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Developing Resilience: The Role of Teachers

Cheng Yuanshan &
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INTRODUCTION

"Today I was a counsellor, a disciplinarian, a lecturer, a nurse, a coach and a facilitator of knowledge... Today I was a TEACHER." Teachers in schools have a significant influence on the child and the adolescent. The experiences of students in school affect them in various ways either by exacerbating or by protecting them from debilitating consequences. Rutter (1987) explains that schools can be protective because they promote self-esteem and self-efficacy. Teachers can develop protective factors for students, such as having a supportive relationship with at least one person and using problem-solving skills in daily life. These protective factors help students have a belief and power in themselves to deal with changes and difficulties. Teachers can nurture and strengthen these protective factors, and thereby enhance resilience. They can provide opportunities for students to experience success which enable them to develop essential social and problem-solving skills. Yet, the role of teachers has received relatively little consideration in the study of resilience.

RESILIENCE

A study of resilience is more hopeful than investigating the maladaptation of children at risk. Resilience keeps students functioning when they are confronted with adversities and life's challenges. Rutter (1987) stresses the need to focus on the 'steeling' or protective mechanism by which children maintain their self-esteem and self-efficacy in the face of adversity. Self-esteem is a belief in oneself and

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self-efficacy is having the internal power to deal with changes and difficulties. Rather than a static factor, resilience is a process by which students can overcome failure or adversity and bounce back. Interestingly, people who face childhood adversity or problems and bounce back may do better later in life than someone whose childhood was relatively easy (Garmezy 1991).

Resilience in one domain of life may not translate to other domains. Some students may show resilience with peer conflicts, but not with academic achievement. The reverse may be true as well. Luthar & Zigler (1991) suggest that urban 9th graders considered to be academically resilient may show signs of emotional maladjustment. This paper focuses on resilience from a positive perspective where students strive to do well academically and socially in schools.

What determines how much students can experience before giving up differs. Some students give up after much stress while others give up after a small incident. The former may have had more opportunities to take a risk, fail, and bounce back. The latter group may have had little experience of picking themselves up after failing. These experiences of successfully bouncing back develop self-efficacy... the 'I can' do it attitude.

Resilient students tend not to seek formal professional help, but turn to those they have grown to trust or see regularly, such as grandparents, older siblings and friends, and teachers. Students who have succeeded despite their problems very often have one person who can create a pathway to resilience, rather than leave success to fate or to character traits (Shapiro & Brownlee 1996).

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN TEACHERS AND STUDENTS' PERCEPTION OF SCHOOL

A survey questionnaire was conducted with secondary students in Singapore schools (Mau, Lim, Chan & Lee 1998). A factor analysis was then performed on the students' responses to the items. This statistical procedure usually extracts the underlying psychological structures. In this way, a few factors can then describe what was obtained from a large number of different items. Four factors related to the discussion of the present paper were obtained (see Table 1). Factor 1 may be named *Teacher* because all the relevant items are related to the comments and feelings about their teachers. The other three factors can be considered

relevant to resilience. Factor 2 can be called *Meaning in School* because all these items connect to the students' feelings and attitude about their school life. If students feel that school is meaningful to them, they may be more resilient and will try harder in school. Factor 3 may be named as *Belief in Oneself* because all the items are associated with the belief that they have an internal power to deal with problems. If students have a belief in themselves, they may be more able to overcome adversity. Factor 4 may be called *Norms* because the relevant items are related to following school norms and rules. If students understand and follow norms in schools, they may be more resilient to develop academically and socially.

Table 1: Factor loading matrix after varimax rotation (n = 1172)

Item	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3	Factor 4
School is teaching me what I want to learn.	.531			
I feel that I am wasting my time in school.	.497			.267
School is helping me get ready for what I want to do after secondary school.	.401			
School rules are made for the good of the students.	.409			
Pastoral care lessons help me to understand myself and others better.	.661			
CME lessons have reminded me about the importance of being a food citizen.	.645			
PE lessons keep me trim and fit.	.586			
The library media centre is useful in supporting my learning.	.586			
I like working on the computer.	.479			
My teachers keep good discipline in the class.	.302	.491		
My teachers take time to help students who are having problems in class.		.584		
My teachers let students learn from each other in class.		.447		

Item	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3	Factor 4
My teachers conduct interesting lessons in class.	.316	.476		
My teachers mark students' assignments fairly.		.626		
My teachers give feedback to students' work regularly.		.597		
My teachers give clear instructions for assignments.		.579		
It is hard to know what is right and wrong because the world is changing so fast.			.651	
The problems of life are sometimes too big for me.			.564	
I am pretty sure my life will work out the way I want it to.			.539	
Things are changing so fast that I am not sure which rules to follow.			.605	
It is all right to break the law as long as you do not get caught.				.809
A student has the right to cheat if it will keep him/her from failing.				.816

From the analysis, we can see that Factor 2, Factor 3 and Factor 4 are related to resilience and they can be considered as indirect measurements of resilience. In the questionnaire, there are a few other items asking students to describe their own achievement in math, English, science and mother tongue subjects. The total score of these items can be treated as a measure of *Self-Perception of Achievement*. This could also be an indirect measure of resilience. In order to examine the relationship between *Teacher* (Factor 1) and *Meaning in School* (Factor 2), *Belief in Oneself* (Factor 3), *Norms* (Factor 4) and *Self-Perception of Achievement*, a Pearson correlation was conducted and the results are shown in the following table:

Table 2: Correlation coefficients between the factor of Teacher and other factors related to resilience of students

Factors	Correlation coefficient with the factor of <i>Teacher</i>
Meaning in School	.548**
Belief in Oneself	.228**
Norms	.297**
Self-Perception of Achievement	.286**

Note: ** means $p < .01$.

The correlation coefficients between the factor of *Teacher* and each of the other factors are all positive and very significant. This means that students' perception of their teachers is highly related to their resilience in school. As students perceive their teachers more positively, they find school more meaningful, have a stronger belief in themselves that they can overcome problems, are more likely to follow school norms, and feel more confident about their academic achievement. In other words, when students perceive teachers more positively, they may have the self-esteem and self-efficacy to be resilient in schools.

From the results, we can see that teachers play a very important role in the development of resilience in students. This paper suggests four ways in which teachers can develop resilience by providing meaning and structure to the lives of their students.

FOUR WAYS FOR TEACHERS TO DEVELOP RESILIENCE

CREATE A LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

How do teachers create a school environment that students will succeed in largely due to their own abilities and efforts? The importance of reinforcing a sense of personal control is basic to resilience (Henderson & Milstein 1996). Teachers can create a learning environment that reinforces students' belief that mistakes and failures are not only acceptable, but to be expected, and are seen as best ways of learning. Resilient children assume realistic ownership for their achievements and failures. They possess a sense of inner control over what is happening

in their lives. So teachers can nurture students to stretch to their full potential by encouraging them to try over and over again. Students are more apt to try in a non-threatening environment where teachers encourage questions and allow students to make mistakes. When students have a sense of security, they can more easily take in cognitive information and have the confidence to take risks.

Besides creating a learning environment, which is non-threatening to students, teachers can focus learning on tasks that students complete. Students in task-oriented situations are more likely to change failures into challenges by trying harder. By dealing with their failure, they gain greater self-efficacy. Teachers then can teach students to develop the self-confidence and analytic skills to confront and solve problems while doing a task.

COMMUNICATION

Teachers can convey their own optimism and caring to students. Empathy is essential to understanding how students experience communicating with teachers. One way to develop this empathy is to have a warm, encouraging relationship with students by not severely criticizing attempts at learning. Encourage by saying, "Why don't you do this?" or "I think you can do that... ."

These comments help according to one student because "I wouldn't have thought positively of myself if other people, such as teachers, hadn't given me opportunities. I think self-motivation can only go so far" (Mau *et al.* 1998).

In teaching students, it is important not to humiliate or intimidate them. If students are to assume responsibility for their actions and perceive rules as being fair, they must understand the purpose of the rules and contribute within reason to their formation. Moreover, they are aware of respective consequences of not following the rules or guidelines. Teachers can maintain a delicate balance between rigidity and permissiveness by communicating clear-cut regulations as well as logical and natural consequences.

Another student was comfortable with his Mathematics teacher's teaching style. "She taught me the value of studying and the value of getting an 'A' by hard, hard work. But I also got to know her as a person" (Mau. *et al* 1998). So, teachers can develop resilience by relating to students as teachers, counsellors and mentors.

DEVELOP PROBLEM-SOLVING AND COPING SKILLS

When teachers teach problem-solving strategies such as requesting for help with assignments and spending more time to practise a skill, students become more resilient (Brooks 1994). Less academically-resilient students may rely on counter-productive behaviours such as quitting, avoiding, cheating, denying or escaping.

Decision-making and problem-solving skills can be taught so students can feel in control and in the process increase their sense of ownership and empowerment — important ingredients in strengthening resilience.

A junior-high girl often engaged in struggles with her parents about bedtime. Through problem-solving skills, she spoke to her parents and was permitted to select one evening each week when she could stay up 30 minutes later than usual

Straits Times, 22 July 1998: 20

Teachers who link their curriculum with events and people in the community show students how the skills of learning are related to the skills of living. Teachers can help students to better cope with real-life problems. They can teach students to recognize behaviours that are causing them trouble and then show them appropriate responses and resources. Moreover, teachers are well aware of the pressures placed on students to excel in schools. So, they can show students various ways of effectively managing their time and dealing with these pressures and their stress.

SENSE OF ACCOMPLISHMENT

School success is often associated with good opportunities for students to exercise responsibility. Schools need to provide an ethos for students to exercise autonomy and responsibility and to achieve success in some areas of their lives (Stipek 1997). Such success need not only involve high scholastic achievement, but also include good teacher-pupil relationships, completing tasks and succeeding under difficult circumstances.

Resilient students often possess another protective factor — a talent. What seems key is not the level of talent, but involvement in an activity. Their sense of purpose and pride derived from this activity builds students' self-efficacy. Every student has some competence or

talent which can be nurtured by teachers. This sense of achievement helps build their resilience.

Teachers can help by assigning long-term tasks that promote a sense of competence or self-efficacy. This does not come from only making students feel good about themselves, but also from interacting positively with students as they overcome obstacles met on their tasks or projects. Students who receive 'scaffolding' or assistance from a teacher will pursue and develop their own natural aptitudes and interests as well as have a 'I can' attitude.

Moreover, teachers can develop resilience by having high expectations for excellence from students. Besides developing a 'I can' attitude, teachers can also develop an attitude of 'I will do my best'. With both high and realistic expectations for all students, teachers can encourage habits of working hard and a perseverance to bounce back from difficulties.

SUMMARY

Resilience has multiple meanings; this paper discusses the role of teachers in developing students' resilience in school. Some protective factors of resilience are intelligence, problem-solving skills, affiliations with confiding adults, and a supportive relationship with peers. These reduce students' vulnerability to academic and behavioural difficulties (Dubow & Luster 1990).

Often, teachers reward academic outcomes and motivate in terms of cognitive skills and achievement on tests and examinations. Teachers can also enhance protective factors and build resilience by teaching problem-solving and social skills, and by raising students' self esteem (Zimmerman & Arunkumar 1994). Resilient students do turn to people they trust or see regularly, such as family, friends and teachers. Based on a strong correlation between teachers and students' perception of school, four ways are suggested to develop resilience in students: create a learning environment, communicate optimism and care, develop problem-solving skills and encourage a sense of accomplishment, and a natural talent in students.

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