

## ***The Resilient Child is the Whole Child***

~ by L. Kay Forsythe and Peter J. Holly

*Ultimately there are two kinds of schools: learning-enriched schools and learning-impooverished schools. I've yet to see a school where the learning curves of the youngsters are off the chart upward while the learning curves of the adults are off the chart downward, or a school where the learning curves of the adults were steep upward and those of the students were not. Teachers and students go hand in hand as learners--or they don't go at all. (Roland Barth, 2001, p. 23)*

The Resilient School is the learning-enriched school described by Barth. The reciprocity of learning between teachers and students flourishes in this culture. Thus, Resilient Schools provide the contexts within which the development of resilient students can be nurtured. And resilient students are essentially life-long learners. They know how to learn their way through life and everything (both positively and negatively) it has to offer them. Resilient, life-long learners are not automatons: they engage and grapple with life and its challenges. They are, in essence and in reality, whole.

According to Kouzes and Posner (2003), such people--whole people--possess a certain "psychological hardiness," i.e., resiliency. When the turbulence, conflict, and uncertainty brought on by change become the norm, we are all tested. In such times of challenge, they say, we have to burrow inside ourselves and discover the true gifts buried down deep. We have to believe in ourselves and the importance and meaningfulness of what we are doing. "Challenge," they say, "brings with it a much higher degree of risk and uncertainty. That's why it's rich in learning opportunities. It's also why it can be a breeding ground for stress." But, as the body of research on resiliency defines, some people are capable of thriving in challenging situations. They are capable because they possess certain attributes: they have a strong sense of efficacy (they believe that they can beneficially influence the direction and outcome of what is going on around them *through their own efforts* and refuse to lapse into powerlessness and the passivity of a victim mentality); they are strong in commitment and believe that what they're doing is important and worthwhile and achievable--a sense of purpose; they are strong on the challenge side and believe that personal improvement and fulfillment come through the continual process of learning from both negative and positive experiences--a sense of autonomy; and they are skilled problem solvers, able to think abstractly, reflectively, and flexibly.

If psychological hardiness, resiliency, self-renewal and continuous learning are all blood relatives, then the same principle applies to all four: as Alfred Whitehead (1932) always claimed, they can be sympathetically fostered, and they can be unsympathetically stifled. While resiliency-building is a long-term process, so is resiliency-dissipation. Resiliency can be enhanced or undermined--over time and one step at a time. Patterson (2001) maintains,

Resilience is a long-term, not a short-term, construct. Resilience doesn't fluctuate daily like the stock market. You're not resilient today and non-resilient tomorrow. Resilience represents your capacity, your collective energy points, available to move ahead under adversity. You build or destroy your resilience capacity one day at a time. (p. 18)

Resiliency Theory helps us with these issues. It not only defines the characteristics of the resilient person but also shows us the way to build resiliency over time. The attributes, or characteristics, of resilient students can be nurtured through the long-term application of what are known as the protective factors: a caring and supportive environment--through genuine relationships; opportunities for meaningful participation--through empowerment and engagement; high-positive expectations--through clearly defined learning goals; and skill building--through highly effective instruction. High expectations have to be supported by the other three factors in order to rise to the challenges facing us all. Teachers, as we argue, in order to provide effective support for students also have to be in receipt of the protective factors--in their case provided by their administration, schools, and districts.

While it is still being grown and developed, however, student resiliency has yet to acquire the quality of hardiness mentioned above. It is still a vulnerable creation. This is why Stiggins (2002) is so concerned about the current state of play in our schools. In our schools, many students are still acquiring what it takes to be resilient. And with all the talk of "raising the bar" of higher expectations--however laudable the rhetoric--we must be aware of the downside of these demands. Stiggins (2003) asserts that the first rule of all educational professionals should be "Do not deprive the students of hope." As he observes,

Another huge segment of our population [at-risk students], when confronted with an even tougher challenge than the one that it has already been failing at, will not redouble its efforts--a point that most people are missing. These students will see both the new standards and the demand for higher test scores as unattainable for them, and they will give up in hopelessness. (Stiggins, 2002, p. 760)

DuFour et al (2004) add to this warning.

Unfortunately, the way in which the current legislation is being applied in many schools is depriving students of hope. Students who have struggled in the past recognize that the bar is being raised higher and higher and ultimately conclude that school does not offer them a place for success and affirmation. Just as tragically, their teachers are also losing hope of meeting the tougher standards being imposed on their schools. (p. 11)

This is the perfect example of providing the protective factor of high expectations without the other three factors, resulting in exactly the opposite result than that intended. And, it is the central argument of this article that, while resilient teachers breed resilient students, the converse is also true. Teachers without hope are unlikely to be able to

impart the joy of learning to their students. They are also presenting a model of hopelessness. Albert Bandura (author of *Self-Efficacy: The Exercise of Control*) has argued that modeling is the first step in developing competencies. When operating negatively, however, modeling can also be the first step in students acquiring learned helplessness. This is why DuFour et al (2004) speak to the urgent need for self-efficacy on the part of educators.

It is not the perception of a staff regarding the ability of their students that is paramount in creating a culture of high expectations. The staff members' perception of their own personal and collective ability to help all students learn is far more critical. This belief in one's ability to impact the outcome on the basis of his or her personal efforts, or self-efficacy, is the cornerstone of a culture of high expectations...Now add to that sense of confidence and caring and compassion that characterize all great teachers, and we have an illustration of teacher self-efficacy that generates the high expectations for student achievement essential to a stretch culture. In such a culture, teachers can advise their students: *This unit will be challenging, but we can do this. We have learned how to help students just like you to be successful in accomplishing things they never thought were possible. We believe in you, and if you believe in us and do what we ask of you, we can meet this challenge.* (p. 181-182)

This description by DuFour and his colleagues is that of the resilient school in action. Indeed, there is a lot in common between the conception of the Resilient School (Holly and Forsythe, Forthcoming) and DuFour's vision of the professional learning community (see DuFour, 2004). According to DuFour et al (2004), professional learning communities speak to the needs of their participants. Psychologists tell us that we share certain fundamental needs--the need to feel successful in our work, the need to feel a sense of belonging, and need to live a life of significance by making a difference. Like a resilient school, a professional learning community is one where needs are met and self-efficacy prospers. And not in some unwarranted, artificial way, but as earned credit--on the part of students and teachers alike. Self-efficacy comes with hard work, positive results, and a real, merited sense of achievement and is best accomplished within a collective, mutually reinforcing context (see Goddard, 2001). It is a world of purpose, performance and production: action, assessment and accountability. As DuFour rightly emphasizes, it is a world permeated by the belief in one's ability (as an educator and as a student learner) to make a difference and impact the outcome on the basis of one's personal efforts.

Building self-efficacy and resiliency is not a soft option--far from it. It is earned and merited. It is grounded in goal achievement. You have to work for it. You have to put in the effort. As commentators keep telling us, the stakes are high. They are, indeed, but not in the way that we are normally being told this. What is at stake is resiliency itself. In some ironic twist, when externalization (in the form of external mandates) abounds and internalization (the generation of internal initiative and capacity-building) is weakened, we are robbed of the very capacity that we need to be able to respond to the external demands in the first place. In short, our internalized capacity (resiliency) has to be strong enough to be able to engage with external forces.

DuFour et al (2004) describe a continuum of responses to these external pressures to perform:

It is not national legislation demanding that all students learn or the adoption of rigorous standards that will transform schools. In fact, in many schools the effort to raise standards and have tougher high-stakes assessments will not contribute to the creation of a stretch culture, but will instead contribute to a culture of learned hopelessness for students and staff alike. In other schools the standards movement will be used as a catalyst to help students achieve at higher levels. The staff of some schools will look for external solutions, waiting for the state to change legislation, the district to provide more resources, or the parents to send more capable students to their schools. They will look out the window for solutions. In other schools the staff will work together collaboratively to develop their collective capacity to meet the needs of their students. They will look in the mirror for solutions. Ultimately, what will make the difference is not the standards themselves, but the self-efficacy of the staff--their belief that it is within their sphere of influence to impact student achievement in a positive way. (p. 182)

In this passage, DuFour and his colleagues, like Barth in the opening quote, are describing a spectrum of schools with a spectrum of responses to centralized mandates--from non-resilient to resilient. Resilient schools, however, are capable of looking out of the window and looking in the mirror--at one and the same time. They have the capacity--while being sorely tested--to look both ways and to gain from the perspectival interaction.

We are all being tested by the kind of demands mustered in the No Child Left Behind legislation--literally (in the case of students) and metaphorically. When we are tested, pressured and stressed to a high degree, something is taken out of us and our reserves are depleted. If we survive and "pass" the test, something is replaced and we become stronger through the experience. As Covey (1989) has explained, this is tantamount to the workings of a bank account. We make deposits and withdrawals--with the deposits hopefully being large enough to cover the inevitable withdrawals. We, like Patterson (2001), consider "resiliency" to be the equivalent of our reserves--what is in our personal bank accounts to pay for expected and unexpected demands and setbacks. Resiliency, therefore, can be added to and built up over time, and it can be tested and depleted. Every event and experience, says Patterson, has the potential to be resiliency-building or resiliency-depleting. We have to make sure that the former always outpaces the latter for teachers and for students. Moreover, these deposits and withdrawals can be made on two fronts--on the academic/cognitive side and the social/emotional side--and, given the complexity of the reciprocal relationship between the two domains, as Sarason (2004) has explained, withdrawals on one side can be offset by deposits on the other and vice versa.

With its single-minded purpose being to raise academic scores for all students, No Child Left Behind makes all its demands on the academic side of the equation. As Rothstein (2004) reminds us, however, society-at-large (including employers and parents) tends to also value traits not covered on academic tests. Given, however, that what gets tested

gets the attention and gets taught, the danger is that the social/emotional traits that are so much part of our character (and our resiliency) might inevitably be neglected by teachers and their schools. In arguing that institutions are directed away from activities that are not rewarded toward activities that are, Rothstein contends that “noncognitive outcomes are important goals of public education, perhaps even more important than the academic ones.”

The problem is that resiliency is an interesting mix of cognitive and noncognitive skills. Promotion of one is inevitably at the expense of the other. This point is elaborated upon by the National Academy of Education report published in 1987.

At root here is a fundamental dilemma. Those personal qualities that we hold dear--*resilience and courage in the face of stress* (our italics), a sense of craft in our work, a commitment to justice and caring in our social relationships, a dedication to advancing the public good in our communal life--are exceedingly difficult to assess. And so...we are apt to measure what we can, and eventually come to value what is measured over what is ...unmeasured. The language of academic...tests has become the primary rhetoric of schooling.

Written almost twenty years ago, these comments have become even more relevant today.

What is of concern, therefore, is that while No Child Left Behind is making so many right-minded demands on the academic side, it is, at the same time, failing to countenance and bolster the very traits that could help students (and their teachers and schools) develop resiliency and acquire the capacity to both weather and master those demands and also be decent human beings in the bargain.

With No Child Left Behind not going away, what are needed more than ever are resilient schools that produce resilient students. This is because full resiliency--encompassing both academic and social/personal skills--is, in the words of a recent TV commercial, the gift that keeps on giving. It is the greatest legacy that a school can bestow on its students--so they can use it to overcome the various obstacles and reversals that lie in store for them. Ironically, NCLB might well be undermining the very capacity-building that would enable schools and their students to cope with and achieve its demands in the short term and life's vicissitudes in the long term. In order for success to be achieved at every level, the architects of NCLB need to embrace a more holistic approach incorporating all four protective factors of resiliency: Yes, higher academic expectations, but only when coupled with effective skill building, opportunities for meaningful involvement and connectedness, and all within a caring and supportive environment. Given this major adjustment, the result will be resilient students who are wholly successful--academically, socially, and emotionally.

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