

RESILIENT AT-RISK STUDENTS IN THE INNER-CITY

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ABSTRACT. Many at-risk students overcome their social and personal disadvantage. Such students are referred to as **resilient** and are understood as being characterized by protective or compensatory factors. Thirty-eight principals and teachers in inner-city schools were asked to reflect on their personal and professional experiences with at-risk students who demonstrate resiliency. These principals and teachers identified a broad range of compensatory factors including: human relationships, student characteristics, family factors, community factors, and school factors. Based on these experiential data, a model of compensatory factor influence on at-risk student resiliency is proposed.

RÉSUMÉ. De nombreux étudiants à risque surmontent leur position désavantageuse sur le plan social et personnel. On dit de ces étudiants qu'ils ont une grande résistance et l'on croit comprendre qu'ils se caractérisent par des facteurs de protection ou de compensation. Trente-huit principaux et enseignants d'écoles de quartiers déshérités ont été invités à réfléchir à leurs expériences personnelles et professionnelles auprès des étudiants à risque qui affichent ce type de résistance. Ces principaux et enseignants ont cerné un riche éventail de facteurs de compensation parmi lesquels : les relations humaines, les caractéristiques de l'étudiant, les facteurs familiaux, les facteurs communautaires et les facteurs scolaires. D'après ces données expérientielles, on propose un modèle d'influence des facteurs de compensation sur le degré de résistance des étudiants à risque.

Contemporary educational and social concern with children and youth at-risk is so pervasive and extreme as to require little qualifying introduction (Elam, 1993; Manning & Baruth, 1995). Since 1989, some 2,500 articles and conference papers have focused on this topic, and a growing number of governmental reports continue to address the theme of children and youth at-risk (Swadener & Lubeck, 1995). From an educational perspective, the term **at-risk students** covers many categories of children and youth, "... those who become pregnant, those who commit crimes, those who commit suicide, those who drop out" (Mar-

tin, 1991, p. 69). Given this broad range of adverse outcomes, it has been suggested that from one-third to one-half of students could be considered at-risk (Aksamit, 1990; Henson, 1995; Takamishi, 1993). Educational concern with at-risk students is not simply that they are failing to learn but, rather, that they will approach and enter adulthood "illiterate, dependent upon drugs and alcohol, unemployed or underemployed, as a teenage parent, dependent on welfare, or adjudicated by the criminal justice system" (Barr & Parrett, 1995, p. 3). The ultimate risk that students face is that they become disconnected from the functions of society, from economic productivity, and as citizens in a democracy.

Risk factors are those characteristics and circumstances that predispose students to experience risk outcomes (Richardson, Casanova, Placier, & Guilfoyle, 1989; Ruff, 1993). Educational risk factors have been conceptually categorized in terms of student attributes, familial characteristics, school factors, and community variables (Johnson, 1994). Within an educational context, the most commonly cited risk factors include: substance abuse, illegal activity, school truancy, suspension, expulsion and failure, poor parenting, familial transience, poverty, English as a foreign language, residing in the inner-city, counterproductive sibling behaviours such as dropping out of school and criminal activities, lone-parent families, lack of extracurricular involvement, poor home-school relations, ethnic minority status, and having an uneducated mother (Fitzgerald, 1990; Frymier, Barber, Carriedo, Denton, Gansneder, Johnson-Lewis, & Robertson, 1992; Pallas, Natriello, & McDill, 1989).

However, "all studies of risk factors have shown a very considerable variability in how people respond to psycho-social adversity" (Rutter, 1993, p. 626). Clearly, not all students characterized by risk factors actually experience negative outcomes. There are any number of situations in which disadvantaged youth function successfully in school and in life (Connell, Spencer, & Aber, 1994; Garnezy, 1991). In a recent study of students whose life circumstances and behaviours were characterized by numerous risk factors for academic failure, approximately 19% were found to have developed positive goals and plans for the future (Peng, Lee, Wang, & Walberg, 1992). Rutter's (1985) research on children growing up in adverse conditions found that approximately half of the children did not repeat that pattern during adulthood. Correspondingly, a classic longitudinal American study that followed high risk individuals (i.e., characterized by four or more risk

factors) from birth to adulthood reported that one-third of the subjects were functioning well by adolescence. By age 32, two-thirds of those children who had demonstrated problems during adolescence were functioning normally during adulthood (Werner & Smith, 1992). Such studies might be interpreted as implying that intervention for at-risk students is best directed toward enhancing "the self-righting nature of human development" (Benard, 1993, p. 44).

Children and youth who are characterized by risk factors but who do not manifest risk outcomes are referred to as **resilient** (Barr & Parrett, 1995). Numerous personal and situational characteristics appear to compensate for or protect against risk factors (Scales, 1992). Such protective or compensatory factors exist within the child, the family, the school, and the community (Benard, 1991; Keogh, 1989; Werner, 1990). Resilient students have typically been found to possess four attributes: social competence, problem-solving skills, autonomy, and a sense of purpose and future (Connell, Spencer, & Aber, 1994; Reed, McMillan, & McBee, 1995). Similarly, families, schools, and communities that protect at-risk children and youth are characterized by caring and support, positive expectations, and ongoing opportunities for participation (Garbarino, Dubrow, Kostelny, & Pardo, 1992; Garmezy, 1991; Liontos, 1991; Phelan, Davidson, & Cao, 1992; Taylor & Reeves, 1993). However, while such research has identified specific protective factors, a unifying theoretical framework for understanding the circumstantial and personal forces of resiliency in at-risk students is lacking.

Most typically, educational and social interventions for at-risk students are directed toward reducing or minimizing the impact of risk factors (Irby Davis & Haney, 1991; Slavin, Karweit, & Madden, 1989). The importance of such interventions cannot be underestimated. At the same time, examination of resiliency in at-risk children and youth contributes to an alternate intervention orientation, one that attempts to foster protective and compensatory factors in at-risk students, their families, their schools, and their communities. An important approach to improving the probability of academic, social, and personal success of at-risk students is to enhance practical understanding of individual resiliency in terms of a conceptual model of protective and compensatory factors.

Principals and teachers in inner-city schools have considerable experience with at-risk populations and with those specific students who appear able to overcome the deleterious consequences of adversity (Wang & Reynolds, 1995). The personal reflections of inner-city school

principals and teachers regarding their professional experiences with at-risk students who are resilient may contribute toward a deeper understanding of individual and environmental compensatory and protective factors. Such an experiential data-base may illuminate interaction among compensatory factors and may highlight the differential impact of student, family, school and community characteristics in resilient at-risk students.

STATEMENT OF RESEARCH DIRECTION

Principals and teachers in inner-city schools have frontline experience with at-risk students who appear to overcome the adversity of their situations. How do school principals and teachers in the inner-city interpret the success of at-risk students? According to inner-city school principals and teachers, what are the circumstances and characteristics that contribute most to at-risk student success in school and in life? Which compensatory factors are most frequently cited by inner-city school personnel? What are the interactions between identified protective factors? Can a theoretical model be generated that reveals the relationships between compensatory factors and indicates relative importance of protective factors in at-risk students who are resilient?

METHOD

Participants: School principals and teachers in the inner-city

Central administrations of two large school districts in a western Canadian city were asked to generate a list of schools that served a high proportion of at-risk students. A list of 30 schools was developed on the basis of limited family income, degree of transience among the student population, disproportional representation of students of ethnic minority status, and school procurement of special high needs school grants. While most of the schools were geographically located directly in the inner-core, five were located outside of the inner-city. In all cases, schools were geographically located in the oldest areas of the city. One teacher described his/her school as serving "the 13th poorest neighborhood in Canada." Another teacher stated that "two-thirds of my class is funded special needs (14 out of 21) and 12 are ethnic minority students." One teacher claimed that his/her school population maintains "the highest transience rate in our entire district." A principal described his/her school by mentioning that "many children [had been] removed from their homes because of sexual, physical, and emo-

tional abuse – many behaviour problems – many family problems – need for a social worker in the school.”

The principals and teachers in these inner-city schools were asked to describe, in writing, their professional and personal experiences with and interpretations of at-risk students who are resilient. The experiences of principals and teachers were considered equally important in understanding resiliency in at-risk students. Principals bring to the data-set a global and administrative perspective; teachers contribute opinions based on in-classroom and continuous individual interaction with students. Twenty-six teachers and twelve principals complied with this request, including 15 males and 23 females. These participating inner-city school personnel ranged in age from 25 to 53 years; the average age of principals and teachers was 39.7 years. Eleven participants worked for the Catholic School System and 26 worked for the Public School System (data were missing for one participant's school system affiliation). Twenty of the participants worked in elementary schools, eleven worked in schools serving students in kindergarten through grade nine, six worked in junior high schools, and one worked in a senior high school. Enrollment in participating inner-city schools ranged from 93 to 545 students, with an average enrollment of 271.7 students. Participating teachers ranged in terms of teaching experience from one to 35 years (average 16.1 years), and in terms of teaching experience in inner-city schools from one to 16 years (average 6.6 years). Participating school principals ranged in terms of administrative experience from one to 25 years (average 9.8 years), and in terms of administrative experience in inner-city schools from one to 15 years (average 5.4 years). Participants ranged in terms of university education from four to eight years (average 5.0 years).

The written query:

Compensatory factors in at-risk students who are resilient

In addition to items concerned with school and participant background characteristics, inner-city school principals and teachers were asked to comment, in writing, on their professional and personal experiences with at-risk students who are resilient. Participants were not given specific criteria by which to identify resilient students. Instead, resilient students were loosely defined as those who are socially disadvantaged and who succeed. Student success, in this context, was left to individual participant interpretation. No participant sought further clarification of terms or of the intention of the query. The following written query solicited participant response:

Students at-risk sometimes overcome the odds and are productive, successful individuals. It has been suggested that certain student characteristics and/or environmental factors compensate for or protect against social and personal disadvantage. Based on your experience with at-risk students, reflect on those individual cases where disadvantage was overcome or appears to have the potential to be overcome. What are the factors that you feel are most important in student resiliency or compensation for social disadvantage?

Analyzing written responses: Frequency of dominant themes

Inner-city school principals' and teachers' written responses were organized and summarized in terms of re-occurring thematic categories of protective factors. The frequency with which categories of compensatory or protective factors were mentioned by participants was determined. All compensatory categories or themes were considered important in understanding resiliency in at-risk students. However, degree of compensatory category importance was determined in terms of the frequency with which category responses were stated. That is, the more often that inner-city school principals and teachers made reference to a thematic category, the more important that category was deemed to be in understanding resiliency in at-risk students.

**FINDINGS: INNER-CITY SCHOOL PRINCIPAL AND
TEACHER EXPERIENTIAL DATA**

For the preliminary purpose of synthesizing the collective experiences of inner-city school principals and teachers, and for the ultimate purpose of developing a conceptual model of compensatory factors, written responses were organized into thematic categories. Such an approach is necessary in order to summarize and present the experiential data. Classifications, however, do not intend to propose an absolute system of categorization. Indeed, there are numerous response situations in which the interactive and mutually dependent nature of protective factors was expressed or implied in participants' written responses. Summarized and presented in Table 1, five general thematic categories of compensatory factors in at-risk students emerged from inner-city school principal and teacher experiential data.

Among these five general categories of compensatory characteristics, school factors were noted in several inner-city school principals' and teachers' written responses. Academic success was mentioned thrice as a factor that enhances the at-risk student's self-esteem, thereby providing mechanisms for building confidence and increasing perceived op-

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TABLE I. Principal and teacher personal reflections on compensatory factors in resilient at-risk students

| General Theme | Frequency of Response | Specific Examples of Thematic Response |
|-------------------------|-----------------------|--|
| Relationships | 25 | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• supportive relationship with school personnel• encouragement and concern from adult• positive role model• positive peer group• positive older sibling |
| Student Characteristics | 19 | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• self-esteem• motivation• self-control• goal setting• accept responsibility• intelligence• work ethic• seek/accept help• particular skill/ability• solid moral fiber• good attitude |
| Family Factors | 14 | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• parental support/concern• parental discipline and expectations• family not transient• parental school involvement |
| Community Factors | 7 | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• sports/club/hobby involvement• community youth programs |
| School Factors | 5 | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• anger management/prosocial skills training• substance abuse programs• academic success |

NOTE: In some cases, principals and teachers mentioned multiple compensatory factors.

portunities to improve life situations. The research literature on resiliency in at-risk students has not identified academic success as a compensatory factor but, rather, as a manifestation of resiliency itself. According to at least some inner-city school personnel, academic success may, in-and-of-itself, compensate for social disadvantage. Correspondingly, specific school programs (i.e., those concerned with developing prosocial skills in at-risk students and those supporting substance abuse prevention and intervention) were identified in two response cases as essentially related to the capacity of at-risk students to compen-

sate for risk factors. The research literature has not identified specific school programs as protective factors in at-risk student resiliency. If, in fact, school programs act as protective factors, then it could be assumed that all students exposed to such programs would compensate for disadvantage. This is not the case. On the contrary, the effectiveness of such school programs is highly selective. If school-based programs compensate for social disadvantage, their impact on at-risk students may be mediated by other, perhaps individual or familial, factors.

Compensatory factors concerned with community attributes were identified in seven inner-city school principals' and teachers' responses to the written resiliency query. Most typically, respondents noted that community-based programs for at-risk children and youth provide constructive opportunities that, similar to the logic associated with school-based compensatory factors, contribute to enhanced self-esteem and personal confidence. In one response situation, a respondent expressed the experience-based perception that athletic and extracurricular involvement "promotes social skills, individual responsibility . . . provides stability and predictability . . . gives hope of success and the possibility of achievement." This appears to confirm previous research that identifies community opportunities for participation as associated with resiliency in at-risk children and youth. However, as previously suggested in interpreting school-based compensatory factors, not all at-risk students appear to benefit equally from community programs. Community youth involvement does not consistently nor absolutely compensate for social disadvantage. The most plausible explanation for principal and teacher identification of community-based protective factors is that such community opportunities interact with other, perhaps individual or familial, characteristics to result in resilient student outcomes.

In fourteen separate principal and teacher response cases, familial and parental characteristics emerged as essential protective factors in at-risk student resiliency. In general, this is consistent with research literature that has identified caring and supportive familial situations as compensatory factors in at-risk students who are resilient. The current experiential data, however, provides more substance to the details and mechanisms of protective parental characteristics. Inner-city school principals and teachers frequently expressed the perception that social disadvantage is overcome when parents make their children a priority. According to the participating inner-city school principals and teachers, such parental prioritization is manifest in the routine care of children's

health, hygiene, and nutrition. Correspondingly, participating principals and teachers claimed that children whose parents demonstrate that school, education, and teachers are important appear far more likely to overcome their social situations than do children whose parents are educationally apathetic or hostile. In several response situations, principals and teachers observed that parental school involvement was generally associated with increased probability of at-risk student success in school and in life. One inner-city school teacher wrote: "The few students I have in my class who are doing well have a strong family life . . . these kids' parents take an interest in their children's school work as well as their children's behaviour." One respondent claimed that many parents appear afraid, unwilling, or unable to control their children's behaviour. The result is children who are not self-controlled or self-disciplined. In a few exceptional situations, parents are able to demand responsible behaviour from their children and to implement reasonable consequences for rule violation. In such cases, according to two respondents, student probability of overcoming social disadvantage is substantially increased.

Student characteristics frequently emerged as protective or compensatory factors in at-risk students who are resilient. Participating principals and teachers confirmed the general research conclusion that student autonomy and sense of purpose contribute to resiliency in at-risk students. Participants frequently expressed the perception that at-risk students who establish and work toward specific goals overcome their adverse situations. Inner-city school principals and teachers often made the claim that resilient students "accept responsibility for their actions and believe they can change." One respondent wrote that "many high risk students view everything in a negative manner and blame everyone else for their unhappiness and their situations." Those students who can move beyond such external locus of control increase their chances of academic, social, and personal success.

As well as verifying the student-based compensatory factors previously identified in the research literature, several additional student characteristics emerged from the experiential data as having the potential to compensate for social disadvantage. Student attributes of intelligence and particular talents were mentioned thrice as factors that can compensate for a range of environmental risk factors. In reflecting on at-risk students who overcame adversity, several respondents expressed the view that successful at-risk students inevitably possessed "an inner

sense of self-worth” that “must come from within the student rather than from an outside source – this sense of self-worth may initially come from an outside force, but it must be internalized to have any long term effect on the student.” Internal motivation to change and a negative appraisal of their current situations frequently emerged from the experiential data as compensatory factors in socially disadvantaged students who demonstrate resiliency. One inner-city school principal wrote:

I feel the students who “make it out” of their situation have an inner drive. They have found, somewhere, a work ethic – something at-risk students are definitely lacking. I do not see many students disliking their situations so much that they see education as a way out – they see prostitution, crime as a way out.

While category distinctions are often blurred and to some extent arbitrary, by far the most common inner-city principal and teacher response to the written resiliency query focused on human interactions and relationships. In approximately 37% of response cases, principals and teachers identified positive supportive human interaction as the most critical factor in at-risk students compensating for disadvantaged situations. Such supportive human relationships, it was suggested, can occur between at-risk students and their parents, their teachers, their peers, their siblings, or any caring, concerned adult. Corresponding to the research literature, encouragement and support were identified as key factors that differentiate resilient from non-resilient at-risk students in the inner-city. Related to human interaction, the presence of positive role models frequently surfaced as critical to the development of resiliency in at-risk students. Rather typically, in reflecting on at-risk students who overcome social disadvantage, school principals and teachers in the inner-city made reference to affective realities. As one participant wrote, “somewhere along the line they’ve been loved by someone who made a difference.” Another respondent claimed that “a love or support connection allows all people to endure.” A teacher expressed the view that “the greatest single factor in overcoming the odds is a caring and compassionate person who takes a special interest in the student and makes an extra effort to help.” The protective or compensating capacity of human support, love, and encouragement is consistent with previous research on resiliency in at-risk students. What is novel is the extent to which human interaction and relationships were emphasized by participating principals and teachers. From the current experience-based data-set, human relationships appear to be situated in

a central and interactive position in the resiliency of students who are characterized by numerous risk factors.

A MODEL OF RESILIENCY IN AT-RISK STUDENTS

Based on personal and professional experiences with at-risk children and youth, school principals and teachers in the inner-city maintained that a broad range of circumstances and characteristics are implicated in student resiliency. School, community, family, and student factors were all perceived as potentially protecting students from risk factors or as potentially compensating for personal and social disadvantage. Most commonly, human relationships and interactions were viewed as critically related to the at-risk student overcoming the probability of failure in school and in life. The frequency with which principals and teachers attributed at-risk student success to these different categories of protective and compensatory factors is interpreted as indicative of differential impact. Accepting the premise that increased response frequency is a metric of compensatory category importance, human relationships are interpreted as the most critical factor in student resiliency, followed by student characteristics, family factors, community variables, and school programs and success. However, the interactional influence of these characteristics is apparent from principal and teacher written responses. For example, one respondent, arguing mainly for the positive value of community recreation activities, claimed that such "usually provide positive adult role models and peers who are motivated and on the right track." Another respondent, focusing mainly on parental school involvement, expressed the opinion that "when teachers make parents welcome, parents get involved." Thus, the inter-connectedness of compensatory factor categories is apparent and, thus, implicit in theoretical conceptualization.

Based on the current experiential data-base, Figure 1 presents a visual-graphic model of the paths of influence among compensatory factor categories associated with resiliency in at-risk students. Since human relationships were most frequently cited by school principals and teachers and since many responses to the written resiliency query presented protective factors within an interactional framework, human relationships are presented as a central and unifying force in the model of at-risk student resiliency. The relative impact or importance of school, family, community, and student characteristics is expressed in Figure 1 in terms of the size of the graphic representation rotating around human

relationships. Largest and most importantly, student resiliency characteristics are interpreted as influencing and influenced by human relationships. Correspondingly, second largest and second in importance, familial resiliency factors are understood within a context of human relationships and interactions. In the same sense, community factors are third largest indicating relative importance. As such, community resiliency factors include youth programs and activities and are equally interpreted as essentially unfolding via human interaction. Finally, student academic success and specific school programs unfold in response to teacher-student, principal-student, and peer-student relationships. Implicit in the proposed conceptual model of compensatory factors and at-risk student resiliency is the interaction between student, family, community, and school characteristics. Student motivation, attitude, and self esteem, for example, influence and are influenced by parental support and concern which in turn influence and are influenced by community and school factors.

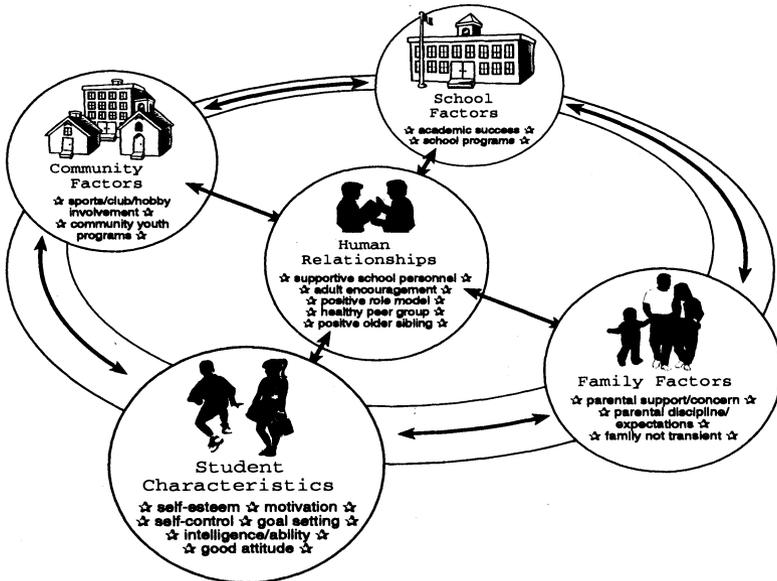


FIGURE 1. A model of compensatory factor influence on at-risk student resiliency

The proposed conceptual model of compensatory factor influence on at-risk student resiliency has implications for practice. The importance of a systemic approach to understanding at-risk students is highlighted; an approach that recognizes the interactive nature of student experi-

ence and that includes the family and the community in interventions directed toward assisting at-risk students. The critical impact of student motivation, self-esteem, self-control, goal setting, and attitude provides for specific targets of intervention. It is proposed, however, that all school, community, and family-based programs must be understood within a context of human relationships. The importance of supportive human relationships for at-risk students suggests heightened and personal commitment on the part of professionals who serve at-risk students and their families. From the experiential data provided by school principals and teachers in the inner-city, it is essentially human support, concern, encouragement, caring, and modeling that propel at-risk students toward healthy outcomes. This affective reality is manifest in school, familial, and community relationships and interactions.

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