

## "I build resiliency": The Role of the School Media Specialist

Jami L. Jones

*Barron Collier High School, Naples, Florida, USA*

*The results of research conducted by Werner and Smith (1992), Rutter (1983), Garnezy (1991), and others indicate that school media specialists can play an important role in promoting resiliency and building assets in youth. By developing programs and services that build connections, encourage reading and hobbies, and teach problem-solving and social skills, media specialists aid in the development of resiliency. Understanding the theories of resiliency, assets, and developmental tasks will position school media specialists to become change agents in their communities and schools by strengthening the environment in which children and teens learn. The author discusses the models developed by Benard, Wolin and Wolin, Milstein and Henry, and the Search Institute that school media specialists can apply to their media center programs and services. Practical suggestions are provided.*

### Introduction

Seventeen-year-old Anne stood apart from other seniors (17- and 18-year-olds) who were enjoying their last carefree month of high school (students ages 14 to 18 years of age). While her classmates socialized and chatted in the media center about end-of-the-year festivities, this attractive teen sat by herself and focused like a laser on her research paper. She had to focus because her two after-school jobs meant little time for goofing off. Anne worked many hours because she lived alone and was responsible for her own expenses. Anne had spent most of her chaotic childhood living with an alcoholic mother. On many occasions, starting as young as 10 years old, she drove the family car to fetch her mother, drunk, from a bar. As soon as Anne could, she escaped. Immediately after graduation, this mature young woman headed to a military college on a "full ride"—all educational expenses paid by the college. I realized her single-minded focus on a military career was her ticket to a brighter future. In her I recognized the qualities of self-reliance, independence, and problem-solving. In her I saw the power of resilience. This article explores resiliency as an important developmental concept and examines the role of the school library media specialist in fostering learning and development through an understanding of resiliency theory and aligning services and programs to meet the needs of teens.

### Resiliency Defined

Resiliency is defined as "the ability to bounce back successfully despite exposure to severe risks" (Benard, 1993, p. 44). Masten, director of the Uni-

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University of Minnesota's Project Competence, defines resilience as "patterns of positive adaptation in the context of significant risk or adversity" (Masten & Powell, 2003, p. 4). Resilience is an "inference about a person's life that requires two fundamental judgments: (1) that a person is doing 'OK' and (2) that there is now or has been significant risk or adversity to overcome" (p. 4).

Many children and teens who are at risk because of academic failure, poverty, neglect, abuse, war, parental alcoholism, and a host of other conditions are able to do well in life in spite of these challenges. These children and teens are resilient. Since the 1970s, the pioneers of resiliency research Wemer and Smith (1992), Rutter (1983; Garmezy, 1991), and Garmezy (1983; Masten & Powell, 2003) have sought answers to the question: "Why do some children bounce back from adversity while others do not?" Despite a variety of experimental designs, these research projects point to a "relatively small set of global factors [called protective factors] associated with resilience" (Masten, 2001, p. 234). In turn, these research findings have fueled the development of models, frameworks, and strategies to tap the natural "capacity of kids and adults for healthy functioning" (Marshall, 2001, p. 3).

### Resiliency Research

Several landmark studies dominate the resiliency research, and each of these is discussed briefly.

#### *The Kauai Longitudinal Research Study*

The Kauai Longitudinal Research Study, together with other similar longitudinal studies, has proven to be the richest source of information about resilience. In the study conducted by Wemer and Smith (1992), 505 children born in 1955 on the island of Kauai in Hawaii were monitored to determine the effects of risk factors such as low birth weight, chronic poverty, uneducated parents, dysfunctional and disorganized family environment, divorce, parental alcoholism, and mental illness, as well as the protective factors that helped these children rise above their adverse situations (Masten, 2001). Children in the study were followed by a research team of social workers, public health workers, pediatricians, and psychologists for over three decades from in utero until 32 years of age.

As a result of interviews, surveys, and assessments during the first two years of life, the research team identified children whose difficulties would be most likely to predict problems in later childhood and adolescence. Some of these children—42 girls and 30 boys—were designated high-risk because they had four or more risk factors before the age of 2. "Even with these factors against them, one out of three of these high risk children developed into competent, confident, and caring young adults by age 18" (Wemer & Smith, 1992, p. 2). The resilient children did not develop any serious learning or behavior problems in childhood or adolescence. They grew up and managed to do well in their schoolwork and in their homes and social lives. As young adults, they set realistic goals and expectations for themselves.

Werner and Smith (1992) identified a number of protective factors that buffered these children from the damaging effects of adversity. As infants, the resilient children had attractive temperaments that elicited positive attention from family members as well as strangers. These children were active, affectionate, cuddly, good-natured, and easy to deal with. They exhibited fewer eating and sleeping habits that distressed parents. As toddlers, they were more advanced in communication, locomotion, and self-help skills. In elementary school, teachers reported the resilient children interacted well with their classmates. They had better reasoning and reading skills. They had many interests and engaged in activities and hobbies that were not strictly gender-typed. By the time they graduated from high school, the resilient youths had developed a positive self-concept and an internal locus of control [feelings of being in control of one's life]. They were more nurturing, responsible, and achievement-oriented than their high risk peers. Resilient youth participated in extracurricular activities such as 4-H, YMCA, or YWCA. Most important, resilient children had established a close bond with at least one caretaker. They had found emotional support outside the family such as a "teacher who had become a role model, friend, and confidant" (p. 57).

### *Families and Risk Studies*

Research conducted by Rutter (1983; Garmezy, 1991), a well-respected British psychiatrist, and Garmezy, professor of psychology at the University of Minnesota, has greatly contributed to an understanding of resilience. Rutter's research with families on the Isle of Wight and in an inner-city borough of London showed that as the number of risk factors such as marital discord, low socioeconomic status, large family size with overcrowding, paternal criminality, and maternal psychiatric disorder increased, so did the child's risk for mental illness.

### *Project Competence Research Program*

Garmezy (1983; Masten & Powell, 2003) studied children whose mentally ill parents had schizophrenia. He found that a significant number of these children were doing well compared to competent children who had few risk factors. In fact, the two groups were remarkably similar. Whereas resilience requires that a person has faced and overcome significant adversity, competence refers to high-achieving individuals who have not encountered significant adversity. "By the early 1970s, he and his [graduate] students turned their attention to the study of competence in children 'at risk' due to parental mental illness and other risk factors ... at this time, Garmezy named his research program 'Project Competence'" (Masten & Powell, 2003, p. 2). The purpose of Project Competence, a longitudinal study begun in the late 1970s that studied 205 Minneapolis elementary students in grades 3 through 6, is to understand "linkages between competence, adversity, internal functioning, and a host of individual and family attributes" (p. 2).

## Resiliency Models

Research on resilience by Rutter, Garnezy, Wemer and Smith, and others has spawned models, frameworks, and strategies developed by Benard, Steve and Sybil Wolin, Milstein and Henry, and the Search Institute. These act as guides for applying the theory of resilience to individuals, schools, and communities that wish to make a difference (Masten, 2001).

### *Adults Create the Environment*

The central concept in Benard's model (Thomsen, 2002) is that adults have the power and responsibility to create environments where children can thrive. The key factor in shaping resilient youth is through caring and supportive relationships with them. "Ideally, if we want to build resilient kids, we have to focus on the three most important environments in which a child lives, plays, and works: namely, the home, school, and community" (p. 17). To do this, it is important to provide caring and support, provide opportunities for meaningful participation, and set and communicate high expectations.

### *The Importance of Reframing*

A second resiliency model was created by Steve Wolin, a practicing psychiatrist, and Sybil Wolin, his wife, who holds a doctorate in child development (Thomsen, 2002), which focuses on the importance of framing. For many years, Wolin practiced psychiatry in the traditional medical model. In this model, the therapist makes a diagnosis, labels the disorder, and through therapy, prescribes behavioral and pharmaceutical interventions. Eventually, Wolin became dissatisfied with this approach and instead began to focus on his patients' strengths. He identified seven behaviors his patients used in dealing with adversity. These are insight, independence, relationships, initiative, creativity, humor, and morality.

The Wolins (Thomsen, 2002) encourage teachers to use their model to help students reframe difficulties. An example of this—adaptive distancing—is the "ability to distance oneself psychologically and emotionally from the distracting problems and dysfunctional situations around you" (adaptive distancing). Students learned to understand that the problems they are dealing with may not be of their own creation.

For example, children who return each day to homes where parents abuse alcohol or other drugs usually learn to live in chaos. They can count on very little consistency, and life is usually crisis management. With guidance from counselors and teachers, these children can learn about the disease of addiction and understand that they can make very different choices in life. They can learn to protect themselves emotionally and even have some insight and compassion for their parents. These children can be encouraged to join afterschool activities such as sports or drama. If those options are not available, they can be encouraged to stay focused on academic goals. The important thing is that they

stay busy and focused on bettering themselves and managing the chaos at home as well as possible until they are old enough to leave, (p. 28)

### *Change the Educational and Community Culture*

A third model developed by Milstein and Henry (2000) focuses on forming supportive partnerships between schools, families and communities, and students with the aim of changing the educational and community culture. It is employed by educators who wish to change the educational and community culture of children and teens from high-risk environments (Thomsen, 2002). Milstein and Henry's wheel of resiliency consists of six factors: prosocial bonding; clear and consistent boundaries; life skills; caring and support; high expectations; and meaningful participation.

### *The 40 Developmental Assets: Protective Factors for Youth*

A fourth model, asset building, was developed by the Search Institute, a nonprofit organization in Minneapolis, Minnesota the mission of which is to provide leadership, knowledge, and resources to promote healthy children, youth, and communities (Thomsen, 2002). "The asset-building approach postulates that the more assets children have, the less likely they are to engage in risk-taking behavior" (p. 34). In 1996 and 1997, the Search Institute surveyed almost 100,000 students in grades 6 through 12 in communities and schools across the US to determine what assets teens possessed. The *40 Developmental Assets* are culled from this research. These are similar to Milstein and Henry's (2000) protective factors, but are more specific to the developmental stages of youth. There has been some criticism, because the *40 Developmental Assets* are specific and attempt to quantify precisely the protective factors in individuals, families, schools, and communities. For example, some assets are as specific as one hour of homework each day, three or more hours of reading for pleasure each week, and one or more hours per week in religious activity (Howard, Dryden, & Johnson, 1999).

### Resiliency/ Competence, and Developmental Tasks

Adolescence is a unique developmental stage that places biological, cognitive, and social demands on the individual. During adolescence teens must negotiate a series of demands called developmental tasks. Teens who are able to negotiate these demands are considered competent (Manning, 2002). Researchers involved in Garnezy's Project Competence define competence as "effective performance in developmental tasks which are salient for people of a given age, society or context, and historical time" (Masten & Powell, 2003, p. 5). When adolescents are unable to negotiate these developmental tasks successfully, maladaptation can occur.

According to Havighurst (Manning, 2002), the eight developmental tasks of adolescence are: achieving new and more mature relations with age-mates of both sexes; achieving a masculine or feminine social role; accepting one's physique and using the body effectively; achieving emotional independence

of parents and other adults; preparing for marriage and family life; preparing for an economic career; and acquiring a set of values and an ethical system as a guide to behavior. Resilience, competence, and developmental tasks are complementary because each is concerned with the development of youth who "play well, live well, and work well" (Benard, 1993, p. 44).

### The Library Ladder of Resiliency

How can school media specialists promote resiliency and develop assets? The answer is to base the media center's programs, services, goals, and objectives on the protective factors that have been proven to promote resiliency and competence in youth. Five factors identified by Wemer and Smith (1992) and others are consistent with the goals and objectives of the media center. These are mentoring, reading, problem-solving skills, social skills, and hobbies. I have developed a model, the "Library Ladder of Resiliency," based on these five factors. By using this model, school media specialists are tapping into a powerful body of research that proves that what we do makes a difference in the lives of children and teens.

#### *Mentoring and Making Connections*

The first protective factor is mentoring. Again and again, studies have shown that the most important protective factor for children and teens at risk is caring relationships with adults (Laursen & Birmingham, 2003). In this study conducted during 2001, 23 adolescents were asked to identify the qualities they most desired in caring adults. A tally of their responses indicates that the qualities of trust, attention, empathy, availability, affirmation, respect, and virtue are most cherished. The authors of this study suggest, "caring is not just a 'feel-good' relationship. Rather, authentic caring involves specific adult behaviors and beliefs that provide the foundation for reclaiming challenged youth" (p. 245). Because relationships are such an important means of bolstering self-esteem and promoting resiliency, adults who are cognizant of these qualities and incorporate them into their relationships with teens will have a greater effect on children and teens.

There are many opportunities for school media specialists to position themselves to become mentors. "Media specialists have opportunities to connect with children and teens in ways that classroom teachers do not because we tend to work with students in a one-on-one supportive relationship, helping them find and use information on a variety of topics, both academic and personal" (Jones, 2003, p. 48). Not only does the mentored teen benefit, but so does the media center program when the school media specialist provides books and resources and develops programs and services that support adolescent development.

#### *Reading*

The second protective factor is reading. Wemer and Smith (1992) found that many resilient children and adolescents were competent readers. "Effective

reading skills by grade four [ages nine and 10] was one of the most potent predictors of successful adult adaptation" (Krovetz, 1999, p. 9). Garmezy's (1983) research on poor Black youth in London found that the children who exhibited qualities of resilience lived in homes "marked by the presence of books" (p. 75). School media specialists are integral to reading and literacy because of their knowledge of books and resources and their dedication to uniting teens with them. Teens want to read about other teens and their lifestyles and struggles. They want to read about characters who successfully develop their own identity, which is an important developmental task for this age group. Reading helps teens formulate their identity. "Young adults struggle, often in isolation with postmodern identity issues, family displacement, globalization, cultural and ethnic issues, job losses, and other problems that schools need to address" (Bean, 2002, p. 37).

One specific program that promotes reading is Reading/or the Fun of It! In this program, which I developed as a high school media specialist, students 14 to 18 years of age traveled to a local bookstore with me to select books of personal interest to them and their peers. These books were then placed in a special recreational reading section in the media center. Reading/or the Fun of It! benefits both the media center and the teens. The media center benefits because the teens act as "collection development advisors" and conduits to understanding the books and resources that are of interest to students their age. It has been shown that the most effective route to adolescent literacy is providing teens with books—and lots of choices—they want to read. "The research supports the commonsense view that when books are readily available, when the print environment is rich, more reading is done" (Krashen, 1993, p. 33). Teens benefit because they are able to spend time with a caring adult who values their opinions and purchases books that can aid their transition into adulthood. In a 15-year study conducted by the High/Scope Educational Research Foundation, researchers discovered that when young children from a poor inner-city neighborhood were given opportunities to plan and make decisions for their preschool, "they were, at age 19, significantly less (as much as 50%) involved in drug use, delinquency, teen pregnancy, or school failure (Benard, 1993, p. 47).

### *Problem-Solving Skills*

The third protective factor is problem-solving skills. Teens who are able to research and use information and other resources to solve problems are more likely to be resilient. Most often students research problems assigned by the teacher. However, sometimes students need to research and solve personal problems. School media specialists who teach problem-solving and information literacy prepare students to find and use information to solve both academic and personal problems. Many maladaptive children and teens add to their problems because they do not possess the effective problem-solving

skills of their more resilient and competent peers (Masten & Coatsworth, 1998).

Teens can be taught problem-solving skills through lessons that teach information literacy. By using information literacy models such as the Big6, students first identify the task, or their "problem." Next students develop a search plan; then they locate, read, and synthesize the information; and finally, they evaluate the process. Other information models can effectively be used for the same purpose.

### *Social Skills*

A fourth protective factor is social skills. Teens who have well-developed social skills are able to make friends and keep them. A teen's popularity during adolescence is based on his or her social skills. "Popular adolescents act appropriately in the eyes of their peers, are skilled at perceiving and meeting the needs of others, and are confident without being conceited" (Steinberg, 2002, p. 187). Although not all teens value popularity, the inability to create a social network can lead to depression (Koplewicz, 2002). Social skills can be taught by fostering, encouraging, and modeling these behaviors. School media specialists promote social skills whenever they support and host activities that encourage teens to make friends and work together.

"The Lunch Bunch," an example of a program to enhance social skills, was developed by a Nelle Martin, a high school media specialist in Florida. This program won Martin the Florida Association of Media in Education's Amanda Award. This award is given annually to media specialists in Florida who develop programs that promote resiliency in teenage students. When Martin noticed that the same students came to the media center alone every day during lunch instead of spending time with friends in the cafeteria, she decided to take action. By talking to the students, Martin learned that many of them were new to the school and had not yet made friends. They told her they were too fearful to enter the cafeteria. To help ease their social fears, Martin let them eat their lunch together in a secluded spot in the media center. She purchased chess and checkers games for them to play during lunch. Sometimes "The Lunch Bunch" students helped her by performing minor chores around the media center. Martin was truly astounded to see how these students flourished as they developed friendships in the group. In this way, the school media specialist assumed an active role in promoting social skills in these students who previously had been friendless.

### *Hobbies and Interests*

A fifth protective factor is hobbies and interests. Wemer and Smith (1993) found that "extracurricular activities played an important part in the lives of the resilient youth" (p. 57). Hobbies and interests promote competence and self-esteem. In addition, teens who face stressful situations and problems may momentarily forget their troubles when they participate in hobbies and

interests. School media specialists promote resiliency when they select books and resources that encourage hobbies and interests. School media specialists can help teens learn about hobbies and interests by developing displays and arranging for community members to give workshops and demonstrations.

Resiliency, seen as positive adaptation in the face of risk and adversity, is a significant development concept of young people. Resiliency research identifies a number of key strategies for fostering resilience such as mentoring, reading, hobbies, and the development of problem-solving skills and social skills. These strategies signal a clear opportunity for school library media specialists to contribute to the holistic development of young people. Resiliency research provides school media specialists with the opportunity to evaluate and align their services and programs and goals and objectives to meet the needs of teens. Resiliency research supports what school media specialists have known all along: the media center is not only the heart, but also the soul of the school.

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### *Author Note*

Jami L. Jones, a National Board Certified Teacher in educational media, is a school media specialist at Barren Collier High School in Naples, Florida, USA. In addition, she is an adjunct instructor of educational media at Nova South-eastern University in Fort Lauderdale, Florida. Her first book, *Helping Teens Cope*, has recently been published by Linworth. She is author of the Florida Association of Media in Education's Amanda Award, which recognizes secondary media specialists who develop programs that promote self-esteem and resiliency in teens. Jones can be contacted through her Web site at <http://www.askdrjami.org>