Reading and Resilience

It is vital to build the reading skills and resilience of at-risk students who come to school facing adversity in their communities. How can we meet the extraordinary challenges?

A major challenge for educators is providing effective reading instruction that results in high reading achievement for students who enter elementary classrooms with a wide-range of vulnerability-producing characteristics that place them at risk for early academic failure. This challenge also places teachers at-risk for failing these children. The students’ characteristics include, but are not limited to, insufficient exposure to rich experiences with texts before entering school, overexposure to negative home and community experiences such as violence and other illicit activities, often fragile parental or guardian supports, and other adversity-related variables that affect a large number of our nation’s children. Additionally, students who have strong emotional support from loving parents are placed at risk for failure in school when they encounter low-quality reading instruction in the primary and intermediate grades from inexperienced or inadequately prepared teachers who are struggling to reconcile how to teach “certain” students. This may include students with: (1) inadequate alphabetic knowledge; (2) underdeveloped oral language skills; (3) insufficient vocabularies to handle the early demands of schools; (4) poor concepts of reading; or (5) child-like immaturities that are not accepted as normal behavior within classroom environments.

Failure to provide effective reading instruction that nurtures students’ identities as readers in kindergarten or first grade can manifest into years of academic failure for students who find themselves trailing their peers as early as second grade. Parents and teachers become overwhelmed and frustrated when they attempt to teach reading to these youngsters. These feelings of frustration often lead to a shift in culpability between parents and educators, with teachers blaming parents and parents blaming teachers for students’ reading difficulties. Meanwhile, the students find themselves struggling to negotiate their existence with low-level literacy skills. Here is a portion of an unsolicited e-mail from one parent to illuminate this point:

I am writing to you because I am desperately seeking some advice that will help me break down the wall that is quickly building up between my son and [me]. I had [him] during my senior year...
of high school. I was five months pregnant when I received my HS diploma. I started college right away against all odds and after giving birth I returned to school and made the dean’s list. [My son] has been at my side since the moment of his birth…. With my new love for education, I thought everything would be great, that was until my son went to kindergarten and encountered the teacher from hell. She made my son’s first real school experience a very traumatic and indelible experience. After being evicted from where we were residing, … we ended being in [a] house with so many other people making life confusing for everyone…. With this move came the beginning of what I called [my son’s] school hopping…. I started my teaching career, and [my son] was moved yet again to a Catholic school for grades 3–6. I was hoping that this would be better for him, but it wasn’t. At the end of the 6th grade, [my son’s] scores displayed that he was reading on a fourth-grade level and he was facing retention…. I am facing a new crisis with my son, who is unaware of the critical state of his education. I now realize that for the past five years, because I was giving 100% to the students I was teaching, my own son was able to slide through the cracks and now the holes are so big I need help closing them and teaching him how to stand on solid ground…. I am looking for a starting place for my son that will work. I have tried everything that I could think, … but I am hitting a brick wall and it is getting to the point that I am becoming angry…. [emphasis added] He is turning twelve … and I know if I don’t make a breakthrough now, the journey ahead will be a rocky one…. I am hoping that you can send me back some information that would help me reclaim the life of my son.

As a director of a university-based reading clinic in a large urban area, I have received, on average, more than ten unsolicited e-mails per year over the past three years from parents with similar pleas seeking help to recast their children’s futures. Each time, I am challenged to rethink the role of reading instruction in the lives of these young people. I often settle on the belief that reading instruction for struggling readers needs to be conceptualized to help them recover; help them reconcile to a new identity, both personal and academic; and help them become resilient. Having underdeveloped literacy skills is stressful, and reading for these students becomes a painful experience. Falling behind in reading affects the psyche of young students who struggle to understand why they cannot read the print on the page with ease similar to their observation of other students who have begun, in their minds, to “master the code.”

In the United States, elementary school-aged children across all ethnicities and income levels struggle to read. The struggles with print are more widespread among students who receive low-quality instruction. The long tradition of failing to provide effective reading instruction for students who characteristically continue to underperform in elementary classrooms is deeply rooted in cultural, economic, linguistic, historical, sociological, and psychological factors that many
well-meaning teachers are not prepared to address. These factors, which can shape and inform the teaching of reading, are neglected in the professional preparation of many pre-service and in-service teachers. As a result, many of the nation’s children who can benefit from their teachers having a more comprehensive understanding of addressing their literacy needs remain vulnerable to failure in elementary schools, thus increasing their chances of having unfavorable life outcomes.

A failure to reconceptualize reading instruction to focus on nurturing the resilience of students becomes inimical, not only to many low academic performers, but to the nation and our national imagination as a whole. This is particularly important when considering the shifting demographics in the United States. It is now inconceivable that any approach to reading that fails to account for cultural, historical, linguistic, sociological, and psychological factors of the students will be effective.

There are now more than 29 million foreign-born citizens in the United States. In 2006, 12.5% of the U.S. population was foreign born, compared to 6.2% in 1980. Eighteen states have a population of more than 10% foreign-born citizens. This compares to only five states in 1990. California, the state with the largest foreign-born population, is at 27% foreign-born citizens comprised of more than 9.9 million residents. Hispanics and Latinos continue to be the fastest growing population. The Hispanic and Latino population grew 53% between 1980 and 1990 and another 58% between 2000 and 2009. Between 1980 and 2006, the number of Hispanics nearly tripled, growing from 14.6 million to 43.2 million. African Americans and Latinos now make up 27.9% of the U.S. population, representing more than one quarter of the total population. These shifts in the general population have occurred while the demographics of the teaching population have remained fairly static.

Why a Focus on Resilience?

Most definitions of resilience encompass the capacity for successful adaptation in spite of adverse circumstances or stressful life events brought on by early traits, conditions, or experiences (Henderson and Milstein, 2003; Masten, 2001; Masten, Best, and Garmezy, 1990; Wang, Haertel, and Walberg, 1994; Werner and Smith, 2001). Resiliency research brings attention to individuals’ strengths and resources, often referred to as protective factors or protective resources (D’Imperio, Dubow, and Ippolito, 2000; Henderson and Milstein, 2003; Small and Memmo, 2004; Werner and Smith, 2001). Researchers have identified internal factors (e.g., competence, personal attributes) and environmental factors (e.g., classroom and school environments) as two sources of these protective resources (Cowen and Work, 1988; Masten, 2001; Werner and Smith, 1992).

Personal attributes such as self-efficacy, academic and social competence, autonomy, and having a meaningful purpose and goals are individual characteristics that researchers have observed among resilient youth. Efforts should be made to acknowledge or honor each of these attributes and combine them with other resources to shape positive literacy experiences and life trajectories. For instance, educators can help students develop resilient personal characteristics or provide strategies that help them adjust to their lack of skills
in specific areas. Practically speaking, enriching students’ vocabularies and engaging them in rich conversations or using read-alouds in powerful ways can counterbalance feelings of self-loathing, cynicism, anger, and sometimes despair and depression.

Educators can play an instrumental role in helping students identify, build, and utilize their resources for developing successful reading experiences. In part, teachers can do the following to build protective factors:

1. Increase students’ opportunity to hear and use rich language.
2. Establish clear and consistent routines to support students’ reading development.
3. Provide constructive and responsive feedback during reading instruction.
4. Plan and provide meaningful instruction to help students make connections between the reading and their future, a future that moves beyond the upcoming testing cycle.
5. Focus on helping students become smarter about subjects in the curriculum and become better readers during every lesson; both have capital.
6. Maintain the disposition of a consistent, caring adult with positive expectations for students while providing them with opportunities to participate and feel welcomed in the classroom environment.

It is clear from the research that students who feel secure in the presence of adults who clearly communicate high expectations with realistic goals and who support students’ meaningful participation by engaging them with authentic tasks and “real-world” dialogue are more likely to be resilient (Henderson and Milstein, 2003; Stanton-Salazar and Spina, 2000). For individual students, certain protective resources are going to be in greater demand depending on both student and contextual factors (e.g., accumulation of failure, negative school experiences, inability to read).

A Model for Building Reading Resilience

The convergence of students’ identities and reading strengths and weaknesses must be accounted for when planning instructional practices aimed to improve students’ reading proficiency and to nurture resilience. This accounting suggests the need to pay attention to four sets of vital signs of literacy instruction (Tatum, 2008):

1. The vital signs of reading—word study, fluency, comprehension, writing, and language development
2. The vital signs of readers—home life, culture, environment, language, and economics
3. The vital signs of reading instruction—instructional supports, texts, contexts, assessments, and technology
4. The vital signs of educators—caring, commitment, competence, culpability, and courage
An oversimplified approach to reading instruction that focuses on the vital signs of reading alone (i.e., word study, fluency, comprehension, writing, and language development), without considering the other vital signs, is conceptually thin. A brief summary of each vital sign with implications for teachers is provided below.

**Vital Signs of Reading**

Students’ ability to comprehend texts points toward four broad generalizations for providing effective comprehension instruction (Pearson and Fielding, 1991). They are the following:

1. Provide explicit, unambiguous instruction that is paced appropriately to support students.

2. Build a relationship between students’ background knowledge and experiences and the content included in the text selections.

3. Improve students’ ability to visualize text and monitor their own comprehension.

4. Make knowledge of text structure explicit, and bring attention to it systematically.

5. Teach students how to recast what they have read by distinguishing important from unimportant information.

With thoughtful, well-planned modeling and scaffolding, many students come to realize that comprehending texts depends on a combination of their own personal effort and use of strategies in searching for understanding (Borkowski, 1992; Winne, Graham, and Prock, 1993). Students benefit when teachers:

1. Talk aloud or “make their thinking public.”

2. Provide clear indications about correctness.

3. Give encouragement.

4. Rehearse skills both by speaking and by providing supports.

5. Remind students about important information to learn.

6. Support students’ language development and reading development.

This can potentially cause students to self-regulate strategy use and to use the strategies, particularly if they are informed of the benefits and provided with evidence of the contributions of the strategies that lead to their improved performance on comprehension-related tasks, thus nurturing resilience.

**Vital Signs of Readers**

The achievement gaps we find present today among low-performing readers and high-performing readers are not natural. Linguistic differences, cultural differences, inferior education, and the rationale that different cultural groups have for schooling have been stated as causes that contribute to low student achievement. Perceived rationales involve cultural groups’ understanding of the significance of school performances to life opportunities. Linguistic differences are prominent in U.S. schools when students of diverse backgrounds speak a
When cultural and linguistic differences are present, teachers and students have to learn how to navigate these borders and boundaries in a respectful way and in an atmosphere of trustworthiness.

Cultural and linguistic differences can be initial sources of trouble between teachers and students that can develop over time into entrenched, emotionally intense conflict. Research of the past two decades consistently has found that students who are allowed and encouraged to identify with their native language and culture in their schools and communities can improve their learning. Using culturally responsive instructional approaches and infusing culturally responsive materials during reading instruction so that students do not view their lived experiences outside of schools as being marginalized are essential. Tinkering with a few cultural additions to the curriculum is different from a wholesale transformation (Nieto, 1999) of teachers’ beliefs focused on two major pedagogical indicators of acknowledging the vital signs of the readers:

1. Reconstructing curriculum to incorporate a wider set of interests
2. Being personally warm toward and respectful of, as well as academically demanding of, all students

Vital Signs of Educators

Effective teachers who foster trust and establish kinship are more likely to nurture resilience among non-resilient or disengaged students. These teachers, often characterized as culturally responsive, are more likely to structure learning as a social activity and emphasize cooperation over competition. These attributes offset intercultural misunderstandings that can lead to distrust or bitter struggles of negative identity exchanges between some students and their teachers (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Tatum, 2000, 2005).

Although multiple research studies reveal a close relationship between culturally responsive approaches to teaching and reading achievement, widespread implementation of culturally responsive teaching has not yet taken root. Gay (2000) identified five notions why this is the case:

1. There is a belief that education has nothing to do with culture and heritages.
2. Too few teachers have adequate knowledge about how teaching practices reflect European American cultural values.
3. Many teachers want to do best for all their students and mistakenly believe that to treat students differently because of their cultural orientations is racial discrimination.
4. There is a belief that good teaching is transcendent; it is identical for all students and under all circumstances.

5. There is a claim that education is an effective doorway of assimilation into mainstream society for people from many diverse cultural heritages, ethnic groups, social classes, and points of origin.

Despite these notions, student achievement data on the positive effects of culturally responsive teaching practices used inside individual classrooms have emerged (Tatum, 2000; Gay, 2000). Paying attention to the vital signs of educators points toward several implications for improving the reading achievement and nurturing resilience among students:

1. Regard students’ culture as legitimate, and make it a reference for learning.
2. Resist curriculum orientations that stifle or postpone academic growth.
3. Use texts as a conduit to discuss strategies for overcoming academic and societal barriers.
4. Guide students toward academic success and cultural competence.
5. Address students’ cognitive, affective, social, emotional, and developmental needs.

**Vital Signs of Reading Instruction**

Instruction embodying connections to the real-world learning, self-directed activities, direct strategy teaching, and allowance for varied forms of self-expression increases long-term motivations and strategies for reading (Guthrie, Alao, and Rinehart, 1997). Environmental contexts characterized by letting students know ahead of time what will be expected, minimizing risk by giving students time to prepare responses, organizing classrooms to meet students’ instructional needs, and engaging students in conversations of how their actions affect the literacy context and how those contexts affect their literacy development all support their literacy development. These environmental strands, when mismanaged or ignored, however, have the potential to lead to a series of academic disappointments and failures that can ultimately lead to non-resilient literate behaviors.

Students are more likely to engage in classroom activities if they feel supported and valued. Teachers who shape classroom contexts responsive to students’ needs allow students’ choice, engage them with relevant knowledge, and provide opportunities for students to negotiate their needs and desires. Nonthreatening environments where children and adolescents are engaged in conversations about the multiple literacies in their lives can help the students feel supported and valued. This has the potential to incite more student participation in literacy-related tasks, increase learner motivation, lead to improved academic outcomes, and nurture resilience. In order to shape resilience-supporting contexts, it is important to:

1. Reconceptualize the role of reading in students’ lives.
2. Bridge the gap between students’ home lives and school lives.
3. Recognize that students draw on multiple literacies to define themselves.
4. Structure supportive environments.

5. Develop assessment plans that pay attention to students’ cognitive and affective needs.

The wide range of difficulties related to reading impacted by personal and environmental factors calls for the need to approach literacy teaching by paying attention to all four sets of vital signs mentioned and their associated variables. The variables include, but are not limited to, research-based reading strategies. Becoming knowledgeable about students’ home lives, culture, environment, language, and economics, shaping instructional environments, selecting and mediating texts in responsive ways, and having the competence and courage to move beyond usual-path approaches (e.g., decontextualized skill and drill or standards-based test prep) that have failed many students are warranted.

The contexts of students’ lives, namely the students’ families and social contexts, form a web of issues that no education program can ignore (Miller, 2006). Embedded in this premise is the need to pay attention to characteristics of students, educators, and instructional supports that increase the likelihood of advancing students’ literacy development that will allow them to become resilient—and not only persist in educational settings, but persist in life. This is paramount for struggling readers trying to find a steady foothold in schools. For educators, this is the true promise of reading instruction for those who enter our spaces and give us the opportunity to engage them with print.
REFERENCES