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Resiliency assessment within special education evaluations

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Abstract

Data were gathered from 65 teachers of students with learning disabilities to assess their perceptions of one of two school-based special education evaluation reports: a primarily deficit-oriented report or the same report with embedded protective factor (resiliency) information added. Results suggested that the learning disability teachers who reviewed the resiliency report were significantly more optimistic for the evaluated student than those teachers who reviewed the deficit report. In contrast, the protective factor comments did not specifically contribute to more positive teacher perceptions of the report itself. Implications are discussed, including potential methods for reporting collected resiliency data in written evaluation reports.

Resiliency Assessment within Special Education Evaluations

Observations of resilient children who seem to adapt very well, despite difficult circumstances or threats to development, have been well documented (e.g., Brooks, 1999; Masten, 2001; Werner & Smith, 1982). Although original assumptions about the rarity and extraordinary nature of resiliency were probably misleading (Masten, 2001), educators and psychologists have been encouraged to re-think the deficit-oriented model that has been pervasive, and consider giving increased attention to the influence of strengths and capacities (Sheldon & King, 2001).

A helpful starting point in this effort involves increasing awareness of specific protective factors that are associated with resiliency. One key factor appears to be the presence of warm and caring support from at least one adult (Masten, 1998; Rutter, 1985; Werner & Smith, 1982). This may in turn contribute to the child's problem-solving and self-regulation skills, which can also act as protective factors (Masten, 1998). Additionally, and more specific to the school setting, Henderson & Milstein (2002) have cited the need for meaningful school participation as an important student resiliency catalyst. These authors maintain that all students need to participate in activities that they, and their peers, view as important. While this summary of factors is not exhaustive, it provides a sampling of key individual, family, and extra-familial resiliency variables. Beyond increasing one's awareness of these factors, the resiliency literature has moved toward providing a more thorough understanding of how resiliency can successfully be encouraged and developed in schools or other settings. One recent practical resource provided educators with proactive classroom planning strategies reflecting the assumption that well conceived support systems are critical to student resiliency (Doll, Zucker, and Brehm, 2004).

Purpose

We set out to contribute to this evolving resiliency literature by focusing more specifically on students with disabilities, in this case learning disabilities. The assessment process was of specific interest. Traditionally, special education assessments have been deficit focused, involving the determination and reporting of student risks and weaknesses. The identification of deficits is needed to ensure student eligibility for many special educational services. However, we believe that incorporating a more balanced risk/resiliency framework into the special education assessment process is of importance in terms of creating a more accurate and optimistic perception of the child being evaluated. One way to further promote student resiliency in the special education process is to encourage psychologists and others who assess struggling students to more formally ask about and look for protective factors (e.g., during testing, during observations, during interviews). Those evaluators can then utilize psychoeducational reports as a platform for presenting known protective factors, in addition to the deficits and risks that are also of importance.

The purpose of this study was to statistically test the impact of including protective factor data in psychoeducational reports. A hypothetical report of a student we called Kevin was utilized as our primary unit of analysis. We chose to analyze the perceptions of learning disability teachers after they read Kevin's report in one of two ways: either as a "traditional" psychoeducational report format (primarily deficit oriented) or as a "resiliency" report (protective factor comments discretely embedded). Two specific research questions were developed:

a) Is there a statistical mean difference between teachers' perceptions of a resiliency report and teachers' perceptions of a more traditional report?

b) Is there a statistical mean difference in teachers' optimism for the evaluated student when protective factor comments are added in the report, versus teachers' optimism for the same student when more traditional report content is used?

Method

Participants

To identify potential participants, an address file of all learning disability teachers in one Midwestern state was obtained from the department of education in that state. A random sample of 300 learning disability teachers was drawn from this file. Research packets were sent to each teacher in this sample, and sixty-five packets were returned and used for this study. Ninety-seven percent of that sample categorized themselves as white/Caucasian and 3% as other. In terms of geographic location, 45% indicated that their place of employment was best described as rural, 28% indicated urban, and 28% indicated suburban. The mean years of experience for the total sample was 14.8.

Materials

Each participant received a fictional special education evaluation report to review (either "traditional" or "resilient") as well as a questionnaire to be completed and returned. The traditional report was developed after reviewing the content of several actual special education evaluation reports for students with learning disabilities. Attempts were made to make this mock report appear typical for school-based psychoeducational evaluations involving a potential learning disability. We included background information, observation data, cognitive ability

assessment, academic achievement assessment, and information processing data. Content in the traditional report was primarily dedicated to special education qualification criteria.

The resiliency report was nearly identical, utilizing the same student, test scores, and information within all the same categories noted for the traditional report. However, distinguishing characteristics of this report included brief comments related to the assessment of protective factors. Information related to various sources of adult support, specific student competencies, meaningful participation in school, and helpful problem-solving strategies during testing were specifically integrated into the report at six separate points in the report. Included factors reflected components of resiliency that were gleaned from the current resiliency literature (Brooks & Goldstein, 2001; Henderson & Milstein, 2002; Masten, 1998). The goal with the resiliency report was to create a more balanced report (deficit and strength) that still maintained realistic content. Only the minimum requirements of a typical assessment report were included in each of the mock reports to minimize the amount of time necessary for participants in this study. See Appendix A for a verbatim listing of the strength-based information that differentiated the resiliency report.

In addition to the two fictional assessment reports, a questionnaire was developed to assess demographic characteristics of the participants and two additional dependent variables: a) Perceptions of the Report, and b) Optimism for the Student. All participants in both groups received the same questionnaire.

Technical Properties of the Scales in the Questionnaire

Six questionnaire items were utilized to measure learning disability teachers' Perceptions of the Report (See Appendix B for item list). These items were developed to measure the readers' view of how useful the report was, primarily as it related to developing interventions for

the student. Internal reliability analysis of these Perceptions of the Report items revealed a

satisfactory alpha level of .79. Additionally, four items were used to measure participant

Optimism for the Student (See Appendix B). These items were developed to be more specific to

the individual student's future, as opposed to perceptions of the report itself. A reliability

analysis of the four Optimism for the Student items resulted in a low internal reliability value

(alpha = .34), making interpretation of the results of this particular analysis more complex.

Procedure

Half of the 300 prospective participants were mailed the "traditional" assessment report

with the questionnaire and the other half received the "resilience" report and questionnaire.

Participants were asked to read the report carefully and formulate conclusions about the

hypothetical student evaluated in the report. After reading the report, they were asked to

complete the questionnaire and return it in an enclosed postage-paid envelope.

<div align="center">Results</div>

Analyses were first conducted on demographic variables in order to identify any

differences between the resiliency report readers and the traditional report readers that may

impact the interpretation of our primary analysis results. Pearson Chi Square tests of

independence were not significant for gender [X^2 (1, $N = 65$) = 1.38, $p > .05$] nor ethnicity [X^2 (1,

$N = 90$) = 3.53, $p > .05$]. The two groups were both primarily Caucasian. Likewise, an

independent samples t-test confirmed that the two groups were similar in years of experience as

educators ($t = .865$, $p > .05$). These findings support the conclusion that the two groups can be

considered equivalent in terms of gender, ethnicity, and years of experience.

Psychoeducational report perceptions: The influence of protective factors

An independent samples t-test was used to identify potential differences between the two groups on the total scores of the Perceptions of the Report variable. Group descriptive statistics are displayed in Table 1 for these variables. The t-test revealed an insignificant mean difference on the Perceptions of the Report variable between the two groups of teachers ($t = .901$, $p = .37$). Those reading the resiliency report ($n = 41$) were no more positive about their report than those who read the standard report ($n = 24$).

<TABLE 1 HERE>

Optimism for the student: The influence of protective factors

An independent samples *t*-test that was also used to analyze teachers' total Optimism for the Student (see Table 1 for descriptive statistics). The *t*-test results revealed a statistical mean difference between report types on the total Optimism for the Student score ($t = 2.144$, $p < .05$). To determine the effect size, the strength of association between group membership based on report type read and Optimism for the Student was also calculated. The eta-squared value was .068, suggesting that about 7% of the observed variance in learning disability teachers' optimism for the student can be accounted for by the style of the report (protective factor content vs. standard). Furthermore, four additional item level *t*-tests revealed one of the four items individually resulted in a statistical mean difference between resiliency and standard report readers (Kevin has solid problem solving skills that could help him overcome his struggles). Those who read the resiliency report were again more optimistic ($t = 2.732$, $p < .01$).

<div align="center">Discussion</div>

Teachers who read a report with interjected protective factors reported feeling significantly more optimistic about the student being evaluated when compared to teachers who

read a more traditional report. Given that all report data (beyond the inclusion of protective factors in the resiliency report) was held constant between the two reports, it can be concluded that protective factor information in reports is associated with increased teacher optimism for evaluated students. We speculated that many readers might be primarily influenced by test scores, but that perhaps readers of the resiliency report would be more optimistic than standard report readers. Indeed, the latter was the case. It appears that these teachers consciously or unconsciously looked beyond test scores when developing their perceptions of students being evaluated.

Given these findings, we recommend that school psychologists, teachers of students with disabilities, and other educators involved in psychoeducational evaluations give additional consideration to resiliency assessment. We recognize that educators involved in special education frequently face demanding schedules, and that they must often focus on deficit-oriented data needed to clarify special education qualification. While this reality is understood, we believe that a great deal of protective factor data can be collected rather efficiently and within already existing assessment practices. For example, during test session and classroom observations, evaluators can consciously focus on when the student does particularly well in addition to a focus on deficit. Indeed, similar to its use within problem behavior observations, ABC recording (antecedent-behavior-consequence) (see Van Houten & Hall, 2001) can help decipher why a child is doing well during observations. A resiliency focused mindset can also be efficiently utilized during structured and informal interviews with parents and teachers. Interviewers could include queries related to support systems, meaningful participation activities in school, and other competencies that don't readily result from a standard special education assessment. While protective factor assessment may already be part of some standard

procedures, it appears less likely to be given emphasis in reports when compared to deficit factors. Preliminary data analysis involving 16 initial psychoeducational reports (potential learning disabilities) suggested that significantly more lines of text are dedicated to deficit factors versus protective factors. (Woitaszewski, Honerman, & Pendleton, 2005). We believe that reporting the details surrounding protective factors is invaluable, especially for initial evaluation reports, where educators often look for comprehensive student data.

As with any activity that is valuable, some specific resiliency practices will take time. Additional measures that have specifically been developed to uncover assets (e.g., the Behavioral and Emotional Rating Scale, Epstein & Sharma, 1998) require time to administer and interpret, and observations that intentionally focus on known strengths clearly involve expanding one's schedule. However, the assessment and reporting of protective factors has the potential of setting a more accurate and optimistic tone for the educators and parents involved. Moreover, we especially encourage Individual Education Plan goals that are developed from known student competencies or other assets. This practice may help maintain student self-esteem and school connectedness.

The limitations of this study include a low internal reliability value for the total Optimism scale. We believe the Optimism items were appropriate yet perhaps too diverse to yield a reliable total scale. Additional reliable items could be developed in order to increase confidence in a total optimism construct. Future researchers should also consider studying how much resiliency assessment is actually being done in the schools, what tools are used to assess it, and how it is reported. Ultimately researchers must assess the direct impact of resiliency assessment on student achievement and mental health. Research questions could address the connection

between strength/asset based IEP goals and positive student outcomes (e.g., increased positive attitude toward school, reduced drop-out rate).

Is summary, these findings help support previous suggestions in the literature that understanding student protective factors may be important for children with disabilities (Armen, 2002; Brooks, 1999; Brooks & Goldstein, 2001; Goldstein & Brooks, 2005). We suggest that special education assessment teams strive to maintain balanced risk/resiliency psychoeducational reports. Use of a risk and resilience model has been encouraged and generally described well elsewhere (e.g., Bryan, 2003), but has not been expanded to specify written reporting in special education. We view the psychoeducational report as a document that sets an important tone for the evaluated child's future. Consumers of a psychoeducational report (e.g., teachers and parents) may inappropriately perceive a child's skill or potential by content that inaccurately leans towards deficit identification. To deliver resiliency data most effectively, we recommend that written psychoeducational reports clearly highlight and emphasize student competencies, strengths, and support systems. We strongly urge the use of a section heading in psychoeducational evaluation reports that identifies "protective factors" or "resiliency data." We believe this practice helps the evaluation team to organize resiliency data, while also helping the reader recognize this influential information.

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Appendix A

Resiliency data that was included in the resiliency report (at six separate points):

a) "During the interview several positive assets were also noted. Kevin's paternal grandmother appears to be a caring support for him. He enjoys visiting her weekly in a nearby town, as it was reported that she frequently encourages Kevin to always "work hard" and "keep doing what you do best." Additionally, Kevin has a strong bond with Mr. McMahon, one of his teachers from last year. They share an interest in fishing and often speak about their hobby during free time at school. Kevin's skill at fishing is reportedly a real source of pride."

b) "Kevin was also observed for 30 minutes in his afternoon art class on February 20, 2003. Although still off-task more than a comparison classmate (Kevin – 31% off-task; Comparison – 20% off-task), his off-task behavior was observed to be much less in this environment when compared to the social studies observation. Kevin was still restless at times, but he appeared to benefit from his teacher's use of proximity and praise for his work and his effort. Kevin's activity level also appeared to be less problematic because he was frequently asked by his teacher to move around as part of a classroom job involving distributing materials to his classmates."

c) "Despite his difficulties, it should be noted that Kevin displayed a sincere desire to do well. He sometimes made encouraging self-statements such as 'you can get this!' or 'you got that one.'"

d) "Additionally, Kevin sometimes 'talked his way through' various problem solving efforts. He often appeared to be most successful, with both verbal and nonverbal tasks, when engaged in this strategy."

e) "Similar to other WISC-IV tasks, he was most successful when he chose to verbally repeat items out loud to himself. This verbal repetition appeared to help his working memory significantly."

f) "In contrast, testing of the limits (following standardized test administration) revealed that Kevin simply starts off on the wrong track at times. Once he understood a task (this typically took more repetition than it would others his age), his rate of success increased significantly. Additionally, as a whole, Kevin appeared to prefer 'hands-on' tasks, but he also increased his success when verbalizing during problem solving. These observations may suggest that he performs best when information is multi-sensory in nature."

Appendix B

Perceptions of the Report items:

a) There is ample content in this report that would be useful in designing interventions/help

    for Kevin.

b) This report is too long.

c) This report sets an appropriate tone of optimism about Kevin's future.

d) This report includes information that parents could use to help Kevin.

e) This report includes information that teachers could use to help Kevin.

f) I had difficulty understanding Kevin's needs (item score reversed)

Optimism for the Student items:

a) Kevin has the potential to be successful in school.

b) Kevin is a candidate for dropping out of school at some point in the future (item score

    reversed)

c) Kevin has solid problem-solving skills that could help him overcome his struggles.

d) I'm confident I could help Kevin with his struggles.

Table 1.

Descriptive Statistics for the Perceptions of the Report & Optimism for the Student variables:

Traditional Report Readers vs. Resiliency Report Readers

	Traditional			Resiliency		
	M	*SD*	*n*	*M*	*SD*	*n*
Perceptions of the Report	23.8	5.2	24	25.1	5.8	41
Optimism for the Student	16.8	2.1	24	18.1	2.6	41

Note: These values represent total scores. The Perceptions of the Report total score included six items on a six-point likert scale resulting in a potential total score range of 6 – 36. The Optimism for the Student total score included four items resulting in a total score range of 4 – 24. Higher scores reflect more positive views of the report and greater optimism, respectively.