Developing Resiliency in Youth: A Professional Development Summer Institute for Educators

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The issue of resiliency has never seemed more important or relevant than now. As we contemplate the horrendous events of September 11, 2001, and their implications for ourselves and the young people with whom we work, we are moved to consider the sources of human strength and resilience.

Human beings can be incredibly strong in the face of adversity. It is necessary to nourish those sources of strength and resiliency in order to help us deal with the adversity and tragedy that life may unexpectedly or predictably present to us. Recent events suggest that the nourishment of resiliency has never been more relevant or imperative than it is now. Building resiliency in our young people and in ourselves is particularly compelling and relevant today.

A New Professional Opportunity

In June, 2001, my colleagues and I joined 54 teachers, counselors and school administrators for a two-week, intensive new course that focused on the construction and nourishment of resiliency in young people in order to combat such pathological responses to human problems as substance abuse and other self-destructive behaviors. This Summer Institute was sponsored by the Hawai‘i State Department of Education (DOE) and the College of Education, University of Hawai‘i Mānoa (UHM) and offered through the UHM Outreach College for graduate credit. The DOE underwrote the cost of the institute with tobacco settlement funds provided through the Hawai‘i State Department of Health (DOH) as part of the Healthy Hawai‘i Initiative. My purpose in this article is to report and reflect on the ideas and strategies that emerged from the examination of resiliency that we engaged in during those two weeks.

We were fortunate to bring outstanding presenters to the Summer Institute. Dr. Joyce Fetro, from Southern Illinois University, conducted three sessions on learning to teach essential personal and social skills to young people, such as communication, decision-making, goal setting, and stress management. These skills promote the development of essential "internal assets" that have been identified as contributing to the nourishment of resiliency in youth. Mervlyn Kitashima, a local guest presenter, was one of the original participants in the classic longitudinal study of resiliency in Kauai (Wener & Smith, 1992). Mrs. Kitashima spoke movingly of her grandmother, who served as a source of stability and unconditional love during difficult family times. Geneva To dikoi, a high school teacher in Oahu, described a mentorship program that she coordinated in Alaska. Manu C. Kaiama, director of the Native Hawaiian Leadership Project, and Kamana‘opono Crabbe contributed an invaluable session on the power of culture as a powerful source of resiliency and guidance. Dr. Douglas Smith provided a general framework and model as well as invaluable web-based resources that educators could access in order to encourage the nourishment and development of resiliency. I offered specific examples and elaboration of the essential elements of the model such as operationalizing how "meaningful" student participation can be achieved.

An effective way to prevent pathology and dysfunction is to build health, resiliency, and strength. In psychology, the principle of reciprocal inhibition holds that two incompatible behaviors cannot occur simultaneously and that a response that is incompatible with an undesirable response can be substituted for that undesirable response. Health is incompatible with pathology. Thus, promoting mental, emotional, social, and physical health can help alleviate pathology, suffering, and dysfunction; promoting peace can help decrease violence; creating institutions infused with social justice can combat injustice and nourishing strength and resiliency can mitigate the negative effects of adversity and trauma.

As I considered how to approach the issue of resiliency in the Summer Institute, I sought root meanings. Webster's Third International Dictionary (1971) includes the following in its definition of resilience and resilient:

1. An act of springing back.
2. Capable of withstanding shock without permanent deformation or rupture.
3. Tending to regain strength or high spirits after weakness or depression.

The Concise Oxford Dictionary (1990) describes a resilient person as one who readily recovers from shock. The Random House Webster's College Dictionary (1999) defines resilience as the ability to recover readily from illness, depression, adversity or the like—buoyancy.

Singer and songwriter Bob Dylan wrote a song for his newborn son that wished him "a strong foundation when the winds of changes shift." Thus, I began the two-week resiliency course by asking, "What kind of humans are we trying
to help develop?” I suggested that the answer to this question would be the central organizing principle for our efforts as educators. It was heartening to read the list of responses generated by the educators, counselors, and administrators present. There was widespread agreement that we wished to help develop strong, healthy, competent and courageous young people. These characteristics are components of that quality we call resiliency. How can we help develop young people who are strong, healthy, competent, courageous and, therefore, resilient to the adversities of life?

A Resiliency Model

In psychology and education, we have used a medical model to identify problems, deficits, and pathologies. The assumptions of this model rarely are questioned, and educators too often are trained mechanically in the logic of the medical model without seriously examining its premises. At times, we have found pathology where only normal human variation is expressed. New trends in positive psychology present an alternative orientation to promoting human and social health. The development of strong, resilient human beings is related to protective factors built into the environment and cultivated within the person. Protective factors refer to the influences modifying, ameliorating or altering the response of an individual to various hazardous events preceding maladjustment (Rutter, 1985). These protective factors can be environmental or personal factors, which protect the individual against the effect of various stressors (Losel & Bliesener, 1994). At the root of these factors are human needs. What do humans in general and young humans in our schools really need?

Psychologist Abraham Maslow (1970) proposed a hierarchy of human needs. His hierarchy suggested that these needs are as follows:

- Physiological needs (e.g., air, water, nourishment)
- Safety needs
- Belonging
- Self-esteem
- Self-actualization

Maslow thought that higher order needs (e.g., self-esteem, self-actualization) could not be satisfied unless the lower order needs (e.g., physiological, safety needs) were first satisfied. However, these needs may not exist in a strict linear relationship. For example, a school that does not foster a real sense of belonging and participation will not support the establishment of a safe environment. Young people in schools where they feel alienated and marginalized will not be invested in that school and may be motivated to meet their needs by alternative means, including gang membership, substance abuse or even revenge seeking behaviors. Educators are responsible for providing the healthiest and most socially useful opportunities for young people to meet their human needs and aspirations. We cannot blame recourse to gangs if we fail to offer viable alternatives.

The work of Bonnie Bernard (2001) informed the model of resiliency that we used in the Summer Institute. This model identified a set of youth needs that must be addressed, those external and internal assets that promote resiliency, and its associated enhancement of health, social and academic outcomes. What do young people really need? Bernard suggested that young people need safety, love, belonging, respect, mastery, and challenge. The model also suggests internal and external assets that positively address these core needs. They are:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>External Assets</th>
<th>Internal Assets</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Caring relations</td>
<td>Cooperation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High expectations</td>
<td>Empathy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meaningful participation</td>
<td>Problem-solving</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goals and aspirations</td>
<td>Self-efficacy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-awareness</td>
<td>Self-esteem</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

To help develop strong, competent and resilient young people, our efforts should support the construction of school environments where students feel cared about, where high expectations are held, and where students participate meaningfully in the decisions that affect them and in the life of the school community. Additionally, the development of strong, competent and resilient human beings requires the development of the ability to cooperate, empathize with others, and solve problems. It also requires a belief that one’s actions have consequence to achieve self-awareness and the development of challenging and valued goals. Participants in the Summer Institute considered how to build protective factors into school environments that can support the cultivation of internal assets (e.g., empathy, problem solving, and self-efficacy). These internal assets serve a protective function in the face of adversity, thereby making improved health, social and academic outcomes more probable.

Caring Relations

One caring person can make a difference. Discouraged youth who are convinced that they lack value and significance can have that devastating conviction challenged by just one caring person. Needless to say, the more caring people the better, but one caring person can, as the Werner and Smith (1992) study shows, positively alter the course of a young person’s life.

The outcome data from Ms. To dikoshi’s mentorship project in Alaska indicated the power of such interventions. Mentors are, by definition, people who care and take a special interest in their mentees. Caring relationships were built into that program in two ways. First, high school students who were
having academic, social or emotional difficulties were identified. They were not severely disturbed but were displaying problems or risk factors that were considered likely to become more severe without effective intervention. These high school students were paired with elementary school students in the community who needed help with their school-work. The older student was charged with the task of coming to the elementary school on a weekly basis and helping the younger. Secondly, a community person was paired with the high school student in a mentor-mentee relationship. The community mentors were matched carefully with mentees on the basis of likely compatibility and shared interests, and they were supported with training after their initial screening for appropriateness. This approach effectively put the "at-risk" high school student in the role of helping another, thus making a real contribution to the community and to the elementary school student. Adler (1973) called this "social interest." Social interest is that potential that exists within all people to contribute and focus beyond self. Since teenagers are often heroic, transcendent figures to young children the teenagers found their charges to be thrilled to have their very own teenager who cared and would work with them in their subject of difficulty. The community mentor would meet at least once a week with the targeted high school student and the mentor's role was to develop a caring and supportive relationship with that young person. This relatively inexpensive intervention had a powerful effect and is now considered to be a model program. Such inexpensive interventions can provide the crucial protective condition of caring relations. It is difficult for young people to maintain the conviction that they are worthless and unlovable when there is clear evidence to the contrary that exists in the form of a respected person who truly cares.

High Expectations

Are any of us wise or prescient enough to truly know the upper limits of anyone's human potential? Do aptitude tests really tell us what a person may be capable of? Do the diagnostic labels with which we describe students really have validity? Do we, in fact, commit a grave injustice on young people by placing them in "diagnostic prisons" from which there rarely is escape? For example, are low expectations inherent in diagnostic labels such as "learning disability?" Does such labeling result in a self-fulfilling prophecy as teachers, parents, and the labeled student expect less and thereby produce less? When we note the requisite discrepancy between assessed intelligence and achievement that is the essence of a learning disability diagnosis, do we consider plausible alternative explanations for that discrepancy, such as discouragement, lack of motivation, cultural differences, irrelevant curriculum and, yes, even hunger? Do we, with the best of intentions, in fact do harm? Can we hold realistically high expectations for our students while supporting them as they reach to achieve them? These are questions that challenge the assumptions of some of our practices. It is necessary to periodically re-examine such assumptions because even well intentioned, but erroneous, assumptions can lead to great harm. A useful principal is first to consider plausible alternative explanations for observations of low achievement before inferring that the low achievement has a biological or "information processing" disorder requiring a medical or pseudo-medical explanation that then requires a "Felix" response. The idea of resiliency raises questions about such assumptions and invites educators to examine them more thoroughly.

Meaningful Participation

Young people need options other than the extreme choices of conformity or rebellion. A third option exists that rarely is developed—to participate in the decisions that affect them and to be responsible for those decisions. What responsibilities can appropriately be given to students in our schools? Discipline plans, for example, directly affect students—but how often do we include them as partners in the development of such plans? We purport to be preparing our students to live in a democratic society, to solve problems and participate actively in their own lives, but do we provide them with the kinds of experiences that prepare them to do so?

Student councils and governments exist in most schools. What are they responsible for? What can they be responsible for? Schools often are bound by certain requirements set by policy makers or by necessity. These may be called the non-negotiable "givens." However, the demands placed by reality on schools are relatively few. They are that the school must be safe and that learning takes place to prepare young people to function successfully in the modern world. But there is more to educating a person than just fitting them into the system.
Injustice demands change, and young people need to learn how to critically assess their world and the courage to transform it if necessary. Beyond these requirements, much remains negotiable. Indeed, even these "givens" invite student participation. For example, students can become participants in the construction and maintenance of a safe school environment where learning can take place. As a result, they can learn to function effectively in the world as it is and to work to transform it if necessary. By struggling and participating in their worlds and their lives, young people gain competency and courage.

Building an Inclusive School Community

Can we develop school communities where each student and teacher feels respected as a thinking, feeling, meaning-constructing human being? Can we develop school communities where each person feels connected and experiences a real sense of belonging? Can we construct schools where all feel valued and significant; where all feel they can make contributions and are valued by the school community; where all feel challenged by high expectations to develop themselves to their maximum potentials and feel supported by encouragement and resources to achieve those expectations? The goal of resiliency as an educational aim demands that we should.

Much can be accomplished by creating opportunities for students to feel that they truly belong and that the school is their school. Consider how many clubs, organizations, service opportunities exist in our schools. How often and how broadly are students acknowledged for their accomplishments? Unfortunately, the real opportunities for recognition and the achievement of a sense of belonging frequently are available only to a few students. What are the others to do? How will they meet their need to feel respected, valued, challenged and, yes, needed and useful? We prevent human problems by addressing human needs.

Culture as a Source of Resiliency

E Becker (1971), an interdisciplinary scholar, thought that culture was the highest form of human adaptation. In the Summer Institute, we asked students to consider sources of strength and resiliency derived from their own cultural traditions. Since people have varying levels of awareness of themselves as cultural beings, this was an interesting and stimulating assignment. Cultures tell us how to be in the world and how to act. Cultures tell us how to achieve a sense of value and significance. Different cultures provide different solutions to common human problems, but all cultures address human needs and aspirations in creative ways. For example, they provide ceremony and ritual to assist us with difficult transitions, such as grief and loss. Cultures, therefore, are a source of strength and resilience in the face of life’s adversities.

Manu C. Kaiama, director of the Native Hawaiian Leadership Project, offers the following description of Hawaiian culture as a rich source of strength and resiliency.

Resiliency and The Native Hawaiian People

Hawaiian people have a rich culture and history spanning more than one thousand years. Hawaiian culture includes all the necessary ingredients for a collective society to develop and flourish. The culture contains deep sources of meaning and adaptation such as religion, government, music and dance. In the past, for example, struggles for resources and power nurtured a warrior class who were trained and taught to die for their allies. The qualities of warriors were identified and clear. After contact with Europeans, diseases were introduced that the population had little resistance to, and the Native Hawaiian population was dramatically changed and scarred forever. In a period of just 100 years, Hawaiians witnessed the overthrow of their monarch and familiar government system, the desecration of their sacred sites, and the death of their people. In a time when the population went from 900,000 to a mere 40,000, they were taught by well-meaning missionaries that they were uneducated savages. A law was passed forbidding them from using their own language. They must learn English. The hula was banned.

How do a people survive when they are not allowed to sing their own song? How did 40,000 survive the oppression imposed on them by foreigners? This resiliency, this warrior spirit is housed and nourished in the na‘au. The na‘au is located where the intestines are. A western “gut feeling” helps to describe the na‘au. But interestingly enough, Hawaiians believe that not only is the na‘au the home of the guts, but also the home of the mind, affections, emotions and feelings. The pō'o or head, houses the spirit; the na‘au houses the heart. Hawaiians listen and respect their na‘au, or gut instinct in combination with their feelings, their heart. They recognize that there is no way to separate intellect and emotion, nor should they be separated. These very tools can help keep them
strong, guide them to make good decisions, enable them to overcome the challenges of life itself. Finely tuned instincts are gifts from the kupuna and numakua (ancestors) who came before. Ancestors act as protectors and guides. You are a culmination of all of them who came before. Your very existence has mana (spiritual power) and that is a sacred thing. To be taught to respect your na'au because it is all these things, and to listen to it, is the piko (very beginning) of developing resiliency. To trust your instincts, to believe you are guided by a greater force in this life, develops confidence. To value instinct, feelings and intellect as a gift from those who came before you, knowing that it is there to assist you to live a life that is pono (balanced), is the building blocks of resiliency. The Hawaiian value system teaches you that you do not stand alone. Even in despair, there is hope when there is help. Having faith and knowing, not just believing, that the mind, spirit, body and aina (land) are all connected and have good purpose, gives Hawaiians the strength to go forward—the spirit to continue and search for that which is pono, and not to give up.

Conclusion

What kind of humans are we trying to help develop? Many, if not most, of the readers of this issue of Educational Perspectives would agree with educators in our Summer Institute that we want to help develop strong, courageous, competent, compassionate and, resilient human beings. The world needs such people. We must work to construct school environments that make such desirable outcomes more probable. As educators, we can draw on the beliefs of our respective cultures to strengthen our capacity for resilience. To quote Bobby Kennedy, “It is not too late to seek a newer (and better) world.” Let’s do it with intention, courage, compassion and an implacable belief in the nobler and higher natures of our fellow humans and in our ability to cultivate and nourish those potentials.

References


