School Psychologists and the Emphasis Placed On Student

Resiliency in the Assessment Process

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April 2009

Abstract

An action research study was initiated involving school psychologists among various Minnesota and Wisconsin school settings. A single ten-item questionnaire was used. This questionnaire included several Likert scale items designed to measure the emphasis and importance school psychologists of various backgrounds and work settings place on student resiliency during the special education eligibility assessment process. Several research questions were examined involving different school psychologist variables which were determined by a demographics information sheet completed by each participating psychologist. While three school psychologist factors showed no relationship to resiliency practices, one variable showed a statistically significant relationship. The results of this study suggested that as a school's socioeconomic status decreases (represented by the percentage of free and reduced lunch), resiliency assessment practices among school psychologists increase.

School Psychologists and the

Emphasis Placed on Student Resiliency

In educational settings today, school psychologists are faced with daily challenges involving not only fostering academically and socially equipped students, but also attempting to secure future success for all learners. It appears imperative that educational staff and parents appreciate the components of a resilient mindset as they collaborate to establish strategies for academic and social achievement (Brooks & Goldstein, 2001). As noted by Thomsen (2002), "whether or not the seeds of resiliency get nourished and grow often depends on the people surrounding a child and their attitudes toward children" (p. 11).

Resiliency Defined

When examining resiliency in students and more specifically, school psychologist's use of resiliency in student assessment, it would be beneficial to begin with a definition of the term. Attempts to define resiliency have often been vague and lacking in construct. However, there has been some agreement on the general framework of resiliency within development. Small, Stephen, Memmo, & Marina (2004) noted that resilience is best demonstrated when an individual both avoids problem behaviors and attains developmental expectations despite exposure to significant risk. Masten (2001) indicated that often the goal of research on resilience is to understand processes that account for good outcomes when an individual has experienced serious threats to adaptation or development. Important to note, is the view of Brooks & Goldstein (2001) that "although in some scientific circles the word *resilience* has typically been applied to youngsters who have overcome stress and hardship, it should be understood as a vital

ingredient in the process of parenting *every* child" (p. 3). In fact, the universal application

of resilience was supported by Masten (2001) when she wrote "the great surprise of

resilience research is the ordinariness of the phenomena. Resilience appears to be a

common phenomenon that results in most cases from the operation of basic human

adaptational systems" (p. 227).

The concept that resiliency could apply to a great number of students highlights

its importance in the school setting. Enhancing resiliency would appear to benefit youth

in an American society that has seen an increase in failing grades at school, involvement

in the court system, illicit drug use, violence, and depression (Fraser, 2002). When they

discussed the qualities of resilient individuals, Brooks & Goldstein (2001) found that

resilient people feel special and appreciated, they have learned to set realistic goals and

expectations for themselves, they have developed the ability to solve problems, they rely

on productive coping strategies that are growth-fostering rather than self-defeating, and

they are aware of their weaknesses and vulnerabilities. They also recognize their strong

points and talents, they have developed effective interpersonal skills with peers and

adults alike, they are able to seek out assistance an nurturance in an appropriate manner

and they are able to define the aspects of their lives over which they have control and to

focus their energy and attention on these rather than on factors over which they have

little, if any, influence. If resilient youth possess these characteristics and resiliency can

be fostered in a majority of students, it can be argued that schools act in the best interest

of students when they incorporate resiliency into their interactions with students and

families.

Resiliency in Schools

There is clear evidence that schools as organizations and education in general provide a hospitable environment to foster resiliency building skills. In fact, according to Hendersen and Milstein (1996), "next to families, schools are the most likely place for students to experience the conditions that foster resiliency" (p. 17). Research has indicated two consistent themes in effective school literature and student resiliency building include the fostering of *caring* and *personalization.* It should be noted that the act of focusing on students' strengths rather weaknesses will thrust students from "risk" behavior to resiliency. In addition, developing and maintaining a trusting relationship with just one adult is the most critical resiliency builder for students (Hendersen & Milstein, 1996). With schools being critical environments for students to "bounce back from adversity, adapt to pressures and problems encountered, and develop the competencies-social, academic, and vocational necessary to do well in life," (Hendersen & Milstein, 1996), six consistent themes emerged from research showing how schools can provide environmental protective factors and the conditions that foster individual protective factors. The six steps to increase resiliency building classrooms and the behavior of teachers in these classrooms are to *increase bonding, set clear, consistent boundaries, teach life skills, provide caring and support, set and communicate high expectations, and provide opportunities for meaningful participation* (Hendersen & Milstein, 1996).

While knowing that schools can provide environments that build resiliency factors, it will be important to note what, in fact, a resilient school system looks like and more specifically, what a resilient classroom looks like. According to Hendersen and Milstein (1996), resiliency building school environments can be found in all types of

communities. Common characteristics of a resilient school include: healthy bonding is promoted in positive, supportive organizations; clear organizationally defined boundaries that promote cooperation, support, and a sense of belonging; promoting the connection between school wide and individually based learning, change and effectiveness; emphasizing cooperation and caring, celebrations and rites of passage, administrations and other staff make their presence known, getting to know students names and interest; a "can do" attitude must permeate the school, communal beliefs in the ability to succeed are communicated with everyone; changing the perception that students are viewed as "clients" to students are "workers," and therefore meaningful part of the school system (Hendersen & Milstein, 1996).

A resilient classroom is a place where all children can be successful emotionally, academically, and socially (Doll, Zucker, and Brehm, 2004). To foster this type of resilient environment, teachers need to strengthen characteristics of the classroom environment. According to Doll, Zucker, and Brehm (2004), these include: *Academic Efficacy,* provide opportunities to tackle challenging learning tasks with the instructional supports necessary to make success likely; *Behavioral Self-Control,* carefully managing classroom routines, supervising carefully, and systematically manipulating antecedents and consequences; *Academic Self-Determination*, giving students practice, feedback, and direct instruction in academic goal setting, decision making, problem solving, and self-evaluation of academic skills; *Effective Teacher-Student Relationships,* by raising or lowering students' expectations of success, reassuring them in the face of failure, and engaging them in active interaction with new knowledge; *Effective Peer Relationships,* ensuring students have someone to sit with on the bus, someone to play with at recess,

someone to eat with at lunch, and someone to talk with during free moments in the

classroom; *Effective Home-School Relationships¸* checking in with parents to to discuss

things such as monitoring television, providing a quiet place to study, checking

homework completion, and reinforcing teacher discipline. Overall, these six

characteristics connect students to their classrooms by emphasizing the importance of

self-regulation and self-efficacy. In addition, emphasize the caring and connected

relationships among members of the classroom community (Doll, Zucker, and Brehn,

2004).

Resiliency Focus during Student Assessment

Clearly a discussion concerning resiliency in schools highlights what Brooks &

Goldstein (2001) stressed when they stated, "while parents are the most influential adults

in a child's life, it is important to appreciate the impact that teachers and the school

environment have on a child's emotional development and resilience" (p. 261). The

opportunity to foster resiliency can be found in large suburban high schools, in rural

lunchrooms, on the playground in an urban elementary, in a middle school science class,

or in an early childhood home visit. Resiliency can be found, examined and encouraged

in any setting that encounters students. One noteworthy area filled with potential to

utilize resiliency is that of special education assessment. Too often, when a student is

referred for a special education assessment, the team (typically consisting of the student's

parents, teachers, student support staff- school psychologists, counselors, nurses, special

education teacher and administration) is told of the "problems" that are impacting the

student's educational performance. If the team moves forward with the evaluation, a

majority of the time is spent gathering information on the identified problems. Thomsen

(2002) noted that it is the expected role of educators to seek out problems, diagnose them and provide remedies. She further explained that, "we need to shift our thinking from deficits to assets, from problems to solutions" (p. 2).

The tools typically used in the assessment process of special education are deficit oriented (Epstein 1999). However, alternatives that look to incorporate and examine a student's strengths do exist. Informal measures such as student, parent and teacher interviews could seek information related to the positive aspects of a child, as well as their unique abilities.

Formal assessment tools are also available to educators. Epstein (1999) reported that, "perhaps the most widely used strength instrument is the Behavioral and Emotional Rating Scale (BERS): A Strength-Based Approach to Assessment. This is a 52-item scale that measures students' strengths in five-factor, analytically derived subscales. The scales include measurements of *Interpersonal Strengths*, *Family Involvement, Intrapersonal Strengths, School Functioning, and Affective Strength* and have been found to be well constructed and have sound psychometric characteristics (Epstein 1998). An additional formal assessment tool that incorporates an inspection of resiliency is the Behavior Assessment System for Children (BASC-2). The BASC-2 is a norm-referenced standardized system that uses rating scales completed by teachers, parents and students themselves to provide information that is helpful to evaluate the behavior and self-perceptions of children and young adults. Within the BASC-2, there exists a resiliency content scale. This scale measures the individual's ability to obtain support in order to overcome adversity and also to reduce stress (Reynolds & Kamphaus, 2004).

Both formal and informal assessment provides school psychologists with the opportunity to build relationships with individual students. Importantly, Thomsen (2002) reported that this is one of the most important aspects of supporting resilience in youth. An additional two factors also are required, as noted by Thomsen (2002) that include high expectations and levels of support, as well as, opportunities for students to contribute in meaningful ways. School psychologists can utilize student resiliency methods during all phases of the special education process. They can make deliberate attempts to incorporate resiliency in the pre-referral interventions. They can make choices about assessment tools in relation to measuring resiliency. Finally, school psychologists can continue to incorporate student resiliency in the development of Individualized Educational Plans and progress monitoring.

The Influence of School Psychologist Characteristics on Resiliency Practice

The role school psychologists play in fostering resilient environments and taking into account resiliency while completing assessment has been minimal. More specifically, there has been very little research conducted on how resiliency can be assessed in schools. According to Hendersen and Milstein (1996), "Adults in schools need to look for students' strengths with the same meticulousness that is usually used to uncover student problems, and mirror those strengths to the students" (p. 18). However, this strength-based focus has become somewhat of a formality. At IEP meetings and/or re-evaluations, parents, teachers, administrators, and school psychologists may list students' strengths, but never in fact build upon these. Students may not even have effective knowledge about their strengths and how to better use them to be successful at home, in school, and in the community.

To combat some of these concerns, Hendersen and Milstein (1996), have outlined a variety of approaches school districts have taken to increase resiliency building in their districts. Some districts are incorporating components of resiliency building in their school vision and mission statements. Others have taken resiliency-building approaches to discipline, such as providing guidelines for preventive discipline and providing a caring approach to discipline violations. Examples include: providing a space on the discipline referral form for identifying strengths and ensuring that the student receive help for the problem. Also, districts have provided additional incentive programs to allow opportunities for every student to be recognized in some way. Other districts are making sure that all students and staff are trained in conflict resolution and certain students can act as conflict mediators and while other school districts are allowing students to serve on School Governance Teams. These are just some of the examples of ways in which schools are focusing on resiliency interventions. It is clear that much more should be researched as to the effectiveness of these interventions and the role the school psychologist can play when assessing students in order to determine if special education placement would be appropriate and/or when developing interventions to address specific needs.

The purpose of the study was to investigate the emphasis school psychologists place on student resiliency. A sample of school psychologists, from a variety of school settings, completed a questionnaire in order to answer the following research questions:

a) How do school psychologists in the urban, suburban, and rural schools compare in the emphasis they place on resiliency in the special education assessment process?

b) What is the relationship between years of practice as a school psychologist and the emphasis he or she places on resiliency?

c) Is there a statistically meaningful relationship between socioeconomic status of a school and the emphasis placed on resiliency by school psychologists?

d) Is there statistically meaningful variation between the emphasis placed on resiliency among male school psychologists when compared to female school psychologists?

Method

Participants

A questionnaire regarding student resiliency in the special education eligibility assessment process was completed by 80 school psychologists, of the 250 that were distributed, who were employed in various locations in Minnesota and Wisconsin. This resulted in a return rate of 32 percent. These school psychologists were selected through a search of public school websites, specifically targeting staff with the title of "school psychologist." In addition to the questionnaire, a demographics information sheet was completed by each school psychologist participating. From this informational sheet, the following was determined.

This sample included 22 (27%) urban, 37 (46%) suburban, and 17 (21%) rural school psychologists. Of the 80, four (5%) did not report their school location. Their ages ranged from 25 to 63 with a mean of 44. Their years as a practicing school psychologist ranged from one to 35 years, with a mean of 16 years. Our sample included 61 (76%) female respondents and 19 (24%) males. These school psychologists were employed in different school settings ranging from early childhood to high school. This included one

(1%) school psychologist at the early childhood level, 21 (26%) at the elementary level, 9 (11%) at the middle school level, and 13 (16%) at the high school level. There were 36 (45%) respondents who worked at multiple school settings.

The school populations ranged from 10 students to 1,000 students per grade level, with a mean population of 181 students. In order to determine relative socioeconomic status of the school's population, data were gathered regarding percentage of free and reduced lunch for each individual school involved. These percentages ranged from 2% to 99% of the total school population, with a mean of 36.6%.

Materials

A demographics information sheet included information regarding the school psychologist's demographic information as well as information about their school setting (see Appendix A).

In the questionnaire (see Appendix B), there were ten questions pertaining to resiliency in assessment using a Likert-type scale where the respondents rated their agreement with each item (Never, Sometimes, Often, Always). Raw scores were summed with reverse-scoring performed for all negative items (e.g., "I have difficulty looking for evidence of social skills when completing file reviews"). These scores were combined to create a total resiliency score which ranged from 14 to 29. Our descriptive findings showed that our resiliency scores had an acceptable level of skewness at -0.089 and kurtosis at -0.736 resulting in a normal curve. The standard deviation of the resiliency score was 3.917.

Procedures

The questionnaire, demographics sheet, as well as a cover letter were distributed to 250 school psychologists employed in various settings throughout Minnesota and Wisconsin. Participating school psychologists were asked to fill out the questionnaire and demographics sheet and return both to the authors in the postage-paid envelope which was also included. Returned surveys were then analyzed quantitatively with SPSS for Windows software.

Results

The results of all analyses are reviewed in the following sections. All sections are organized by headings that reflect the research questions developed by the authors.

How do school psychologists in the urban, suburban, and rural schools compare in the emphasis they place on student resiliency in the special education assessment process?

In order to determine whether the independent variable of school location affects the emphasis placed on resiliency, a one-way ANOVA was completed. This analysis did not result in statistically significant variation ($F = 1.028$, $p > .05$). Therefore, a school psychologist's location, whether urban, suburban, or rural, did not affect his or her emphasis placed on student resiliency during the assessment process, in this sample.

What is the relationship between years of practice as a school psychologist and the emphasis he or she places on student resiliency?

To examine the relationship between a school psychologist's years of practice and the amount of emphasis placed on student resiliency during assessment, a bivariate correlation was conducted. This analysis did not result in a statistically significant association ($r = .105$, $p > .05$). This results in the conclusion that a school psychologist's

years of practice was not related to the emphasis he or she placed on a student's

resiliency during assessment.

Is there a statistically meaningful relationship between socioeconomic status of a school

and the emphasis placed on student resiliency by school psychologists?

To examine the socioeconomic status of the school's population, the percentage of

free and reduced lunch given to students at the school where the school psychologist was

employed was used. To answer the research question, a bivariate correlation was

conducted. This analysis resulted in a statistically significant comparison ($r = .315$, $p <$

.05). This correlation was in the small range. The r^2 was .099 suggesting that about 10%

of the emphasis on resiliency was explained by the school's socioeconomic status,

leaving 90% to be explained by other factors. Because this was a positive correlation, as

indicated by school psychologists in this sample, as the percentage of free and reduced

lunch increases, student resiliency assessment practices among school psychologists

increase as well.

Is there statistically meaningful variation between the emphasis placed on student

resiliency among male school psychologists when compared to female school

psychologists?

To answer this research question, an Independent Samples T-test was used. This

analysis did not result in a statistically significant comparison ($t = 1.118$, $p > .05$). The

mean resiliency score for females was 21.62 while the mean resiliency score for males

was 20.47. Therefore, the two groups were considered equivalent in terms of their

resiliency emphasis score. This result was indicative of gender having no influence on the

emphasis a school psychologist places on resiliency when assessing a student.

Discussion

 After examining our results, we found statistical significance for one out of our four research questions. Therefore, it can be concluded that school location, years of practice, and gender did not play a significant role in the emphasis school psychologists placed on student resiliency in this sample. Socioeconomic status (SES) of the school, however, had a significant role in the resiliency practices among school psychologists. Because we used the percentage of free and reduced lunch at a school to determine SES, as this percentage went up (SES goes down), so did the emphasis school psychologists place on resiliency.

 Clearly, in schools with lower SES, school psychologists are recognizing the importance of considering student resiliency during assessment. Similar to the research discussed in the *Resiliency Defined* portion of the introduction, it appears that the term resilience is most often associated with a population facing increased risk and adversity. Housing concerns, violent neighborhoods, and economic stressors are just some of the factors associated with low SES. These factors also clearly increase a student's risk and adversity. This historical mindset may have impacted school psychologists over the past several decades. This would help to explain why school psychologists working with a population of students with lower SES may sometimes place a greater emphasis on student resiliency in the assessment process, when compared to colleagues working with populations who are not facing the same level of adversity.

 The lack of statistical significant relating to a school psychologist's years of practice and gender can be considered a meaningful finding as well. This could indicate that both male and female school psychologists place an equal emphasis on student

resiliency throughout the assessment process. In addition, a newly practicing school psychologist does not show deficiencies or superiorities in the utilization of student resiliency approaches when compared to veteran school psychologists.

As noted in our introduction, resiliency can be found anywhere. This research clearly supported this in the finding that school location does not appear to influence the emphasis school psychologists place on student resiliency. Physical location of the school is not a limitation.

One limitation of this study was the smaller sample size used (N=80). Also, an equal amount of responses between urban, suburban, and rural schools was not obtained. This may have affected the one-way ANOVA that was completed involving this variable. Another limitation was the overall location of the sample. Because only Minnesota and Wisconsin school psychologists were used in the study, the results may not accurately portray school psychologist tendencies across the United States.

It is crucial that all school psychologists begin understanding the importance student resiliency should play in assessment, regardless of the school's SES. According to Tedeschi and Kilmer (2005), addressing the importance of resiliency helps to "enhance existing competencies, promote healthy adjustment trajectories, and foster resilient adaptation."

Future research involving school psychologist's emphasis placed on resilience during the assessment process should include study on resiliency in the pre-referral stages. Focusing on prevention is in tune with the current research supported movements in education such as Positive Behavioral Intervention Supports (PBIS) and strength-based assessment. PBIS is generally defined as a school-wide system of supports that include

proactive strategies for identifying, addressing, and supporting appropriate student behaviors to create a positive school environment. Incorporating PBIS in school systems allows for the following: a decrease in development of new problem behaviors; the prevention of existing problem behaviors worsening; the redesign of learning and teaching environments to eliminate triggers and maintainers of problem behaviors; and the avenue to teach, monitor, and acknowledge pro-social behaviors (Walker, et al. 1996).

As noted in our introduction and throughout the literature related to resiliency, movement away from the medical model of student assessment is in order. Current educational trends appear to be focusing on prevention through PBIS measures such as measurable outcomes, data-based decision making, evidence-based practices, and interventions implemented with integrity and fidelity. Through practices such as these, school psychologists should have the ability to increase their focus on student resiliency in a variety of educational settings, and thus increasing opportunities for future student success.

Appendix A

Demographic Information Sheet

(Please answer as thoroughly as possible.)

1.) Approximately what percentage of students in the school(s) you work in receive free/reduced lunch?   _____

2.) On average, how many students are there per grade in the school you service? _____

3.) What is the estimated cultural breakdown in your school?
    Native American   _____%
    Hispanic   _____%
    Caucasian   _____%
    Asian/Pacific Islander   _____%
    African American   _____%

4.) Would you classify your school(s) as urban ( ) suburban ( ) rural ( ) ?

5.) What is your age? _____ Years

6.) How many years have you practiced as a school psychologist? _____

7.) Are you Male ( ) Female ( ) ?

Appendix B

RESILIENCY SURVEY

Please use the following key:

N = Never	**S** = Sometimes	**O** = Often	**A** = Almost Always

As a School Psychologist…

1.) I intentionally observe students that I'm evaluating in classes in which they are known to have at least some success.	N	S	O	A
2.) During observations, I have difficulty recognizing the student's strengths as much as their deficits.	N	S	O	A
3.) When developing interventions, I attempt to help students build on their current strengths and preferences.	N	S	O	A
4.) When choosing rating scales, I am unconcerned whether or not they provide data on protective factors.	N	S	O	A
5.) I look for opportunities during assessments to inquire about a child's future goals and aspirations.	N	S	O	A
6.) When reporting rating scale results, I make sure that I emphasize protective and adaptive factors.	N	S	O	A
7.) When making test session observation notes, I document any evidence of problem solving strategies.	N	S	O	A
8.) I have difficulty looking for evidence of social skills when completing file reviews.	N	S	O	A
9.) I use multiple assessment techniques in order to give the students I evaluate multiple opportunities to demonstrate their strengths and skills.	N	S	O	A
10.) I look for ways to educate parents and teachers on how to foster problem-solving skills in children.	N	S	O	A

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