

Resiliency: The Role of Schools

Veronica Tigert

Dr. R. Hallett

EDUC 352, Applied Inquiry I

December 21, 2014

Resiliency: The Role of Schools

Despite adverse environmental conditions or negative influences, some children succeed. This process involving rising above one's own circumstances has been termed resiliency. Issues with defining resiliency and resiliency related processes (e.g., risk and protective factors) have helped to shape this body of work. Studies across disciplines, such as psychopathology, psychology, sociology, and anthropology, have constructed a framework for trying to understand why some children succeed when others do not even within similar social and economic environments (Waxman, Gray, & Padron, 2003).

Early studies stemmed from the medical fields and focused on the personal characteristics or traits resilient children exhibited (Rutter, 1979; Werner, 1993). Later researchers began to argue against an over-reliance on the “negative aspects of urban life” and shaped what has become known as Resiliency Theory, which calls for research to contextualize risk factors and protective processes within an environmental framework (Hallett, 2012). Although numerous studies on resiliency exist, fewer studies have collected data on resiliency in schools and many of these, like the early works on resiliency, have compared resilient and non-resilient youth (Waxman, Gray, & Padron, 2003). Therefore, an underdeveloped research area is the role of schools in fostering resiliency, especially with regards to particular instructional practices and intervention programs.

This review of literature will outline some key ideas in the development of Resiliency Theory from early studies in medical based fields (Garmezy, Masten, & Tellegen, 1984; Rutter, 1979; Werner, 1993) to latter studies in the social sciences (Luthar, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000; Wang, Haertel, & Walberg, 1994). Key terminology in the study of resiliency will be defined with an overview of the development of definitions (Luthar, 1991; Masten, 1994; McElwee,

2007). The presentation of the historical aspects of Resiliency Theory will help to provide a foundation for understanding the theory as it relates to Academic Resiliency, the type of resiliency related to success in school, academics, and learning (Wang, Haertel, and Walberg, 1994). The focus of the review on Academic Resiliency will be to synthesize the literature on protective processes found within schools.

History of Resiliency Theory

Early research studies launched discussions on resiliency within the medical fields. A longitudinal study of high-risk children in Hawaii with one-third becoming successful adults contributed findings of protective factors that aide in childhood resiliency, such as personality attributes, close ties with family, and support systems outside of the family (Werner, 1993). An epidemiological study over ten years on children from parents with mental illness living in inner-city London showed protective factors including personal characteristics and the child's school environment helped students feel successful (Rutter, 1979). A longitudinal study over ten years on the effects of life "stressors" on success in school found that some children with lower SES, lower IQ, and less supportive families continued to demonstrate competency in school (Garmezy, Masten, & Tellegen, 1984).

These earlier studies helped to pave the way for later researchers by developing various lenses to view resiliency – resiliency from trauma, resiliency of high-risk groups, and resiliency through stressful experiences; however, issues have risen with regards to a clear definition of resiliency, at-risk, and protective processes (Waxman, Gray, & Padron, 2003).

Defining Resiliency

Within the fields studying resiliency (i.e., psychology, sociology, and anthropology), there has been debate over the definition and processes involved. Early definitions tended to view

resiliency as a personality trait whereas later definitions viewed resiliency not as a fixed attribute but as a set of alterable factors (Masten, 1994; McElwee, 2007). Furthermore, as the research developed, resilient children were no longer seen as invulnerable because they tended to exhibit difficulty in some areas even with successes in others (Luthar, 1991). Some pioneers in the field have defined resiliency as:

- “a process of or capacity for or the outcome of successful adaptation despite challenging and threatening circumstances” (Garmenzy & Masten, 1991, p. 459).
- “the heightened likelihood of success in school and other life accomplishment despite environmental adversities brought about by early traits, conditions, and experiences” (Wang, Haertel, & Walberg, 1994, p. 46).

With more recent attention to the ecology of resilience, there is a drive to focus on the environment first, to not generalize findings, to view atypical ways of coping as a condition of the environment, and to study the influence of culture on protective processes (Ungar, 2011). This has led to claims that there can be no static definition of resilience; it is the interaction between the individual and the environment (Winfield, 1994). Resilience is “relational” and needs to be studied within the individual’s other contexts and individual traits should not be emphasized (Bartlett, 1994).

Resiliency can be defined across different contexts. The complexities of the resiliency construct calls for researchers to be specific and use more precise terminology such as educational resilience, emotional resilience, and behavioral resilience (Luthar, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000). However, even within this precision cautions are necessary to not lead policymakers down the wrong path by developing a misconception that some youth just “have what it takes” when phrases such as resilient youth or fostering resilience in children are used

(Luthar & Chicchetti, 2000; Masten, 1994). This becomes especially imperative when determining markers for at-risk individuals.

Defining At-Risk

Historically, a clear definition of at-risk was difficult to ascertain (e.g., using drop out statistics) and can be controversial due to including markers (e.g., limited English proficiency) that may not be a risk factor depending on other variables (Waxman, Gray, & Padron, 2003). Like defining resilience, ecological factors should be considered when defining at-risk. Being at-risk occurs when an individual's development, socially, emotionally, or academically, is inhibited by environmental factors, such as lack of social resources, high stress situations, and unsupportive institutions (Resnick & Burt, 1996; Waxman, Gray, & Pardon, 2003).

When approaching risk from an ecological perspective, the researcher can assess the interrelation between school, student, family, and community by collecting data from risk antecedents (the conditions that are present), risk markers (the behaviors or experiences), and risk outcomes (the combined effect of antecedents and markers) (Arrington & Wilson, 2000; Resnick & Burt, 1996). These interrelations along with data from what has been termed as protective factors or protective processes assist the researcher in attempting to outline a complete picture of the individual within the context of the various environments.

Defining Protective Factors and Processes

Early studies defined protective factors as those personal traits individuals have or develop, such as problem solving skills, sense of purpose, and goal orientation that lead to resiliency behaviors and successful outcomes (Benard, 2002; McMillan & Reed, 1994). Werner (1993) described protective factors as a “compensating function” that challenges an at-risk mindset or serves as an “immunizing function.” However, more recent research has pointed to

protective processes, or environmental influences that challenge risk factors, having a more significant effect on developing resiliency than well-developed personal qualities (Benard, 2003). Youth who have access to protective processes through family, school, and the community are more resilient (Cowan, 1996; Benard, 2003).

Academic Resiliency

Wang, Haertel, and Walberg (1994) defined academic resiliency as “the heightened likelihood of success in school and other life accomplishments despite environmental adversities brought about by early traits, conditions, and experiences” (p. 46). Issues around academic resiliency have included how to differentiate between students who have one or two risk factors to students who have multiple risk factors, as well as the gravity of the factors (Waxman, Gray, & Padron, 2003). The measurement (e.g., test score, grade point average) used to determine resiliency has been questioned (Waxman, Gray, & Padron, 2003). Hallett (2012) described this outcome perspective as “the researcher begins with outcomes that are expected of the general population (e.g. high school graduation or typical psychological development) and uses these outcomes as the measure of successful adaption” (p. 11). Using teacher identification of resilient versus non-resilient students also raises questions about teachers promoting a self-fulfilling prophecy, thus contributing to future lack of success for students (Waxman, Gray, & Padron, 2003). Unlike early studies focusing on the risk factors, more current studies are taking a “strengths-based approach” that focuses on protective processes (Hallet, 2012). Using a strengths-based approach, what are the protective processes within schools that foster academic resiliency?

The body of research evolving from Resiliency Theory uncovers school protective processes across the following categories: the relationship between student perceptions of school

and resiliency, school structures that encourage or discourage resiliency, the role of teachers and counselors in fostering academic resiliency, and the effects of intervention programs aimed at developing resiliency within students.

Student Perceptions of School

Several studies involving Hispanic high school students found academically successful students to be more satisfied with and a stronger sense of belonging to school (Alva, 1991; Gonzalez & Padilla, 1997; Reyes & Jason, 1993). According to Gonzalez and Padilla (1997) the only major predictor of academic success was students' sense of belonging to schools. Furthermore, students who had a connectedness with school revealed having fewer pressures from gangs (Reyes & Jason, 1993) and less risky behaviors adversely affecting the youth's health (Resnick, Harris, & Shew, 1997).

School structure

Successful schools that are organized, promote a nurturing environment, have high staff morale, and are responsive to student needs help to build resiliency within students (Mandleco & Peery, 2000). Schools having structures in place to respond to at-risk students' needs through resources and providing a safe environment are more likely to develop resilient students (Glover, Burns, Butler, & Patton, 1998; Masten, 1994; Patton et al., 2000). Providing models of support that encourage students to participate in extracurricular activities schools increases engagement, develops students' sense of competency, and decreases at-risk behaviors (Irvin, 2012; Resnick, Harris, & Shew, 1997).

Schools can also create obstacles for students who are striving to be academically resilient (Sosa, 2012). For example, inflexible scheduling and lack of advanced level course offerings often conflict with students' family commitments, such as having to care for siblings

(Sosa, 2012). Practices, such as tracking, communicate to students who the school thinks can learn and who cannot (Oakes, 1985).

Role of Teachers

At-risk children are better served by nurturing teachers who help the child see a better future (Mandleco & Peery, 2000). Children from high-risk, high poverty neighborhoods have few experiences to help them develop a positive outlook and sense of well-being; therefore, schools who offer such experiences through supportive adults have a great effect on the child's development (Luthar, 1991). Regardless of environmental conditions, students, who perceive strong support from their teachers, maintain a higher grade point average (Alva, 1991), have increased academic motivation (Goodenow, 1993; Roeser, Midgley, & Urdan, 1996), and have higher math achievement (Nettles, Mucherach, & Jones, 2000).

Teachers who take an interest beyond their classroom create opportunities for students to build resiliency (Sosa, 2012). These teachers see their work going beyond delivery of curriculum by developing caring relationships with students, holding students to high expectations and accountability, and providing opportunities for students to demonstrate competency across a variety of areas (Benard, 2003).

Role of Counselors

Counselors can play a vital role in developing resiliency in students through "influencing the school climate, facilitating positive adult-child communication, and implementing activities that enrich the child's social support systems, such as mentoring programs or faculty-student activities" (Taylor & Karcher, 2009, p. 68). Unfortunately, in analyzing counselor behaviors, developing relationships and connectedness with school was more of a focus on schools with a

predominately white population whereas counselors spent more time on topics related to courage and morality in predominately minority schools (Taylor & Karacher, 2009).

Counselors can have an effect on resiliency by providing interventions that develop protective factors, such as self-efficacy and self-esteem. This has a greater effect than reducing risk factors, such as depression and anxiety (Lee et al., 2013). Counselors need practices and curriculum that addresses a variety of resilience processes within school and these should be sensitive to the cultural and developmental needs of the student population (Lee et al., 2013; Taylor & Karacher, 2009).

Effects of Intervention Programs

For the purposes of this review, I will use the term intervention to describe programs that attempt to intervene when there is an issue and programs that attempt to prevent an issue from developing. Intervention programs can be based on strategies for developing the quantity or quality of one's assets, including personal qualities and outside resources, or strategies for reducing risks or stressors (Masten, 2001). Intervention programs focused on building resiliency should give attention to an individual's strengths and not solely focus on deficits (Luthar & Cicchetti, 2000; Zimmerman & Arunkumar, 1994). However, school programs have targeted children who exhibit dysfunctional behaviors or come from impoverished neighborhoods and the strategies employed only focus on behavioral changes (Zimmerman & Arunkumar, 1994).

Interventions in schools have often been fragmented approaches applied by practitioners targeting individual skills without attention to the bigger picture – the child's entire ecological system (Luthar & Cicchetti, 2000). Schools have relied on pull-out and short-term programs which lack integration within the classroom and connection to the child's home and community (Luthar & Cicchetti, 2000; Patton et al., 2000). Due to lack of long term research funding,

typically 5 years for federal grants, schools tend to adopt programs that have not been longitudinally studied for effectiveness and have been targeted at early childhood with a mindset that this will take care of future resiliency issues (Luthar & Cicchetti, 2000). However, children living in at-risk environments will continue to have “sensitive periods” (Greenberg et al., 2003; Luthar & Cicchetti, 2000). High-risk groups need interventions at these different points, such as entry into school, into adolescence, or into the workforce (Felnar & DeVries, 2013). These periods of transition bring stress even for low-risk groups and high-risk groups will continue to have everyday life stressors.

Luthar and Cicchetti (2000) established the following guiding principles for developing intervention programs focused on resiliency:

- Interventions must be based on theory, and related to the theory and research of the group being targeted.
- Interventions should target reducing negative behaviors and promoting positive ones, reducing negative influences, and tapping into resources to foster competence within a community.
- A developmental focus should be a collaborative effort between parents, schools, community, community leaders, and individuals, with an aim toward self-sustaining services.
- Data should be collected with documentation and evaluation.

Although research on intervention programs implemented at the school site appears to be limited (Sosa, 2012; Zimmerman & Arunkumar, 1994), some studies have shown promising results. Longitudinal studies on intervention programs where teachers were trained and implemented a curriculum focused on building social competence through developing students’

sense of self and communication with others led to students exhibiting more resilient behaviors including self-determination and school bonding (Barrett, Sonderegger, & Xenos, 2003; Pierre et al., 2001; Shek, Siu, & Lee, 2008; Stewart & Sun, 2007). For example, The Gatehouse Project has been implemented in twelve Australian schools with a focus on intervention programs for adolescents through developing connectedness between students, students and teachers, teachers and parents, and students and parents (Glover, Burns, Butler, & Patton, 1998).

Conclusion

Resiliency through relationship building is a key factor in success with academics (Werner, 1993), so the lack of attention within schools especially with at-risk populations is concerning. Due to the strains of poverty that many youth face, such as lack of social services and employment, a school-wide effort that focuses on building connectedness with positive relationship building is necessary. Teachers can serve as the key relationship to building the adult connection and support person that students need (Sosa, 2012).

Building relationship resiliency should be a strong component of any program because children do not always have the social skills that enable them to work with others and gain support. Developing small collaborative groups with peers to provide support and an avenue to explore insight in how to cope may help (Barrett, Sonderegger, & Xenos, 2003; Pierre et al., 2001; Shek, Siu, & Lee, 2008; Stewart & Sun, 2007). Also, developing mentorship programs could help to bridge at-risk youth to supportive adults (Glover, Burns, Butler, & Patton, 1998).

School programs are often based on the results of academics, how students achieve intellectually, and how students are motivated through the analysis of grades. Schools could begin to reimagine how to connect students to school by developing programs focused on enhancing protective processes. Intervening through school-wide efforts to increase social and

problem-solving skills and teach children, parents, and the community how to access resources and advocate for oneself may prove to have a greater effect on resiliency than traditional methods for motivation (Glover, Burns, Butler, & Patton, 1998).

Additional longitudinal studies focusing on what leads to positive outcomes in education are needed, as well as more qualitative studies on various populations (Luthar & Cicchetti, 2000). Within my review, I found little attention given to students from rural communities, students with disabilities, students identifying as transgendered, gay, lesbian, or bisexual, or bicultural students. Within the research, the nature of resiliency of children from divorced parents or single mother homes was explored; however, there appears to be gaps in the research with regards to other non-traditional households, such as students with gay or lesbian parents or students being raised by grandparents. All of these environments pose unique developmental experiences as the youth try to navigate being successful in the majority culture.

Schools can create protective processes within their walls and extend to the larger community. By including in the vision a focus on building resiliency capacity within every student, the school can change outcomes for children and for neighborhoods.

References

- Alva, S. (1991). Academic invulnerability among Mexican-American students: The importance of protective resources and appraisals. *Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Sciences, 13*, 18-34.
- Arrington, M. & Wilson, M. (2000). A re-examination of risk and resilience during adolescence: Incorporating culture and diversity. *Journal of Child and Family Studies, 9*(2), 221-230.
- Barrett, P., Sonderegger, R., & Xenos, S. (2003). Using FRIENDS to combat anxiety and adjustment problems among young migrants to Australia: A national trial. *Clinical Child Psychology and Psychiatry, 8*, 241-260.
- Bartlett, D. (1994). On resilience: Questions for validity. In M.C. Wang & E.W. Gordon (Eds.), *Educational resilience in inner-city America: Challenges and prospects* (pp. 97-108). Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Bernard, B. (2002). Applications of resilience. In M. Glantz & J. Johnson (Eds.), *Resilience and development* (pp. 269-277). Retrieved from http://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/0-306-47167-1_14#
- Bernard, B. (2003). Turnaround teachers and schools. In B. Williams (Ed), *Closing the achievement gap: A vision for changing beliefs and practices* (2nd ed.). Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum.
- Cowan, E., Wyman, P. & Work, W. (1996). *Resilience in highly stressed urban children: Concepts and findings*. *Bulletin for the New York Academy of Medicine, 73*(2), 267 - 284.
- Felner, R. & DeVries, M. (2013). Poverty in childhood and adolescence: A transactional-ecological approach to understanding and enhancing resilience in contexts of disadvantage and developmental risk. *Handbook of Resilience in Children*. 105-126.

- Garmezy, N., & Masten, A. S. (1991). The protective role of competence indicators in children at risk. In E. M. Cummings, A. L. Greene, & K. H. Karraker (Eds.), *Life-span developmental psychology: Perspectives on stress and coping* (pp. 151-74). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Garmezy, N., Masten A. S., & Tellegen, A. (1984). The study of stress and competence in children: A building block of developmental psychopathology. *Child Development, 55*, 97-111.
- Glover, S., Burns, J., Butler, H., & Patton, G. (1998). Social environments and the emotional wellbeing of young people. *Family Matters, 49*, 11-16.
- Goodenow, C. (1993). The psychological sense of school membership among adolescents: Scale development and educational correlates. *Psychology in the Schools, 30*(1), 79-90.
- Gonzalez, R., & Padilla, A. M. (1997). The academic resilience of Mexican American high school students. *Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Sciences, 19*, 301-17.
- Greenberg, M., Weissberg, R., O'Brien, M., Zins, J., Fredericks, L., Resnik, H., & Elias, M. (2003). Enhancing school-based prevention and youth development through coordinated social, emotional, and academic learning. *American Psychologist, 58*(6/7), 466-474.
- Hallet, R. (2012). Educational experiences of hidden homeless teenagers: Living doubled-up. New York: Routledge.
- Irvin, M. (2012). Role of student engagement in the resilience of African American adolescents from low-income rural communities. *Psychology in the Schools, 49*(2), 176-193.
- Lee, J.H., Nam, S.K., Kim, A., Kim, B., Lee, M.Y., & Lee, S.M. (2013). Resilience: A Meta-Analytic Approach. *Journal of Counseling & Development, 91*:3, 269-279.

- Luthar, S. (1991). Vulnerability and resilience: A study of high-risk adolescents. *Child Development, 62*, 600-616.
- Luthar, S. (1995). Social competence in the school setting: Prospective cross-domain associations among inner-city teens. *Child Development, 66*, 416-429.
- Luthar, S., & Cicchetti, D. (2000). The construct of resilience: Implications for interventions and social policies. *Development and Psychopathology, 12*, 857 - 885.
- Luthar, S., Cicchetti, D., & Becker, B. (2000). The construct of resilience: A critical evaluation and guidelines for future work. *Child Development, 71(3)*, 543-562.
- Mandleco, B. & Peery, J. (2000). An organizational framework for conceptualizing resilience in children. *Journal of Child and Adolescent Psychiatric Nursing, 13(3)*, 99-111.
- Masten, A. (1994). Resilience in individual development: Successful adaptation despite risk and adversity. In M. C. Wang & E. W. Gordon (Eds.), *Educational resilience in inner-city America: Challenges and prospects* (pp. 3-25). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Masten, A. (2001). Ordinary magic: Resilience processes in development. *American Psychologist, 56(3)*, 227-238.
- McElwee, N. (2007). From risk to at-risk. *Child & Youth Services, 29(1)*, 29-56.
- McMillan, J. & Reed, D. (1994). At-risk students and resiliency: Factors contributing to academic success. *The Clearing House: A Journal of Educational Strategies, Issues, and Ideas, 67(3)*, 137-140.
- Nettles, S. M., Mucherach, W., & Jones, D. S. (2000). Understanding resilience: The role of social resources. *Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk, 5*, 47-60.
- Oakes, Jeannie (1985). Keeping Track: How Schools Structure Inequality. Birmingham, N.Y.: Vail-Ballou Press.

- Patton, G., Glover, S., Bond, L., Butler, H., Godfrey, C., & Di Pietro, G. (2000). The Gatehouse Project: A systematic approach to mental health promotion in secondary schools. *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry, 34*, 586–593.
- Pierre, T.L., Mark, M.M., Kaltreider, D.L., & Campbell, B. (2001). Boys & girls clubs and school collaborations: A longitudinal study of a multicomponent substance abuse prevention program for high-risk elementary school children. *Journal of Community Psychology, 29*, 87-106.
- Resnick, G. & Burt,M. (1996). Youth at risk: Definitions and implications for service delivery. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry, 66*(2), 172-188.
- Resnick, M., Harris, K., & Shew, M. (1997). Protecting adolescents from harm: Findings from the national longitudinal study on adolescent health. *The Journal of the American Medical Association, 278*(10), 823- 832.
- Reyes, O., & Jason, L. A. (1993). Pilot study examining factors associated with academic success for Hispanic high school students. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence, 22*, 57-71.
- Roeser, R., Midgley, C., & Urdan, T. (1996). Perceptions of the school psychological environment and early adolescents' psychological and behavioral functioning in school: The mediating role of goals and belonging. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 88*(3), 408-422.
- Rutter, M. (1979). Protective factors in children's responses to stress and disadvantage. *Annals of the Academy of Medicine, Singapore, 8*(3), 324-338.
- Shek, D., Siu, A., & Lee, T. (2008). Positive youth development in Hong Kong: Objective outcome evaluation based on a randomized group trial. *International Journal of Adolescent Medicine and Health, 1*, 161-167.

- Shelton, D. (2009). Leadership, education, achievement, and development. A nursing intervention for prevention of youthful offending behaviour. *American Psychiatric Nurses Association, 14*, 429-441.
- Sosa, T.(2012). Showing up, remaining engaged, and partaking as students: Resilience among students of Mexican descent. *Journal of Latinos and Education, 11(1)*, 32-46
- Stewart, J. & Sun, D. (2007). Resilience and depression in children: Mental health promotion in primary schools in China. *International Journal of Mental Health Promotion, 9*, 37-46.
- Taylor, E. & Karcher, M. (2009). Cultural and developmental variations in the resiliencies promoted by school counselors. *Journal of Professional Counseling: Practice, Theory and Research 37(2)*, 66-88.
- Ungar, M. (2011). The social ecology of resilience: addressing contextual and cultural ambiguity of a nascent construct. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry, 81(1)*, 1-17.
- Wang, M. C., Haertel, G. D., & Walberg, H. J. (1994). Educational resilience in inner cities. In M. C. Wang & E. W. Gordon (Eds.), *Educational resilience in inner-city America: Challenges and prospects* (pp. 45-72). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Waxman, H., Gray, J., & Padron, Y.(2003). Review of research on educational resiliency. *Series Reports*. Santa Cruz, CA: Center for Research on Education, Diversity, and Excellence. Retrieved from <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/7x695885>
- Werner, E. (1993). Risk, resilience, and recovery: Perspectives from the Kauai longitudinal study. *Development of Psychopathology, 5*, 503-515.
- Winfield, L. (1994). Developing resilience in urban youth. *Urban Education Monograph Series*. Illinois: North Central Educational Laboratory. Retrieved from <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED378289.pdf>

Zimmerman, M. & Arunkumar, R. (1994). Resiliency research: Implications for schools and policy. *Social Policy Report*, 8(4), 1-18.