expectations for students Communicate the importance of school

meaningfully and experiences an optimal level of challenge (Phillips, Boutte, Zigler, & Finn-Stevenson, 2004). Another protective possibility occurs when students contribute to the classroom in meaningful ways. For example, teachers may assign each student an important job in the classroom such as organizing classroom activities, writing a weekly or monthly newsletter to parents or others in the school, or decorating the classroom according to topics or themes of instruction (Henderson & Milstein, 2003).

The teaching context also provides opportunities to enhance a student's personal qualities or assets such as intrinsic motivation, learning strategies, and problem solving skills. For example, teachers can support and enhance intrinsic motivation by rewarding effort and cooperation and by emphasizing natural interest areas. At the same time, the teacher can work to decrease external incentives (i.e., concrete rewards or a point system) and punishments (i.e., name on the board, withdrawal of privileges) for academic performance. Students can also be encouraged to explore and develop their own interests and learning goals (Battistich, Schaps, Watson, & Solomon, 1996). Finally, maintaining and communicating high expectations for all students is critical for the development of motivation and a positive academic self-concept. An important complement to high teacher expectations is positive engagement with each student to develop a caring and supportive relationship (Waxman et al., 2001).

Teachers can also incorporate social and emotional education in classroom activities. Lessons might focus on increasing students' self-awareness of their feelings and thoughts as well as increasing social awareness by helping students understand what others are thinking and feeling. Students benefit from explicit instruction in responsible decision making and self-management skills such as managing emotions, setting goals, and coping with frustration or set-backs. Finally, classroom activities and instruction can be designed to help students develop relationship skills by learning to cooperate, resist negative peer pressure, and negotiate conflicts (Weissberg & O'Brien, 2004).

Peer Context within the Classroom

Developing a positive classroom climate can provide a variety of protective possibilities (Blum, McNeely, & Nonnemaker, 2002). Students develop social skills, respect for individual differences, and teamwork when they work in cooperative groups on academic activities that are structured with mutual goals and equal status participation for all members of the group. For example, learning groups that expect students to complete a project after they discuss and compare ideas, challenge each others' thinking, and develop strategies for completing the project can be a good vehicle for developing successful social skills. Each group decides how to distribute the workload fairly, develop standards for discussion that respect each others ideas, and find ways to help each other. When a project is completed, the group reflects on what they did that led to or blocked success with tasks, goals, and respectful interactions. These student-centered teaching practices create interdependence among students and teachers (Waxman et al., 2001). Cooperative groups have the potential to create positive classroom environments that reduce peer rejection and maintain positive student engagement and mental health outcomes. For example, Mikami, Boucher, and Humphreys (2005) found that in middle schools, pairing socially rejected peers with popular peers and having them work on mutual activities that required teamwork decreased the amount of self-reported peer rejection.

Opportunities may also be created for whole class activities in which students share their strengths and talents with their classmates. Classroom unity-building activities help students explore their common and uncommon interests, compare their similarities and differences, and make connections with each other and build mutually caring relationships (Ryan & Patrick, 2001). Students can also participate in decisions about classroom rules and expectations; such activities provide teachable moments that help students understand the reasons behind rules and expectations. For example, in a school that participated in the Child Development Project, teachers posted classroom rules and expectations,

all members engaged in discussions to ensure each person in the classroom understood the rules and expectations, and finally all students signed the rules poster to affirm their commitment to upholding the rules and meeting the expectations (Battistich et al., 1996).

A sense of purpose may also be fostered in adolescents through the exploration of career and postsecondary opportunities and options. Exploration activities should teach what is needed for students to reach their goals. Relationships with businesses in the community could be established to provide concrete and appropriate role models for students. Speakers might discuss the skills and responsibilities required to hold a job in a given profession or industry (Henderson & Milstein, 2003). Finally, another very important protective possibility in the classroom that provides a sense of purpose is the involvement of adolescents in activities that allow them to be helpful to others in the school community and beyond (Rak & Patterson, 1996). Students can learn the social and relationship benefits of civic responsibility through such activities as “buddies” programs with younger students, peer tutoring clubs, or service learning activities outside of the school (e.g., at a food distribution center, holiday toy drive, senior citizens centers, or hospital wards for children or adults) (Allen, Philliber, Herrling, & Kuperminc, 1997).

Schoolwide Context

Protective possibilities may be created at the school level, as well (Reis, Colbert, & Hebert, 2005). School-wide activities can offer the same benefits as similar programs enacted at the classroom level, and have the added impact of bringing students together who do not share similar schedules. Whole school activities in schools with tracking or clustering policies are especially important for fostering a sense of community for all students that can increase students’ connection or bond to the school. Extracurricular activities such as sports programs, interest-based clubs, school newspapers or magazines, drama, art, or music are but a few possibilities. Further, leadership opportunities are provided through student

government activities as well as participation in planning school activities such as fundraising projects, family activities or talent shows. Collaborative activities that the whole school works on together may also be arranged (e.g., a cooperative science fair, a service project).

School-level interventions can also enhance student adjustment and social skills. For example, a school mediation program that allows peers to help students work out interpersonal problems teaches problem solving skills to both the students requiring help and the peer mediators. In the five-step conflict mediation process proposed by Henderson and Millstein (2003): (a) a mediator explains the roles and rules of mediation; (b) each party defines the problem and expresses his or her feelings; (c) the mediator helps both parties to understand one another’s points of view; (d) the mediator helps parties brainstorm and decide on a solution agreeable to both parties; (e) the mediator writes down the points of the agreed-upon solution and has all parties sign.

Schoolwide standards for behavior can also enhance adjustment by providing a vehicle for building positive behaviors (Reinke & Herman, 2002). Through discussions and problem-solving, students and staff come to a mutual understanding of the school rules and expectations. Clear consistent boundaries and logical consequences enhance students’ sense of self-determination and autonomy. Recognition should be provided for positive behaviors, and opportunities for learning new behaviors to replace negative behavior should be explicitly taught. For example, schools could partner with local community businesses to offer rewards for good behavior or improved behavior by offering free lunches or dinners from restaurants, free skating or bowling passes, and free passes to local attractions (e.g., museums, theme parks). Programs of recognition are strongest if a student’s parents are also included in the recognition and reward activities.

One-on-one relationships are another important context in which social competence can be realized (Ryan & Patrick, 2001). Such relationships can be a mechanism through which educational, mental health, and physical health needs of students and their families can be

addressed. Students may be connected with a mentor at school with whom they can develop a meaningful and supportive relationship. Possible goals include relationship building, linking different worlds of the child (school, home, peer, community), providing referrals to more intense services when necessary, and providing academic tutoring and support in classrooms (Noam & Hermann, 2002).

Family Context

Another set of protective possibilities for students are drawn from meaningful partnerships between schools and families (Tolan et al., 2004). Parents may certainly be key in developing resilience in their children (autonomy, problem-solving, achievement motivation), but educators should target family resilience as well. That is, school-family interactions might reinforce or develop the family's orientation toward the importance of school, family communication around the tasks and expectations of being a student, and a collective sense of the family's purpose and meaningful participation in the process of schooling.

Schools can involve families in the students' learning. For example, the Child Development Project intervention includes "homeside" activities. These activities are sent home with the student and involve the parents in discussions about what the student is learning at school (Battistich et al., 1996). Periodic contact with parents about the child's school performance provides a feedback loop to reinforce the importance of school and students' skill development, confidence, and motivation. Parents are arguably the best sources of information about student strengths and skills and also powerful partners in shaping student behavior at school (Greenberg et al., 2003). Henderson and Milstein (2003) suggest that schools offer parents meaningful opportunities to participate in school by allowing them to share their strengths and talents with the school; for example, leading classroom lessons or school-wide projects, hosting a club or after-school activity, serving on leadership committees, or helping with school-sponsored

activities. In sum, reaching out to students as well as their families offers a variety of protective possibilities.

Engaging the School Community in Change

Identifying and developing protective possibilities in school contexts requires that a resilience perspective become a central feature in school change efforts for the school personnel. In this article, we have focused on actions that individuals in schools might undertake or organize for students and their families. We suggest these actions with full recognition that the political and accountability climate in schools of today in the context of No Child Left Behind provides challenges for maintaining focus on the positive or on issues other than academic achievement characterized by test scores.

The following list provides a concise review of characteristics that can be developed and supported by the specified strategies for school personnel to enhance protective possibilities in school contexts themselves.

Autonomy:

- Encourage administrators to involve staff in decision-making and allow staff to voice their concerns about what needs to be made a priority in the school environment (Pepper & Thomas, 2002).
- Allow teachers to set the agenda for staff meetings and professional development activities (Henderson & Milstein, 2003).

Sense of purpose:

- Educate school leaders about environmental resiliency—develop ways of thinking about how to expand their students' strengths (Bosworth & Earthman, 2002).

Social competence:

- Encourage teacher professional development and provide observational evaluations to teach-

ers so they are aware of their instructional strengths and weaknesses (Mikami et al., 2005).

- Have new teachers connect with veteran teachers. This can increase teachers' sense of bonding with each other and with the school (Henderson & Milstein, 2003).

Problem-solving:

- Set up collaborative relationships between teachers and between teachers and administrators. Allow opportunities for teachers to share their talents and strengths with the school and learn from one another. In staff meetings have teachers bring a specific problem in their classroom to the meeting, and allow all teachers to share their ideas and expertise (Alfassi, 2004; Mikami et al., 2005).
- Create activities that everyone in the school works on together. Make the goal collaborative rather than promoting competition, and include families in the goal as well (Solomon, Watson, Battistich, Schaps, & Delucchi, 1996).

Achievement motivation:

- Ensure that teachers are getting rewarded through recognition, praise, or celebratory activities for their contribution to their students (Henderson & Milstein, 2003).

Conclusion

We have proposed a framework or a *way of thinking* about how educators can focus their day-to-day interactions on building resilience in students at their school. First is the recognition that for the full range of characteristics we have discussed (autonomy, sense of purpose, social competence, problem-solving, and achievement motivation) there are *protective possibilities* or opportunities to reduce risk and enhance resilience. These opportunities occur in classrooms, in relationships with peers, on a schoolwide level, and in partnership with families. While formal prevention and intervention programs provide a

valuable scaffold for the development and reinforcement of resilience-building skills, individual educators play a powerful role simply through their day-to-day interactions with students.

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