

Resilience and Coping: Implications for Gifted Children and Youth at Risk.

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As a graduate student in the 1970s, the first author of this paper was inspired by an idea presented in a course on childhood psychopathology: Garmezy's (1976) notion of the "invulnerable" child. This concept of children and youth thriving despite adversity seemed to hold the key to social change. If we could identify and recreate the factors that made children invulnerable to hardship stemming from severe family dysfunction, trauma, or intense poverty, we could raise the emotional and academic functioning of children who might otherwise succumb to failure. "Resilience" has since replaced the overly optimistic language of invulnerability, and research in psychology on this topic has continued to flourish. In the aftermath of September 11, resilience has become a public focus with the intent of providing information on supporting recovery from trauma wrought by terrorism (e.g., American Psychological Association Task Force on Promoting Resilience in Response to Terrorism; Alpert et al., 2004; Dudley-Grant, Comas-Diaz, Todd-Bazemore, & Hueston, 2004). Research has expanded to focus on "educationally" or "academically" resilient children--those who succeed in school despite the stresses of poverty and inadequate childrearing conditions. Wang, Haertel, and Walberg (1998) and Waxman, Gray, and Padron (2003), among others, investigated educational resilience and derived recommendations for schools.

Over the years, professionals in gifted education have explored the relationship between resilience and giftedness. Bland, Sowa, and Callahan (1994) suggested that resilient individuals share many characteristics with gifted children and that further study may identify coping skills that counselors can teach. Ford (1994) described barriers to resilience among gifted African American youth and made recommendations for enhancing resilience among this population. Hebert (1996) examined coping strategies of young gifted Latino men, and Frydenberg (1997) those of gifted adolescents in general. More recently, psychologist Neihart (2002) suggested that resilience might serve as a theoretical framework for systematically addressing the social and emotional issues of gifted individuals (e.g., lack of challenging curricula, asynchronies in development). Attention to affective development of gifted students is particularly important given that IQ accounts for only about 25% of the variance in schooling outcomes and 4% to 30% of the variance in job performance (Sternberg, Grigorenko, & Bundy, 2001). Sternberg et al. point to self-efficacy, a factor supporting resilience, as an important contributor beyond intelligence.

A resilience approach would serve especially well the needs of underrepresented populations of gifted students those most at risk for serious hardships. "At risk" would include gifted children and youth living in poverty or in circumstances of abuse and neglect; children and youth who experience discrimination based on race, language, gender, or sexual orientation; and students from all backgrounds who have experienced trauma. The focus on successful individuals from at-risk environments and the strategies they can share makes a resilience framework particularly compelling.

This article summarizes findings from resilience literature relevant to the development of children and youth and derives specific strategies for enhancing outcomes for gifted children and youth most at risk for encountering adversity.

Research on Resilience and Coping

"Resilience" describes the phenomenon of surviving and thriving in the face of adversity typically predictive of negative outcomes: poverty, family psychopathology, trauma. Resilience improves conditions affecting an individual's ability to cope (Osofsky & Thompson, 2000). Psychologists have studied resilience and coping since the 1970s, producing an abundance of literature. Following a description of types of factors critical to understanding resilience literature, we focus on studies relating intelligence, development, and diversity to resilience-topics that can inform practice with gifted children and youth, particularly those at risk.

Central to understanding the literature is the concept that four types of factors function in predictable ways to influence resilience: compensatory, risk, protective, and vulnerability factors. According to Tiet et al. (1998), the first two factors yield consistent effects across levels of risk. Compensatory factors (e.g., healthy family functioning, high educational aspirations) always have a beneficial consequence irrespective of risk level. In contrast, risk factors (e.g., poverty, substance abuse, incarceration) always have a potentially harmful effect, whether there is low or high risk. In contrast, the consequences of protective and vulnerability factors vary depending on risk level. Protective factors (e.g., self-esteem, positive coping

strategies, internal locus of control, social skills) exert a buffering effect at high risk but little or no effect at low risk. Vulnerability factors are the opposite of protective factors and have little or no effect at low risk and detrimental effects at high risk. A life absent of stress, for example, might constitute a vulnerability factor--inconsequential when there is no risk, but disadvantageous at high risk if the individual as a result has no successful experience coping with hardship.

Intelligence and Resilience

Level of intelligence appears to play a role in resilience, though the operating rules for its influence have yet to be defined. At least one study suggests that higher intelligence may function as a risk factor (Luthar, 1991). However, most experts view it as a protective factor (e.g., Condly, in press; Doll & Lyon, 1998; Tiet et al., 1998; Werner, 2000). Findings may differ depending on outcomes investigated (e.g., psychological adjustment or school achievement; drop out status or delinquency), measures used (e.g., psychiatric diagnoses, teacher ratings), and subjects studied (e.g., age, economic status, ethnicity).

Luthar (1991), in a study of primarily African American and Hispanic high risk, inner city adolescents, found intelligence and positive events to operate as vulnerability factors in determining peer- and teacher-rated social competence under stress. Luthar interpreted the findings as suggesting that for older adolescents, in contrast to younger children, sensitivity associated with higher intelligence may increase susceptibility to stressors. Additionally, the author suggests that chronology of positive and negative events may affect whether positive events serve as buffers against stress. In contrast, findings from a cross-sectional study including White, Latino, and African American youth ages 9 to 17 (Tiet et al., 1998) indicated that IQ operated as a protective factor and that it was significant in predicting psychological adjustment among youth at high risk but not low risk. The authors suggested that adolescents with high risk who possess higher intelligence may be better able to cope with adverse life events than their peers with lower intelligence.

Werner (2000) observed that not all resilient children are unusually gifted or talented but that "at least average intelligence" (p. 123) acts as a protective factor.

Even though there is little evidence that high intelligence alone promotes more effective coping, most longitudinal studies of resilient children and youth report that intelligence (especially communication and problem-solving skills) and scholastic competence (especially reading skills) are associated positively with the ability to overcome adversity (Werner, p. 122).

Reviewers of resilience literature agree that average or above average intellectual development supports resilience (Condly, in press; Doll & Lyon, 1998) and perhaps constitutes the most important personal quality serving as a protective factor (Osofsky & Thompson, 2000). Intelligence may be related to qualitative differences in preferred coping strategies. Using the Adolescent Coping Scale, Frydenberg (1997) found gifted adolescents more inclined to use problem solving, working hard, and achieving than their peers in the general population and less likely to use wishful thinking, investing in close friends, reducing tension, or not coping. Rutter (2000, p. 671) concluded that cognitive functioning is important in resilience beyond its role in educational attainment, but the precise mechanism remains unclear.

The preponderance of literature suggests that average to above average intelligence contributes to positive outcomes among high risk children and youth, though alone it is insufficient.

Personal, Coping, and Environmental Factors in Developing Resilience

Building resilience can be viewed as a developmental process in which, over time, experience in successfully overcoming adverse situations increases self-efficacy and confidence in one's ability to influence the environment (Werner, 2000). Development of resilience involves internal personality characteristics, coping strategies, and environmental factors.

Characteristics supportive of resilience appear in early childhood. Osofsky and Thompson (2000) describe resilient infants and young children as possessing an adaptable, easy temperament that elicits positive responses from adults. They have good interpersonal skills and show signs of early coping strategies-- planning how to manage what happens to them. For example, by preschool age, resilient children have developed a strong sense of autonomy and ability to ask for support when needed (Werner, 2000). Even young children may protect themselves by withdrawing from a dysfunctional family situation and finding

outside support (Osofsky & Thompson).

With age, children develop greater ability to use cognitive approaches, such as reappraising and reframing the challenge (Fields & Prinz, 1997). Older resilient children actively plan how to cope with events, continuing to develop a sense of greater control over their lives. By middle childhood (age 10), they demonstrate self-esteem, self-efficacy, internal locus of control, impulse control, and independence. They concentrate on schoolwork and pursue interests and hobbies that are not sex-typed--activities that provide solace and a sense of mastery and pride under stressful situations (Werner, 2000). Resilient children tend to be sociable and assertive, are liked by peers and adults, and exhibit good communication and problem-solving skills. Faced with adversity, they flexibly use a range of coping strategies and reach out for support from teachers and peers (Werner). With the emergence during middle childhood of the capacity to make social comparisons and take other people's perspectives, seeking social support from peers becomes another coping strategy used increasingly in adolescence (Fields & Prinz).

The increasing cognitive development and metacognitive awareness of older children and adolescents permit improved ability to appraise stressors, to estimate duration and controllability, and to consider various alternatives and consequences (Fields & Prinz, 1997). Resilient adolescents and adults possess an internal locus of control, a more positive self-concept, and greater social maturity, nurturance, empathy, sense of responsibility, and independence (Werner, 2000). As they mature, adolescents and young adults display increasing flexibility and planfulness in applying coping strategies. A study of primarily White, middle class adolescents by Williams and McGillicuddy-De List (2000) indicated that older adolescents use a greater variety of coping strategies to reduce stress than younger adolescents. They also tend to use cognitively oriented coping strategies, such as planful problem solving and reappraisal. The authors infer that increasing cognitive maturation and life experiences that come with age support awareness of a greater range of coping strategies and the ability to analyze specific factors in a stressful situation and make effective choices.

Features of the environment that promote children's development of resilience include effective parenting or a strong, trusting relationship with a competent, caring adult (Osofsky & Thompson, 2000) and opportunities to exercise responsibility, make decisions, and learn from their mistakes and successes (Rutter, 2000). Schools and teachers who communicate high expectations, provide caring and support, encourage student engagement and involvement (Waxman et al., 2003) as well as offer a rich, rigorous, learner-centered curriculum and experience solving complex, real-life problems (Wang, Haertel, & Walberg, 1998) contribute to educational resilience.

The literature demonstrates some consensus regarding favorable personality, coping, and environmental factors linked to resilience. However, it is not clear that all factors must be present for successful outcomes to occur. Further, resilience may not be continuously evident in an individual's life over time, and positive changes indicative of resilience can occur well beyond the developmental years. Risk conditions, such as poverty, may be subjectively determined, and a child's perceptions of risk events (e.g., parental divorce) may be different from the adult's perception.

Gordon and Song (1994) suggest that achievement among individuals at risk probably results from a collection of factors and their interaction, and they caution against focusing on the presence or absence of single, specific factors. They also conclude that while resources and supports are required at all developmental stages, influential factors and the appearance of success may occur at any age. Among their African American sample, some participants entered the path for career success at early ages: others found their way later in life by accident or with guidance. Although a meaningful relationship appears to be a consistently positive factor in resilience, negative factors may be subjectively determined by the individual and may operate to induce a constructive response: for example, striving to prove a detractor wrong. In fact, completely removing stress or hardship may not promote resilience in young children, who may benefit from gradually encountering and successfully overcoming challenges, which can enhance a sense of confidence and ability to influence what happens to them (Rutter, 2000). Aldwin, Sutton, and Lachman (1996) found that past stressors had helped younger and older adults develop effective coping skills to handle new problems.

Diversity

Poverty, culture, and ethnicity play a key role in development of resilience in several ways. Poverty and its sequelae are clear risk factors and may interact with aspects of culture (e.g., primary language other than English) to negatively affect school achievement. Racism continues to be a stressor affecting outcomes across economic groups (College Board, 1999). Most important for educators, culture influences how children and youth understand and cope with adversity (Dudley-Grant, Comas-Diaz, Todd-Bazemore, & Hueston, 2004).

Based on their review of the literature, Dudley-Grant et al. (2004) concluded that for people of color,

connectivity (social ties, belief systems, community supports, connection to a community) constitutes a primary contributor to resilience. They cite research indicating positive relationships between resilience and valuing of family needs among Mexican American youth: Afrocentric values and cultural identity among African Americans: and emphasis on traditional culture, positive traditional Native identity, and intergenerational relationships among Native Americans. The authors identify lessons on coping with racism as a protective factor. They note that spirituality and the desire to promote the next generation's well being support resilience across several groups.

Types of coping strategies used may be related to cultural experiences and values. Plummet and Slane (1996), comparing White and African American college students on the Ways of Coping Questionnaire, found that African American students reported using a greater variety of coping strategies. They engaged in more problem-focused and more emotion-focused coping strategies than did White students. Problem-focused strategies concentrate on modifying the stressor or changing the situation and include accepting responsibility, confrontive coping (aggressive tactics), planful problem solving, and seeking social support. Emotion-focused coping strategies attempt to regulate one's emotional state or to reduce tension. Strategies include distancing, escape avoidance, self-controlling, and positive reappraisal (creating positive meaning by reframing). African American students also reported more incidents of racial stress. The authors suggest that African American students may have greater experience with stress and may consequently be more practiced and flexible in their use of strategies. When faced with racially as opposed to generally stressful situations, both African Americans and Whites reported being less likely to accept responsibility, engage in planful problem solving, and seek social support, and more likely to use confrontive coping.

A comparison of stress-affected and stress-resilient urban African American and White children (Magnus, Cowen, Wyman, Fagen, & Work, 1999) found that a sense of competence, positive self-view, empathy, and realistic control attributions predicted resilient outcomes across racial groups. Internal locus of control differentiated resilient from stress-affected children among White but not African American participants. The authors suggest that the difference may be attributable to a focus on individualism in White families under stress. The authors used the What I Usually Do scale to assess positive (self-reliance and seeking support) and negative (immobilization, wishful thinking, and distancing) coping styles. African American resilient children exceeded their stress-affected counterparts on positive coping styles but were similar to them on negative coping strategies. White resilient children used fewer negative coping styles than did White stress-affected children. These findings are consistent with Plummet and Slane's (1996) data for college-age students, with African Americans exhibiting a wider range of coping strategies. Magnus et al. propose that the positive or negative status of specific coping strategies may depend on their adaptiveness within the cultural context and may differ by cultural group.

Research on gifted individuals from diverse backgrounds points to additional, specific factors among cultural groups that may affect resilience. Plucker (1998) found little evidence of gender or grade differences but significant racial differences in gifted adolescents' coping strategies. African American and Latino adolescents were more likely to report seeking spiritual support than their White peers. Latino students scored higher in worrying and Whites lower. White student reported more self-blame. Similar to Frydenberg's (1997) findings, these gifted students (across ethnic groups) were more likely to use working hard and achieving as coping strategies than social action, seeking professional help, reducing tension, or ignoring the problem.

In a study of Latino students attending a prestigious university, Arellano and Padilla (1996) found that identification as gifted may be a protective factor, supporting a self-concept that included ability to achieve. Rumbaut (2000), examining factors influencing immigrant children's achievement, reported a positive link between fluent bilingualism and cognitive achievement. Identification as gifted also was related to superior academic outcomes. Ford (1994) observed that biculturalism contributes to resilience among gifted African American students, and biculturalism has been associated with greater self esteem, motivation, and achievement (Magnus et al., 1999).

A series of studies on high achieving women from diverse backgrounds (Kitano, 1997, 1998a, 1998b: Kitano & Perkins, 2000) identified an array of positive coping strategies, some of which were common across groups (e.g., persistence in the face of hardship) and some that appear culturally related. The African American sample described specific strategies for coping with discrimination including monitoring the environment and using their observations, finding alternative paths, actively ignoring or managing racism, affirming oneself, and having a clear sense of cultural identity (Kitano, 1998a). Consistent with Ford's (1994) finding, achieving African American women cited being bicultural as a survival strategy, as in purposively modifying language and style as the situation demands. The Asian American sample (primarily of Japanese or Chinese descent) commonly described school achievement for positive recognition, working harder and persisting, being flexible (e.g, changing oneself or one's job), and assimilating as ways of coping (Kitano, 1997). The highly achieving Latinas engaged in self-assessing and planning, taking action,

using individual achievement as a vehicle for contributing to family and community, and challenging and confronting dishonesty or injustice (Kitano, 1998b). White women's examples focused on thinking through, taking responsibility and action, consciously making good choices, persisting, and networking (Kitano & Perkins, 2000).

While resilient children and youth share some common characteristics across ethnic groups, there appear to be differences between groups in types of coping strategies related to cultural values and experiences. Biculturalism, having a positive ethnic identity, and connecting to community may be protective factors for gifted students from African American, Native American, and Latino backgrounds. Having specific coping strategies for addressing discriminatory incidents may also support resilience.

Value of Resilience Concept for Gifted

As noted earlier, Neihart (2002) suggested that a resilience framework has potential for addressing the social and emotional needs of gifted

and talented individuals, addressed comprehensively elsewhere (see Cross, 2001; Neihart, 1999; Neihart, Reis, Robinson, & Moon, 2002). This review supports that suggestion, and not necessarily because of any hypothesized similarities between resilient and gifted individuals. The literature offers scant evidence that a preponderance of resilient individuals are gifted or that most gifted individuals are resilient. Resilience does not require high intelligence, though cognitive capacity may contribute to positive outcomes to the extent that it supports effective coping strategies.

The value of a resilience framework lies in its potential for improving outcomes of the most underserved gifted: those placed at risk by adversity. Families and individuals of all racial, cultural, and socioeconomic backgrounds can and do encounter hardship in their lives. Peterson (1997) presented emotionally jarring case studies of "bright, tough, and resilient" abused and neglected White high ability students not identified as gifted. In so doing, she challenged the field to consider and provide the extensive interventions needed for these students to succeed. No group is immune from adversity. The success stories of individuals (and groups) overcoming odds are often stories of cultural diversity, linguistic difference, and/or economic disadvantage, as well as resilience and coping. These are stories that can benefit students from all backgrounds, including gifted students who have faced few stressors in their lives and possess less experience with coping. Sharing of culturally derived coping strategies may help students of any background increase their range of positive strategies and flexibility in applying them.

Limitations

Despite several decades of research on stress and coping, there continue to be conceptual and methodological issues, including the need for coherent theoretical frameworks, consistent operational definitions, and measures beyond questionnaires (Luthar, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000). No single style of coping appears to be effective in all situations, and effective coping is characterized by flexibility and change (Compas, 1987). Researchers have proposed both macro and micro typologies of specific coping strategies. Problem/emotion focused (described earlier) and approach/avoidance (actively planning vs. trying to ignore or escape) models are examples of macro-level categories. Micro typologies list an array of specific coping strategies. While macro-level approaches mask distinctions, micro-level approaches do not show tremendous consistency from study to study or derive from compelling conceptual frameworks (Fields & Prinz, 1997). Whether some are more adaptive than others may depend on context (e.g., family conflict, medical event, academic issue) and culturally related perceptions. However, there is some evidence that problem solving and engaging in rewarding activities are related to better overall adjustment across early and middle childhood and adolescence. For older children and adolescents, approach coping appears to be more associated with achievement than defensive and self-blame strategies (Fields & Prinz, 1997). Somerfield and McCrae (2000) suggest changing the focus of research from a search for universal ways of dealing with stress to individual differences that affect choice of coping strategies as well as strategies effective for specific stressful contexts.

Implications and Recommendations

Within these limitations, the literature consistently indicates that families, communities, and schools can enhance both psychological and educational resilience by focusing on alterable factors, such as social support, interpersonal skills, educational aspirations, self-efficacy, empathy, problem solving, and coping strategies. Cowen, Wyman, Work, and Iker (1995) reported that inner-city elementary-age children participating in a 12-session program demonstrated significant improvement on teacher ratings of learning problems and task orientation, and on child ratings of self-efficacy, control attributions, and anxiety. The curriculum centered on perspective taking, social problem solving, solvable and unsolvable problems, and self-efficacy. Activities included applying a structured problem-solving process and having children serve as consultants to help other children apply the process to their own issues. Gillham, Reivich, Jaycox, and

Seligman (1995) found cognitive- and social-problem-solving techniques effective in teaching fifth- and sixth-grade students to be more optimistic and less likely to experience depression two years after a 12-week intervention.

Hess and Copeland (2001) cited additional studies indicating that instruction in coping skills and problem solving can help adolescents decrease stress and improve problem solving. They claim that a strong relationship with a caring teacher who has high expectations can decrease susceptibility to negative peer influences and that schools can play a key role in enabling children and youth to acquire effective coping skills through training from early elementary through high school. The complex relationships among personal traits, coping skills, and environmental supports in determining resilience argue for collaborative efforts between teaching and counseling personnel. Given their daily contact with immense numbers of students at risk, schools potentially can play a major role in enhancing resilience (Doll & Lyon, 1998). Wang et al. (1998) further caution that increasing children's educational resilience requires a comprehensive effort (teachers with high expectations; learner-centered instruction: challenging, non-remedial curriculum: rigor and depth) and cannot be effected by a simple set of activities.

Within this context, the literature reviewed here indicates components of such a comprehensive intervention appropriate for gifted students placed at risk:

1. Enhance connectivity. Teachers can help ensure a strong, meaningful relationship with a significant, positive other: a parent, relative, teacher, counselor, religious leader, peer. A caring teacher can serve in this capacity by working to identify a mentor: help students make good choices about friendships (to include achieving peers): encourage them to engage with nuclear and extended families, community, and school (Hess & Copeland, 2001); and develop classroom projects that increase opportunities for teamwork, sense of community, and respect (Alpert et al., 2004). Parent programs can help families understand their children's needs for consistent, nurturing, authoritative parenting and high expectations for performance and educational attainment.
2. Encourage a sense of self-efficacy and agency. Teachers and families can provide opportunities for children and youth to take responsibility and make decisions as developmentally appropriate and learn from their successes and failures. They can provide opportunities to develop a sense of ability to influence the environment, for example, by helping others in the community or solving a real-life problem. They can encourage students to develop and pursue interests and hobbies as a source of personal satisfaction. They can ensure normal protection without removal of all stress.
3. Encourage optimism. Counselors, teachers, and families can help youth process their bad experiences and incorporate them into their concept of self, think optimistically, accept the reality of a bad experience without self-blame for events outside their control, and build on positive aspects of a bad situation (Rutter, 2000).
4. Teach directly and indirectly a range of culturally consonant coping strategies and coach implementation. Teachers can support student awareness and flexible implementation of effective coping strategies. They can help students develop attitudes and metacognitive skills supportive of flexibly applying a range of positive coping strategies (Rutter, 2000). Teachers and students can share a variety of positive coping strategies that have worked for them and for others who have succeeded despite hardships. Teachers can offer culturally consonant coping strategies, such as using humor and creativity in coping and achieving as a way of helping their communities and next generations to succeed (Dudley-Grant et al., 2004). They may need to enlist families and communities to support culturally specific coping strategies found effective in the literature (Dudley-Grant et al.), such as promoting spirituality, encouraging use of traditional knowledge (e.g., healing ceremonies) and ways of knowing, encouraging story telling, and drawing on past experiences of overcoming trauma. Awareness of varied alternatives may be insufficient to improve younger adolescents' coping in the absence of practice, role playing, and scaffolding (Williams & McGillicuddy-De Lisi, 2000). Teachers can encourage students to practice coping skills by problem solving and role playing (Cowen et al., 1995) or by using positive-self statements in the face of typical stresses (Alpert et al., 2004). They can model planning, problem solving, persisting, and coping positively in stressful situations.
5. Validate (rather than ignore or minimize) children's experiences with bias. Teachers can recognize and acknowledge social injustices experienced by children and youth (Dudley-Grant et al., 2004) and help them identify effective strategies for overcoming them. They can enlist family and community members to provide stories and examples of positive strategies for coping with racism, sexism, homophobia, ableism and other forms of discrimination.
6. Support pride in heritage. Teachers can work with families and communities to strengthen students' ethnic identity through their engagement in intercultural activities. Teachers and families can encourage and provide opportunities for students to become bilingual and bicultural. Assimilation may serve as an

effective coping strategy for some individuals, depending on cultural values.

The large body of literature on resilience and coping gives promise to finding specific ways in which teachers and counselors can enhance success among at-risk children and youth, including those who are gifted and talented. While high intelligence is not a requirement for resilient outcomes, cognitive ability appears to be a supporting factor, especially as it relates to problem solving and coping. For example, intellectually gifted adolescents across ethnic groups appear more likely to use the coping strategies of working hard and achieving than ignoring the stressor. Programs and curriculum for enhancing resilience should be consistent with developmental expectations, for example, with respect to perspective taking. Successful experience overcoming hardships supports children's self-efficacy, and protecting children from all stresses may not encourage their resilience. Resilient children and youth across ethnic groups display some common characteristics. However, culture may influence how individuals perceive and cope with stress, and resilience programs should include culturally consonant coping strategies. What constitutes an effective coping strategy depends on the situation and context. Successful coping among adolescents appears to require a metacognitive set conducive to considering a range of strategies and flexibility in their application. To the extent that low-income and culturally diverse children and youth have more experience overcoming adversity, they may possess a greater range and flexibility in coping strategies that can be shared with others. These findings offer a foundation from which curriculum can be developed for supporting resilience.

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