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## How Do We Know They Will Bounce Back?

*“In order to succeed, people need a sense of self-efficacy, strung together with resilience to meet the inevitable obstacles and inequities of life.”*

—Albert Bandura

### EVIDENCE FROM THE RECORD BOOKS

The academic information in this chapter provides the foundational knowledge necessary to accurately and effectively improve student learning. This information is critical to fully comprehend the research base behind formidable school and classroom solutions. Schools must demonstrate caring by engaging their students daily so that they can successfully navigate the treacherous pathways of risk and low achievement. It is time somebody told educators what works to improve student learning based on the years of trailblazing research that is housed in this chapter. But more important, in the words of teenage poet Quantedius Hall (2000), “it is time somebody told” the students that adults in schools care and will do whatever it takes for students to be successful (as cited in Franco, 2000, p. 1). Quantedius said much more than this in his pleading poem of survival, hopes, and resiliency. His words should motivate you to read further in this chapter and in this book to learn the research behind students who rebound from risk. His words will also help educators determine how they can positively impact students like him more consistently each day.

The essence of this chapter is a well researched list of recommendations that will assist schools in successfully conducting systemic change and fostering resiliency in order to improve student outcomes. To that end, we will begin with research-based information about the impact of school-level resiliency protective factors and a rationale for changing school practices to narrow achievement gaps. Important theoretical aspects of resiliency will be reviewed to properly frame the impact of protective factors on student outcomes. Seminal works on the long-term impact of building student resiliency are discussed along with studies on the protective factors shown to positively impact student achievement in language arts.

Resiliency research “provides the prevention, education, and youth development fields with nothing less than a fundamentally different knowledge base and paradigm for research and practice” (Benard, 1991, p. 5). Resiliency provides practitioners with optimism and an additive shelter as they approach student challenges with learning key content along with their battles through adversity. This paradigm focuses on the process of improving student learning and steers away from programmatic elements in school settings. “Ultimately resilience is a process of connectedness, of linking to people, to interests, and ultimately to life itself” (Benard, 1991, p. 6). Moving from risk to resilience empowers classroom practitioners and educational leaders to require social change within their organizations.

Creating structures so students can rebound from risk is critical because many schools where economically disadvantaged students attend still do not provide the needed academic, social, or emotional support that these students’ challenges require. This subgroup’s risk factors include a high degree of mobility, learning challenges, and dysfunctional families. These factors can significantly stand in the way of academic gains (Riley, 2006, p. 2). At-risk students are frequently assigned to the lowest classroom ability groups in elementary and middle schools (Becker & Luthar, 2002, p. 198). To make matters worse, research has shown that teachers’ expectations of students are influenced by the student demographic variables of social class and ethnicity. These demographic variables illuminate racial and income discrepancies in achievement that get larger as students spend more time in school (The Future of Children, 2005, as cited in Hughes & Kwok, 2007, p. 39).

Children from households in poverty score as much as 60 percent lower in “cognitive performance than middle-income children their age” (Neuman, 2009, as cited in Midcontinent Research for Education and Learning [McRel], 2010, p. 30). More specifically, children in poverty arrive in kindergarten having seen and heard 30 million fewer words than many children from middle-income backgrounds (Neuman, 2009, as cited in McRel, 2010, p. 30). What matters most in educating children in poverty and other disenfranchised student subgroups is the guarantee

of “challenging, engaging, and intentional instruction” (McRel, 2010, p. 67). Barriers to learning extend beyond test scores. Roadblocks for at-risk youth come in the form of disengagement, low expectations, and a lack of supportive relationships between adults and children on school campuses. Little attention has been paid in recent reforms to removing those barriers that are related to a school’s culture and climate.

Currently, many urban settings that house the most at-risk students have a high teacher turnover rate and typically the least qualified staff to deliver instruction. It is more important than ever to look for low-cost or no-cost ways to improve student learning with the current financial constraints of an uncertain economic future regionally and nationally. Building resiliency focuses on what teachers say and do in their daily interactions with students and provides a solution-oriented framework. Teachers and districts do not need to spend a great deal of monies to improve student learning. Again, what matters most for these students are engaging classrooms that foster supportive and caring relationships with all students (McRel, 2010, p. 67).

Darling-Hammond (2000) discusses the critical need for a change in the way we educate students in the United States. In a strong statement, she proposes that current school systems need to change to effectively address the needs of diverse students. Higher standards alone “will not enable them to learn” (p. 1). Building resiliency is crucial as students who live in high-poverty households are exposed to poverty-related stress (Wadsworth & Santiago, 2008, p. 406). This stress has a negative impact on these students’ degree of resiliency and can “hinder the development of effective coping abilities” (p. 406).

The key resiliency protective factors provide educators with ways to effectively harness the interpersonal skills and creative strengths of their students. With deliberate adjustments to instructional delivery and greater and more meaningful student interactions student learning will improve.

## **THE IMPACT OF THE RESILIENCY PROTECTIVE FACTORS**

In their study of kindergarten classrooms, Ponitz, Rimm-Kaufmann, Grimm, and Curby (2009) discovered that classrooms where students were effectively engaged with “rich, positive interactions” were predictive of improved literacy achievement (p. 102). These researchers refer to recent studies from Connor et al. (2005) and Mashburn et al. (2008) that indicate that “the actual daily interactions among teachers and students in the classroom most strongly predict achievement” (as cited in Ponitz et al., p. 103).

When speaking to the positive effect of caring adult relationships, Ponitz et al. (2009) acknowledge the link between building connections with students and instructional effectiveness. Social and academic challenges can be addressed “by interacting with children in engaging,

**Voices From the Classroom:  
Examples of this interactive  
relationship included the  
following (from the students’  
perspectives):**

- “They help us.”
- “Teachers are nice to us.”
- “They are good listeners.”
- “They encourage us.”
- “They use good eye contact when they talk to us.”
- “They fix our problems.”
- “We can trust teachers.”
- “They respect us.”
- “They won’t tell anyone about what we talk about.”
- “Teachers ask about our home life.”

interesting, and positive ways” (p. 104). When children become engaged in their classrooms, learning improves. They conclude their study further emphasizing the strong correlation between engaging instructional practices and reading achievement (p. 117).

Martin and Dowson (2009) speak to students’ relationships at school with adults and the critical role these relationships play in improving student engagement. They cite numerous studies to support these conclusions (Ainley, 1995; Battistich & Hom, 1997; Hargreaves, Earl, & Ryan, 1996; Pianta, 1998). Martin and Dowson (2009) discuss “connective instruction,” which relates learning to students’ experiences and needs in order to

foster motivation and high levels of engagement (p. 344). They offer further evidence of the power of caring adult relationships through their review of previous research in this area (Goodenow, 1993; Teven & McCroskey, 1997; Connell & Wellborn, 1991).

“Addressing the (emotional) health . . . needs of youth is a critical component of a comprehensive strategy” to improve student achievement (Hanson, Austin, & Lee-Bayha, 2004, p. 14). Protective factors supported by resiliency research will help educators fulfill the necessary commitment of learning for all students. They will also assist schools in closing achievement gaps that persist in our current deficit-driven system. At-risk students will be supported from all levels of a school’s support system when caring and dedicated adults engage them in learning and ensure they can successfully navigate risk and bounce back from adversity.

## SUMMARY OF THEORETICAL BASE

### Resiliency Theory

The theory of resiliency was originally known as the *Resilience Cycle* and includes the key elements of needs assessments, protective factors,

and the development of a student's internal locus of control (Morales, 2008, p. 23). Students who are academically resilient achieve despite overwhelming statistics that have historically proven otherwise. Research and theories have often focused on student failure and have followed a deficit model. In contrast, resiliency theory is additive in that it states that if protective factors such as caring adult relationships, high teacher expectations, and student engagement are introduced and consistently practiced, students from marginalized subgroups can beat the odds and experience academic success.

According to Bonnie Benard (1991), resiliency research is supported by other studies in child and human development, family structures, school effectiveness, and research on developing school communities. Caring relationships from adults establish safety and trust with students despite numerous risk factors. Students who are able to participate in a meaningful way in the classroom and in school foster responsible decision making and contribute to communities (Benard, 1991, p. 4).

*The fastest way to fail is to improve on yesterday's successes.*

—W. Edwards Deming  
(as cited in Kuykendall, 2004)

### **Leadership Theory of Social Justice**

A transformative leadership style is built from a solid foundation of respect, caring, recognition, and empathetic practices. When leaders who promote social justice were studied, they consistently worked to create socially and culturally responsive educational settings for all students (Theoharis, 2007, p. 223). Leaders advanced their initiatives toward social justice to raise student achievement and close the achievement gap between disadvantaged and advantaged students. School structures of student support were strengthened, the staff's capacities to successfully navigate positive change was improved, and school cultures were fortified (p. 232).

Principals who became successful leaders of social justice reforms in their schools were proactive in their approaches. Their preemptive strategies for school change included purposeful communication, developing a network of supportive administrators, keeping focused on their goals, prioritizing their efforts, immersing themselves in professional learning, and finally building strong interpersonal relationships with staff members.

The leadership theory of social justice clearly notes that most change efforts are met with some forms of resistance. This resistance includes

competing district office initiatives and staff members whose core values conflict with a site or district's student-centered direction. Theoharis (2007) states that administrators must be on the front lines in the battle to transformationally lead and change schools (p. 250). The theory states that leaders must develop a "reflective consciousness" for social justice that includes equity and justice, a deeper knowledge of self, and the belief that the dream of equitable instruction and instructional systems is possible (Scheurich & Skrla, 2003; Rapp, 2002; as cited in Theoharis, 2007, p. 250).

The theory of social justice leadership makes clear distinctions between good leaders and social justice leaders. While good leaders support programs for diverse learners, leaders for social justice focus on strengthening core instructional methods and curriculum. They also ensure that all students have similar access to the core program in schools (Theoharis, 2007, p. 252). Good leaders empower teachers but leaders for social justice require success for all students and collaboratively meet in a timely manner to problem solve how all students will achieve that success.

## **SEMINAL WORK ON RESILIENCE: THE KAUAI STUDY**

Werner and Smith (as cited in Benard, 2004) completed what has been often called the seminal work in studying risk and resilience. They conducted research on over 700 children, many who had up to four high-risk factors. The researchers followed the progress of these children from birth to adulthood over 40 years. Known as the *Kauai study*, this research demonstrated that at-risk children who receive a great deal of support and modeling from low-risk adults and youth beat the odds and become responsible citizens. The longitudinal study combined case study accounts and statistical analyses to investigate the impact of biological and social risk factors on the participants' development and coping abilities. Werner and Smith concluded that only one out of six of the study's sample was struggling with problems ranging from financial issues, violence, substance abuse, or mental health issues 40 years later (p. 7). All the study participants were born in Kauai in 1955, and the longitudinal data was collected three times during their lives.

The impact of protective factors was determined by Werner and Smith as more profound than the impact of risk factors or significant negative life experiences or events. They state that the supports known as *resiliency protective factors* apply to all young people who face adversity in addition to simply those at risk of school failure. These protective factors include working on social skills, having a caring and committed care-

giver, and having a community support system that may include schools or churches. They further explain resilience as using “self-righting tendencies” to help children develop normally even when they experience the highest levels of adversity in their lives (Benard, 2004, p. 9). These researchers also cite the importance of developing children’s internal locus of control or their “personal power” (p. 22). They were among the first researchers to identify hope and confidence as central to the lives of resilient people.

The authors of the Kauai study conclude their research with recommendations to school personnel to foster student resilience. Their primary recommendation was for educators to continue being positive role models for youth. They concluded by asking educators to share “the gift of hope” with all students to develop trust, initiative, and competence (WestEd, 2001, p. 23). We will revisit this recommendation of increased student engagement and its impact on achievement later in this chapter.

## SPECIFIC RESILIENCY PROTECTIVE FACTORS IMPACTING STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

### The Impact of Caring Adults

The resiliency protective factor of caring adults in students’ lives has been shown to positively impact students’ academic outcomes. Noddings (1992) identified caring as “the very bedrock of all successful education” (as cited in Lumpkin, 2007, p. 158). Noddings also identified that a strength of caring teachers was their ability to reflect on and refine teaching practices to meet the needs of every student. In *Changing the Odds* (2010), the Midcontinent Research for Education and Learning concluded that fostering meaningful relationships with students that were also nurturing and strong were qualities of effective teaching practices (p. 18).

According to Pianta, Belsky, Vandergrift, Houts, and Morrison (2008), in addition to instructional aspects of classrooms, there is evidence that emotional classroom aspects are “predictive of gains in achievement” (p. 367). The quality of the adult and student interaction is the biggest

#### Voices From the Classroom:

Students also perceived the school support of caring adults through the lens of the expectations they had for them at school. Unfortunately, students gave less detail about these expectations than the previous lively descriptions about caring adult-teacher interactions. Examples of these expectations included the following:

- “We are rewarded for doing good work.”
- “Teachers encourage us to do our best.”
- “If we do quality work, we are praised.”
- “They tell us to never give up with our work.”

determinant of success (Noam & Fiore, 2004, p. 9). Resiliency research demonstrates the huge significance of adults as mentors and role models especially for educationally or socioeconomically disadvantaged students (p. 10). Research has found that African-American and socioeconomically disadvantaged students are less likely than Caucasian or advantaged students to experience supportive relationships with teachers (Entwisle & Alexander, 1988; Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Ladd et al., 1999; Wehlage & Rutter, 1986, as cited in Hughes & Kwok, 2007, p. 40).

Noam and Fiore (2004) feel that relational practices and tools can be developed further through teacher training and work with school-learning environments. They conclude by stating the following: “The foundations have been laid in theory, research, and promising practices. Now the institutional changes have to follow” (p. 14).

Hattie’s (2009) synthesis of over 800 meta-analyses and 500,000 studies related to what impacts student achievement offers further evidence of the significance of the teacher-student relationship. Hattie cites Cornelius-White’s (2007) meta-analysis of 119 studies, 1,450 effects, 355,325 students, 14,851 teachers, and 2,439 schools (p. 118). Cornelius-White found a strong correlation (.34) between all teacher variables and all student outcomes. This researcher concluded from his analysis of numerous studies that teachers must facilitate student learning by showing that they care about each student’s learning and each student as a person, “which sends a powerful message about purpose and priority” (Cornelius-White, as cited in Hattie, 2009, p. 119).

In the appendix of Hattie’s (2009) research synthesis, the influence of the school, classroom, and family factors he reviewed were rank ordered by their positive influence on student achievement. Out of 138 influences on student achievement from multiple domains, teacher–student relationships ranked 11th with an effect size of .72 (Hattie, Appendix I). Looking at this information from another perspective, I concluded from Hattie’s synthesis that teacher–student relationships have a greater impact on student achievement than 92 percent of the other influences in the over 800 analyses that Hattie reviewed. More specifically, the following influences mentioned in this study had a less significant impact on achievement: family socioeconomic status ( $d=.57$ ), parental involvement (.51), student engagement (.48), teacher expectations (.43), gender (.12), and overall teacher effects (.32).

Table 1.1 summarizes current research on the resiliency protective factor of caring adult–student relationships and can be used to substantiate change efforts.



**Table 1.1**

| <i>Researchers</i>                                | <i>Study Participants</i>  | <i>Major Conclusions</i>  | <i>Applications</i>  |
|---|--|---|--|
| Hamre & Pianta (2001)                             | 179 children studied from first through eighth grade                 | Students who had negative relationships with teachers had poor study habits and achievement   | Students who have caring relationships with adults at school will experience increased academic achievement, interventions should be preventative  |
| Worthy, Patterson, Salas, Prater, & Turner (2002) | 24 struggling readers in grades 3 through 5                          | Social interactions with caring adults increased these students' interest in reading, motivation, and reading achievement             | Reaching the most difficult students requires responsiveness from an adult with close and trusting connections to the student  |
| Pianta & Stuhlman (2004)                          | 490 children in preschool through first grade                        | Teachers noted higher achievement for children they had closer relationships with   | Intervene early in the social and academic lives of at-risk students, establish close caring relationships at school with students   |
| Hamre & Pianta (2005)                             | Student observations from 827 classrooms, 747 schools, and 32 states | High-risk (economically disadvantaged) kindergarten students who received emotional support from teachers maintained high test scores | Encourage students to be responsible for their own learning, give high-quality feedback to students, and engage students in the learning process frequently, simple adult–student interactions can have powerful effects on student outcomes |

(Continued)

Table 1.1 (Continued)

| <i>Researchers</i>          | <i>Study Participants</i>                    | <i>Major Conclusions</i>   | <i>Applications</i>   |
|-----------------------------|--|--|---|
| Hughes & Kwok (2007)        | 443 first-grade high-poverty low readers     | Students who had stronger relationships with their teachers were more engaged and had higher achievement | Social relatedness is crucial for academic success, provide training for teachers on building warm and supportive relationships with their students         |
| O'Connor & McCartney (2007) | 1,364 preschool through first-grade children | Achievement is influenced by effective teacher communication and relationship quality                    | Focus on instructional interactions but also enhance relational interactions over time, focus interventions on improving teacher–student relationships      |
| Liew, Chen, & Hughes (2010) | 761 low-income and minority first graders    | Strong teacher–student relationships allow students to self-regulate their motivation and achievement    | Strong relationships allow students to compensate for academic difficulties, investing early in at-risk students pays dividends in their future achievement |

## Meaningful Student Participation

More and more students drop out of school because they do not see the value in getting an education. Furthermore, students who fail to finish high school will earn \$16,000 less annually (U.S. Department of Education, 2007, p. 1). In 2007, the dropout rate was 10 times greater for students living in low-income families than their peers from high-income families (p. 4).

Clearly, an education is crucial for all students, especially those students from disadvantaged households. But improving the academic performance of students “requires that all schools work to more effectively engage all students” but especially students whose backgrounds have traditionally placed them at risk of school failure (Battistich, Watson, & Solomon, 1999, p. 418). Engaging students must mean providing them the skills to learn or to become more efficient self-directed learners. Meaningful participation is synonymous with engagement for the purposes of this book and is defined by Jennings (2003) as “the involvement of the student in relevant, engaging, and interesting activities with opportunities for responsibility and contribution” (p. 45).

Battistich, Watson, and Solomon (1999) conclude their research article with practical recommendations for practitioners to create classrooms that bear a greater resemblance to engaged communities. Some of these recommendations include increasing the amount of collaboration between students, actively involving students in classroom decision making, engaging student interests, and clearly explaining “the relevance of learning tasks” (p. 422). These researchers recommend that teachers take a “believing stance,” which involves believing that students want to become part of a caring and engaged classroom community. It also requires ensuring that students desire to learn when given ownership and purpose (p. 425). If meaningful participation is increased for students in the classroom setting, teachers and administrators can expect to observe students who are more interested in learning, who have increased effort and persistence, who actively collaborate with the teacher to solve problems, and who take time and pride in their academic work. The inadequacies of our current education system must be confronted, and educators need to develop a complete range of student abilities and skills for them to fully and effectively engage in learning.

Table 1.2

| <i>Researchers</i>                 | <i>Study Participants</i>  | <i>Major Conclusions</i>   | <i>Applications</i>  |
|------------------------------------|--|--|--|
| Greenwood, Horton, & Utley (2002)  | 64 kindergarten through fifth-grade teachers in 22 schools, 256 students | Students responded more when given more opportunities for writing and reading, reading instruction speeds up task management, students spent 42 percent of classroom time watching the teacher | Alternatives to whole-class instruction and lecture: peer tutoring, peer-to-peer interaction, computer-assisted instruction  |
| Hanson, Austin, & Lee-Bayha (2004) | 628 schools  | Test scores and grades increased in schools where students indicated they had meaningful participation in the school community and decreased when engagement was low                           | Students are required to set short- and long-term goals, are mutually accountable for responding in class, and have a role in developing classroom rules and procedures; students are doing the learning over 50 percent of the instructional time |

|                                   |   |   |   |
|-----------------------------------|---|---|---|
| Hughes, Luo, Kwok, & Lloyd (2008) | 2 first-grade cohorts of high-poverty students      | Teachers who engaged their students also assisted in developing caring teacher–student relationships that led to higher math achievement; students supported by caring adults were more engaged, showed perseverance, were more open to feedback, and had better coping skills; reading achievement also improved with high levels of caring relationships and engagement | Improving student engagement in the classroom helps strengthen the impact of relationships on reading and math achievement, early classroom experiences should be engaging and should include a high level of teacher support |
| Ladd & Dinella (2009)             | 383 first-through third-grade students over 8 years | Teacher reports of cooperative students was positively correlated with higher student outcomes, higher student participation more strongly predicted achievement gains  | By increasing the levels of student engagement, schools can predict long-term academic growth for their students, and students progress more consistently; engagement should be emphasized in school interventions            |

**Classroom Connections:**

Teachers who facilitated student-to-student small-group interactions left the strongest impression on student language arts test scores. The student voices provided examples of adult engagement strategies that included the following:

- Making learning fun
- “They teach us in ways that make us understand what we are learning.”
- “They check in with us to make sure we understand what they taught.”
- “They allow us to write to express ourselves and to solve problems.”

**Recent Studies: Student Engagement**

Table 1.2 summarizes current research on engagement’s role in improving student outcomes and includes practical applications for schools, classrooms, and other systems of student support.

**CONCLUSION**

There is hope to be found in fostering resiliency in at-risk students. However, it is a reform that requires systemic change. This change centers around the belief that what adults do around children each day makes

a monumental difference in their lives (Krovetz, 1999, p. 3). Supports and opportunities need to address students’ emotional, motivational, and social needs as well as their academic needs. Schools can develop resilience through fostering mentoring relationships with students. They must build academic and social connections daily with a high level of cooperative learning processes and with the support to make learning happen. Students require multiple opportunities for engagement and participation in classrooms. Learner-centered practices such as emphasizing choice and differentiating instruction engage students in their learning and build their “academic self-confidence” (p. 163).

The remainder of this book provides the specific tools educators need to significantly mitigate student risk factors. It will provide school leaders and classroom practitioners with an array of strategies to initiate more student-centered activities and change while improving academic outcomes. Each school and classroom must select the strategies that provide the best fit for their student population and that support the level of urgency needed to narrow achievement gaps. Are you ready to bring your A game?