



For the Success of Each Learner

ClassroomLeadership

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What Should We Teach?

The 4th "R"

How Teachers Can Foster Resiliency in the Classroom

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Every day, students take in great amounts of information. They learn about the importance of citizenship and culture in social studies, about formulas and problem solving in math, and about the art of writing and creativity in English.



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There is still so much more that today's students need that they aren't learning, however. Students' lives are changing, and their needs are, too. More students today are neglected at home. More students work part-time, which takes them away from fundamental family rituals such as eating dinner together or working together on homework. More students are depressed, and in the district where I teach, suicides are on the rise. The need for social services is greater than ever before.

As a result, students must learn how to become advocates for themselves. They must learn how to ask for help, plan for their futures, and communicate sensibly with adults and peers in their lives. Most important, perhaps, students need to develop a sense of hope and a desire for a bright future.

The Resilient Child

I was raised in a home with a multitude of risk factors, yet I still went on to succeed in school and in life. I graduated near the top of my high school and college classes and became a successful, well-adjusted teacher. I discovered that I am resilient.

Resiliency is the ability to "bounce back," to recover from a change, illness, or misfortune. Everyone has potential to become resilient, but few know how. It becomes the teacher's job, therefore, to create the kind of environment and learning activities that build students' ability to bounce back.

Research shows that children who are resilient tend to be

- Socially competent—they have the ability to elicit positive responses from others, establishing nourishing relationships with both adults and peers.
- Problem solvers—they envision themselves as being in control, as having the ability to plan, and as being resourceful enough to know when and how to seek help from others.
- Autonomous—they have a sense of their own identity, an ability to act independently and to exert some control over their environment.
- Goal-oriented—they have a sense of purpose. Resilient children have educational aspirations and are persistent.

These qualities flourish in a caring and supportive classroom environment. Teachers can incorporate resilience-building lessons within the regular curriculum.

Featuring Resiliency

1. **Use a variety of instructional approaches.** I frequently vary methods of instruction. I incorporate multiple-intelligences and learning styles theories, for example, and use primary documents that introduce students to multiple perspectives. Using different instructional methods, particularly those that are student-led and interest-based, builds on students' intrinsic motivation. In addition, I regularly ask students to work in groups. Cooperative learning allows students to socialize, bounce ideas off their peers, and make decisions based on criteria they develop together. I also use a variety of assessment strategies, giving students different ways to demonstrate learning. Giving students as many assessment choices as you can encourages a sense of autonomy.

2. **Give students time to reflect.** Reflection helps students understand and appreciate the purpose of what they are learning.

I use several strategies to encourage reflection. I ask students, for example, to maintain a growth portfolio, which contains examples of assessments, writing assignments, and student reflections. Students include items that show evidence of their growth, regardless of how well they performed on a particular item. The growth portfolio is a tool that helps students identify the areas in which they have improved or need to improve.

A learning plan is another reflection tool that I hand out every couple of weeks. The learning plan requires a student to list several things he learned during the week and explain his achievements or failures in his attempts to reach personal goals in the classroom. The student must then identify new goals. Finally, the learning plan provides space for parent signatures, which encourages parents and their children to talk about their learning.

A third reflection tool is a form I created called S.T.A.R. Dates. S.T.A.R. stands for "Students Taking Active Reflection." Two or three times a month, I ask students to answer several questions about their learning. Students should identify a concept they learned, how they learned it, what skills or ideas make up the larger concept, and how they can apply the ideas or skills to real life or a meaningful situation.

3. **Communicate often with parents.** Frequent communication among students, parents, and teachers helps young people establish positive relationships with adults and creates a caring and supportive environment. Maintaining a high level of communication with parents is difficult, but there are tools that make the job easier.

In addition to learning plans, for example, I send Wolfgrams to my students' families. Named after our school mascot, a Wolfgram is a postcard that teachers can send home to parents when they want to share something positive about students. Each week, I identify good behavior, write several Wolfgrams, and then send them to students' homes. Parents appreciate receiving positive feedback—and students thank me for sending them. Students know that I care about them because I take time to write to their families.

4. **Use humor in the classroom.** Humor allows people to laugh together—and people who laugh together are more willing to trust one another. This trust helps build a caring and supportive environment and ultimately bolsters a student's willingness to participate.

I incorporate humor wherever and whenever I can. Every day at the beginning of class, I write "mind-starters" on the board. These are riddles for the students to solve. It's a fun way to get students focused and ready for learning. Because the answers are usually humorous or silly, we're smiling when we start class. My students really seem to enjoy solving the riddles, and when students are successful, they feel a sense of confidence. I will also occasionally put a joke on the board, or start off the hour with an editorial cartoon. I even put jokes on exams. This helps ease students' test-taking anxiety.

Humor has allowed me to defuse potential problem situations. It contributes to the positive nature of my classroom and spurs student participation.

5. **Make learning active and hands-on.** Using active lessons has proven to be one of the most effective strategies to increase and maintain a high amount of student participation. Students are actively engaged, willing to reflect, and often discuss what they did in my class with other students.

I use activities that help build students' skills in decision making, problem solving, and cooperation, from books like Tom Jackson's *Activities That Teach and More Activities That Teach*. The activities found in books like these can be easily applied to any discipline or subject.

I also use review sessions as an opportunity to make learning more active. To keep a session from becoming tiresome or tedious for my students or myself, I change the review into a game of football or bingo, which adds to the interest level and motivation. The students often leave my classroom on a higher note than when they came in.

Establishing resilience-building strategies and implementing them on a regular basis requires some research and trial and error on the teacher's part. But the effort is worth it—an environment that enriches students' resilient qualities also increases their potential for success in and out of the classroom.

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