From Theory to Practice: School Leaders' Perspectives on Resiliency

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Resiliency describes the ability of children to overcome adversity and become successful adults. School-based programs, strategies, or policies designed to enhance resiliency are relatively new. School administrators ($n = 10$) who had attended an informational meeting about a community-wide resiliency initiative were interviewed about their understanding of resiliency and their present and future plans to implement resiliency initiatives in their schools. Interviewees provided various definitions of resiliency, ranging from a relatively narrow focus on individual characteristics to a broad focus on various environmental factors. Only those administrators who uniformly held the belief that resiliency was an environmental phenomenon that could be promoted in a school setting decided to participate in the community-wide initiative. However, the concept of resiliency has captured the imagination of these school administrators and is seen as a relevant organizing point for designing school programs and school environments. © 2002 Wiley Periodicals, Inc. J Clin Psychol 58: 299–306, 2002.

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Beginning in the late 1970s with the landmark studies of Werner and Smith (1992) and Rutter, Maughan, Martimore, and Ouston (1979), researchers began to investigate why some children experienced positive life outcomes despite less-than-optimal backgrounds or circumstances that would ordinarily predispose them to developmental failure. The term *resiliency* has been used to describe these children's capacity to overcome adversity.

Resiliency describes children's responses to both long-term and short-term adversity. Thus, children who flourish despite such adverse conditions as poverty, racism, low family cohesion, family psychiatric illness, or alcoholism have been described as

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resilient. In addition, irrespective of his or her environmental background, an individual may exhibit resiliency by coping effectively in the face of a single adverse situation, such as a natural disaster or major family illness. A critical feature of both types of resiliency is a specific focus on children's strengths rather than on risk conditions and problem situations. This shift in approach has clear implications for both traditional educational and clinical practice.

Although individual, family, and community/environmental influences are all thought to contribute to resiliency (Bearman, Jones, & Udry, 1997; Garmezy, 1985; Rak & Patterson, 1996), most previous research has examined either individual or family-level factors (Best, Hauser, & Allen, 1997). Further investigation is needed into the potential impact of community and environmental factors on resiliency in children and youth. This article focuses on features of the school environment that support and promote resiliency in students. Although our focus is on the ways the school environment might foster resiliency, it seems probable that individual resiliency is a multiply determined phenomenon that can be promoted or encouraged in a variety of community settings.

Based on a review of existing literature, several broad statements can be made regarding the current state of research about resiliency in children and youth. First, relatively few empirical studies have used a resiliency-based approach. Instead, resiliency factors typically have been considered in terms of some preexisting risk condition, such as economic disadvantage (Powell, 1995) or family adversity (Fergusson & Lynskey, 1996). Second, those studies that have used a resiliency model have involved small or ethnically homogeneous samples (Gonzalez, 1997; Gordon, 1996). Third, many studies have considered factors intrinsic to the child. For example, Fergusson and Lynskey (1996) considered resiliency in relation to variations in intelligence and cognitive ability.

Although individual factors are certainly relevant, it also is important to consider the larger context in which children and youth develop. This contextual approach has been most clearly articulated by authors such as Urie Bronfenbrenner (1979), who has persuasively advocated using an ecological approach to understanding human development. Moreover, numerous authors from a variety of fields have suggested that schools can be quite influential in either promoting or hindering resiliency in children and youth (Bearman et al., 1997; Bush & Wilson, 1997; Embry, 1997; Morrison, Furlong, & Morrison, 1997; Rutter, 1980; Sagor, 1996). Specifically, Henderson and Millstein (1992) proposed six strategy models for promoting resiliency within the school environment: (a) provide opportunities for meaningful student participation, (b) set and communicate high expectations, (c) provide caring and support, (d) increase prosocial bonding, (e) set clear and consistent boundaries, and (f) teach life skills. Based on this six-pronged model, they have created a tool that guides the development of school-based resiliency programs. The research that supports this model is described next.

A wide range of evidence supports the importance of providing children and youth with opportunities for meaningful participation. In their review of the resiliency literature, Rak and Patterson (1996) noted that having opportunities to be helpful to others had lasting protective effects. Gottfredsen (1986) found that students who had opportunities to share in decision making at school experienced greater expectations for educational success and a reduction in delinquent behavior. Rutter (1980) reported that students who had opportunities to participate in planning school activities demonstrated better attendance, improved achievement, and better overall behavior than did peers not having such opportunities. Catterall (1998) found that student involvement in school and community activities was associated with greater recovery from low academic performance. Finally, in a study of school failure, strategies that increased student participation in learning (including interactive teaching, cooperative learning, and proactive classroom manage-

ment) led to a range of positive outcomes, including improved math achievement and a reduction in suspensions among low-achieving students (Hawkins, Doueck, & Lishner, 1988).

Setting and communicating high expectations also have been shown to have beneficial effects. In a longitudinal study of youth in Great Britain, Rutter (1980) found that a school-level emphasis on academic achievement was related to higher levels of achievement. Sagor (1996) suggested that promoting feelings of competency in students contributed to resiliency. In addition, Rak and Patterson (1996) noted that children and youth who believed in themselves and their ability to accomplish goals were more likely to experience successful outcomes. Finally, Kasen, Johnson, and Cohen (1990) observed that a strong focus on academics was protective for youth in that they demonstrated fewer symptoms of psychopathology.

There is especially abundant evidence for the importance of providing a caring and supportive school environment. Rak and Patterson (1996) stated that schools should be welcoming environments for kids. Rutter (1979) found that having a positive connection to school and opportunities for out-of-school activities contributed to successful outcomes, even after controlling for individual differences in ability and socioeconomic status. Rutter (1980) also noted that children who experienced rewards and praise in school tended to be better behaved. In their review of risk and protective factors for youth, Hawkins, Catalano, and Miller (1992) correlated involvement in positive alternative activities with achievement gains and less frequent involvement in both delinquent behavior and substance use. In a recent study of academic resiliency among Hispanic youth, Gonzalez (1997) found that having a sense of belonging to school was predictive of good school performance. Adolescents who felt connected to their school were less likely to report feelings of emotional distress or suicidal ideation (Bearman et al., 1997). Finally, Catterall (1998) noted that high school staff responsiveness to students was associated with improved recovery from low academic performance.

Increased opportunities for prosocial bonding also can contribute to resiliency. Although positive relationships with peers and caring adults are widely thought to have a wide range of potential benefits for children and youth, the empirical evidence is limited. Werner (1989) noted that students' perceptions of teachers as caring individuals contributed to resiliency and positive outcomes. Dill and Haberman (1995) suggested that schools might provide "one last chance" to model and encourage positive social relationships. Similarly, Schultz, Glass, and Kamholtz (1987) argued that opportunities for healthy interpersonal relationships were an important component of a positive school climate.

Research also has yielded evidence for the importance of setting clear, consistent boundaries. Sagor (1996) suggested that establishing logical consequences for individual actions could contribute to a sense of potency or self-determination in youth. Similarly, Werner (1989) found that children who had a history of following rules were more resilient in the face of adversity than those who did not have such experiences. In a related example, Gottfredsen (1986) noted that a multicomponent school program designed to involve students in decision making contributed to an increase in students' belief in school rules and their educational expectations.

Finally, numerous research studies have indicated the potential benefits of teaching life skills and social skills. In particular, much of the research on intraindividual resiliency factors includes some focus on social competency. For example, in their landmark longitudinal study, Werner and Smith (1992) cited the importance of having good communication and problem-solving skills, as did Hawkins et al. (1992). In a study of fourth graders, Ketchel and Bieger (1989) found that social-skills training contributed to a reduction in the use of alcohol, cigarettes, and marijuana in adolescence. One recently pub-

lished study assessed the impact of a multicomponent program for elementary school students involving teacher training, parent training, and social competency training. Students receiving the intervention demonstrated higher levels of commitment to school, better academic achievement, and fewer behavioral problems (Hawkins, Catalano, Kosterman, Abbott, & Hill, 1999).

The present study was conducted during the early stages of an ongoing community-wide initiative designed to promote resiliency in the school setting. We conducted individual interviews with school administrators who had participated in an orientation meeting regarding resiliency promotion and the community-wide resiliency initiative to explore several interrelated questions. First, how would these administrators define resiliency? Given the variety of definitions in the resiliency literature, would these administrators' definitions vary widely? Second, what features of Henderson and Millstein's (1992) six-component model were either in place or were planned in these schools? Third, were there any differences between the responses of administrators planning to continue with the resiliency initiative and those not planning to participate further? Finally, we consider the implications of these results for both educational and clinical practice.

Method

Participants

During the spring of 1999, 10 school administrators (nine principals and one school counselor) in a large, southwestern city were interviewed. These administrators had attended a 90-minute orientation about a resiliency initiative being implemented in the city. This training included an introduction to the Henderson–Millstein (1992) model. All administrators selected for this study had requested an application to participate in the citywide initiative. Half this group (five) eventually decided to continue with the initiative, which included an additional two-day training in the Henderson–Millstein (1992) model.

These administrators represented two high schools, two middle schools, and six elementary schools. All ten schools were located within a large metropolitan area, were ethnically diverse, and had high percentages of students eligible for free or reduced-cost lunch. The administrators interviewed were predominately female ($n = 7$), with an average of 9.7 years experience as administrators. One administrator had been in school administration for 28 years, and three had less than two years' experience.

Procedures

Individual interviews were conducted at times that were convenient for the school administrators. The interview protocols were semistructured to allow for a more conversational interaction between the interviewer and the administrator. The primary goal was to encourage the interviewees to provide their own definition of resiliency and to describe resiliency-based approaches that they were currently implementing or hoping to implement in the future. Interviews were held in the administrator's office and lasted between 40 and 90 minutes.

Analysis

Tapes from the interviews were transcribed, and both authors read each interview to identify themes. Each theme was supported by direct quotes from the text of the interview. For triangulation, two members of the city's resiliency planning team (one admin-

istrator and a school counselor) also reviewed the themes and made suggestions as to the linkages with the model.

Results

Definitions of Resiliency

As expected, interviewees provided a range of definitions of resiliency. In general, definitions ranged along a continuum from a relatively narrow focus on individual characteristics to a broad focus on various environmental factors. For example, representing the individual-characteristics end of the continuum, one elementary school principal said of resiliency, "I define this as a spark . . . that gift that they . . . don't get defeated by life's crises." Another elementary school principal said, "It comes from within. . . . I mean we all get kicked around, but it's a matter of how you look at that and how you deal with that." On the other end of the continuum, several principals defined resiliency as an environmental phenomenon that strengthens all individuals in the environment. For example, one middle school principal said, "It doesn't matter what kids bring to school; what matters is what we do with them in the six hours that they are here." One high school principal commented that he was not sure there was a very good or universally accepted definition of resiliency, and that it would be applied differently based on the characteristics of the environment.

Overall, most definitions fell somewhere in the middle, describing both individual and contextual factors and reflecting some of the complexity surrounding the concept of resiliency. One principal suggested that resiliency was a model that built on students' strengths instead of weaknesses; he said, "It's identifying areas we can tap into, to build their strengths so they can overcome anything they may come across." Another principal said, "It's what helps kids overcome the rotten things that have happened to them [and still keep that hope in them] and still allowing them not just to achieve but to succeed."

How a concept is defined often dictates how that concept will be acted upon. Given that there were a variety of conceptions of resiliency among these administrators (all of whom were had been interested enough in the concept to attend an informational meeting), we also were interested in seeing whether their definitions were reflected in their actions. More specifically, how did their definitions correspond to their plans to participate in additional training in the promotion of resiliency? Of the 10 administrators interviewed, five had applied to receive extra training and funding to develop resiliency programs in their schools. All five who had applied for additional support believed that resiliency was a critical component of the school environment and that it could be promoted at the environmental level. In contrast, four of the five school leaders who did not apply for additional support viewed resiliency as something that resides within individual students themselves. Table 1 shows the contrast between statements principals made that exemplify the two positions.

Activities Promoting or Facilitating Resiliency

In addition to defining resiliency, the administrators were asked to describe current activities and any future plans for activities in their schools that they viewed as facilitating or promoting resiliency. The administrators' descriptions of these activities then were considered in relation to the six components of the Henderson–Millstein (1992) model. The majority of administrators gave vague information regarding programs and plans. This was partially accounted for by the timing of the interviews, which occurred after the

Table 1
Comparison of Definitions of Resiliency

Individual Focus	Environmental Focus
Resiliency is residing in the students themselves	Resiliency is a critical component of the school environment and something that could be promoted at the environmental level.
"Resiliency comes from within."	"Kids need to feel a part of a community."
"Resiliency is a spark, a gift."	"The school should be an environment where kids enjoy coming."
	"The school should provide meaningful participation."

90-minute resiliency initiative orientation to the Henderson–Millstein (1992) model, but prior to a two-day training. Whereas all elementary and middle school administrators interviewed mentioned at least one of the six components, neither of the two high school administrators identified any components as currently being implemented in their schools. Perhaps not surprising given the timing of the interviews, no single administrator identified current activities or future plans that addressed all six components.

The six components of the Henderson–Millstein (1992) model were emphasized differentially by this group of administrators. A majority of interviewees made some mention of the importance of providing a caring and supportive environment. For example, one elementary school principal suggested, "People would [ideally] feel part of a community . . . whether it's students or staff or families." The high school counselor said, "You want to have a school environment where kids enjoy coming." Four administrators noted the value of students having opportunities for meaningful participation. One principal said, "We have [many] classes with a community service component."

The need to set and communicate high expectations was noted quite clearly by two principals. One middle school principal noted, "We try to raise the bar on instruction." Another principal said, "They [teachers] go out of their way to challenge students." The importance of increasing prosocial bonding also was supported by administrators' comments. For example, one noted the value of "making or feeling some kind of 'connection' to another person in the school." Two administrators made some mention of the need to set clear, consistent boundaries. One elementary school principal reported, "Each class has a daily . . . meeting where they review the code of honor." Another stated "[one] priority is improving our schoolwide discipline." Finally, several administrators commented on the potential value of teaching life skills. One particularly proactive middle school principal indicated, "Next year we're going to run every student . . . through a nine-week social skills piece in their daily schedule." Similarly, an elementary school principal stated, "We want them [students] to leave us with skills beyond their educational skills, skills to get along with people, skills to work through problems."

Discussion

Clearly, the concept of resiliency has captured the imagination of these school administrators and is seen as a relevant organizing point for designing school programs and school environments. However, the vagueness of the resiliency concept in the research literature translates into a variety of definitions and approaches at the school level. It is

worth noting that for many administrators, the concepts of resiliency and the promotion of resiliency in schools are still quite new, and for some, initial impressions will likely evolve over time. Additional training could have one of two effects on these administrators. They might identify and implement new programs or strategies, or they might identify practices or programs already in place that they did not previously identify as affecting resiliency.

As noted previously, those administrators who had a relatively student-centered definition of resiliency were less likely to apply for training and additional support. Because the additional training focused on creating more resilient environments, administrators whose priority was to meet identified needs of individual students may not have seen this training as particularly relevant.

It is interesting to note that many of these administrators are initiating resiliency efforts at a time when the state is mandating high-stakes testing and an adherence to knowledge-based academic standards. One principal indicated that schools needed to do more for students than respond to crises or fads. She felt that the school needed to teach, "all the personal, social, academic, and emotional skills."

School-based implementation of programs, strategies, or policies to enhance resiliency is in its infancy. Clearly, many school administrators have gravitated to the concept and are implementing programs either to enhance resiliency in individual students or to create an environment that promotes resiliency. Research can give us guidelines as to what strategies and skills are needed in this endeavor; however, further evaluation and research are needed to understand specific components of resiliency as they manifest themselves in the school setting.

It is important to note that these results should be interpreted with some caution given the limitations of the small sample size and the bias of the group of administrators interviewed. The data presented here are preliminary and descriptive. Despite these limitations, the Henderson–Millstein (1992) model appeared to be a reasonably good fit for this group of public school administrators and can provide guidance for planning, implementing, and evaluating future resiliency efforts.

Many of the six components described in this article also could be facilitated in various clinical settings. Although the provision of caring and support and the teaching of life skills are the two most obviously applicable components, the remaining four components also are highly relevant in terms of assisting children and their families in the identification of resources and strategies within their families and communities. Clinicians working in or with schools can facilitate the creation and support of school environments that embrace all six components of resiliency by introducing these concepts to educators and by participating in discussions about school climate and school reform.

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