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Creating Resiliency in Incarcerated Youth: A Quick Guide for Teachers

By

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Master of Arts Degree in Education

California State University San Marcos

December 1, 2015
RESILIENCY IN INCARCERATED YOUTH

Abstract

The product of this project is in a quick guide for teachers, parents and students entitled Building Student Resiliency: What I Learned from Teaching in a Juvenile Detention Facility. The quick guide product resulted from the author’s experience educating youth who were incarcerated in a juvenile detention facility. The content of the guide is intended to encourage teachers who most certainly will have students who experience tough life situations and who struggle in the classroom. It offers advice to educators on how to develop student resiliency among students.

The guide focuses upon four teacher behaviors or dispositions that can foster resiliency in youth: (1) teaching of accountability, (2) choosing to have a positive attitude toward your students, (3) compassion for others and self, and (4) celebrating perseverance and success. To illustrate these behaviors and dispositions, the author tells students’ stories, changing names and adjusting details to protect their identity.

Keywords: juvenile justice system, juvenile delinquency or offending, resiliency, youth at risk, academic self-efficacy
Table of Contents

Abstract ................................................. 2

Chapter I: Introduction ................................. 4

Chapter II: Literature Review ......................... 8

Chapter III: Methodology .............................. 15

Chapter IV: Results .................................... 18

Chapter V: Discussion .................................. 20

References ................................................. 24

Appendix A: Quick Guide for Teachers ............... 27
RESILIENCY IN INCARCERATED YOUTH

Chapter One

Introduction

A major focus of education today is to advance the academic achievement and social-emotional development of students who are at risk of school failure due to any number of life circumstances. Although developing resiliency to these specific challenges should start at home, many teachers find themselves providing this support so that students are able to learn to confront them.

Many students from diverse cultural, linguistic, and socio-economic groups face various life stressors and end up in the juvenile justice system due to their actions. Short & Sharp (2005) note that, nationwide, a disproportionate number of juvenile offenders are minority students and students of color; namely African-American and Latin youth. How to teach any students at-risk is a challenge, but it may be particularly difficult for teachers who come from the majority culture.

The juvenile justice system is intended to be a system to help rehabilitate youth offenders and prevent them from entering the adult justice system. The system ensures the continuation of the students’ education while they are in a juvenile justice facility and the provision of special education supports for students eligible for special education. Providing a safe learning environment is part of the system.

Baltodano, Harris, and Rutherford, (2005) note that youth offenders tend to have low academic achievement and a high rate of illiteracy, which increases with the time that these
RESILIENCY IN INCARCERATED YOUTH

youth are incarcerated. These youth also struggle with social-emotional self-regulation, and other behavioral and emotional challenges.

Resiliency is the ability to cope and adapt to change to overcome difficulties (A link [Child Welfare homepage]). Nan Henderson, the president of Resiliency in Action, and international teacher and author on resiliency (2012) further sees resiliency as not only the ability to overcome a variety of challenges (e.g., trauma, tragedy, personal crisis) but the ability to bounce back stronger, wiser, and more personally powerful.

Building student resiliency is the focus of this project. My own personal experiences working as a special educator at a juvenile detention facility motivated me to look at the needs of the students living there from a different perspective. The majority of these children had experienced trauma, abandonment, poverty, and/or mental illness. Some of the staff members at the facility saw and labeled these students as “behavior issues,” “slow,” or “juvenile delinquents.” Others, myself included, recognized the negative impact academic, social, and home life struggles had had on them and tried to focus not only upon academics, but on nurturing the resilience in youth who are at-risk.

Purpose and Significance of the Project

The purpose of this project is to develop a quick guide that teachers can use to understand and address the need of students labeled at risk of school failure and at risk of juvenile offending. Through brief chapters that feature true stories share, I intend to share what I did with and learned from incarcerated youth about developing resiliency. The quick guide is design to encourage teachers to have compassion for students experiencing difficulties that holds them back from being successful in school and community. My personal experience as a teacher
RESILIENCY IN INCARCERATED YOUTH
working with juvenile offenders in a juvenile detention center allowed me to be inspired by these young individuals’ struggles to defeat poverty, criminal involvement, and hopelessness. This quick guide is intended to be a source of inspiration for teachers of students who are in or who are at risk of becoming a part of the juvenile system. The significance of the quick guide is that it may inspire those who read it and work with to take actions that help youth considered at-risk to make better choices and commit to a life of accomplishment.

Definition of Key Terms

Academic Self-Efficacy

Academic self-esteem can be defined as a personal judgment of one’s own capabilities to organize and execute courses of action to attain designated types of educational performances functioning (Carroll et al., 2005).

Juvenile Delinquency or Offending

Juvenile delinquency, also known as juvenile offending, is participation in illegal behavior by juveniles (i.e., individuals younger than the statutory age of majority, which is 18 in the state of California. Most legal systems prescribe specific procedures for dealing with juveniles, such as juvenile detention centers, and courts. Juvenile offending can be considered normal adolescent behavior, because teens tend to offend by committing nonviolent crimes, only once or a few times and only during adolescence. Repeated or violent offending is likely to lead to later and more violent offenses.
RESILIENCY IN INCARCERATED YOUTH

Juvenile Detention Facility

A juvenile detention facility is a facility that houses, feeds, and educates minors who have committed an act that otherwise would have been charged as a crime if they were adults.

Juvenile Justice System

The juvenile justice system is structured legal system for minors under the age of 18 who have committed an act that otherwise would have been charged as a crime if they were adults.

Resiliency

Nan Henderson, the president of Resiliency in Action and teacher and author on resiliency defines resiliency as the ability to overcome all types of challenges (e.g., trauma, tragedy, personal crisis) in a way that the person bounces back stronger, wiser, and more personally powerful.

Preview of Chapter 2

This chapter introduced the issue of educating students considered at-risk. I express my optimistic view that students who are labeled at-risk are also capable of changing their lives for the better. In my view, teachers who take on this view are more likely to support these students to learn and become resilient. Therefore, the product of this project is a quick guide for teachers based upon my own experiences as a teacher of youth at risk who have been incarcerated during their schooling years. The literature review that follows, examines the work of Brendtro, Brokenleg, & Van Bockern (2009) and other researchers who examine and address the needs of at-risk students.
RESILIENCY IN INCARCERATED YOUTH

Chapter 2

Literature Review

Over the past two to three decades, there has been a substantial amount of literature focusing upon the academic achievement and behavior of incarcerated juveniles. The literature suggest that poor academic achievement and behavior of incarcerated youth may be influenced by several factors: exposure to high risk environments, parenting and family structure, cognitive abilities, and early childbearing effects (Eamon, 2004). Other life situation, such as low socioeconomic status, teen pregnancy, or anti-social behavior and activity such as gang affiliation impede educational mobility also can negatively affect achievement and behavior (Reyes, 2006). A variety of methods have been used to look at the academic achievement and behavior of juveniles in detention facilities. Many concerns have been raised regarding self-efficacy of incarcerated youth and supports to help student’ becoming productive members of society. A summary of the literature on minorities in the juvenile criminal justice system reports that race and ethnicity, type of neighborhood in which the student resides, peer influences, and family difficulties influence who gets incarcerated (Pope & Feyerherm, 1995).

What follows are examinations of student self-efficacy and self-determination; parental family, neighborhood, and other factors impacting the achievement of incarcerated youth. The literature review concludes with an examination of the resiliency construct and strategies for promoting resiliency.
Carroll and colleagues (2009) found students who develop strong academic, self-regulatory, and self-efficacy beliefs are better able to manage their learning and to resist the temptations and social pressures to engage in behaviors, such as delinquency, that can undermine their academic achievement. This study involved a random sampling of Australian high school students who rated themselves on items related to three variables—self efficacy, academics, and social efficacy.

A single-subject longitudinal student Reyes (2006) examined the effects of college students’ participation in a first-year retention and support scholarship program - College Assistance Migrant Program (CAMP) on a situationally-marginalized Mexican-descent student and his learning to be and become a successful college student. The interviews were conducted at the beginning, middle and end of his first-year experience, and the end of the academic year and included the student’s counselors, instructors, and CAMP administrators (Reyes, 2006). Several factors influenced resisting temptation of old gang ways and learning to be a successful college student. It was found that the student continued to have difficulties with his academics due to the culture of the school, which was very different from the culture in which he had been raised.

Reyes quotes from Fraire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, noting that “one of the gravest obstacles to the achievement of liberation is that oppressive reality absorbs those within it and thereby acts to submerge human beings’ consciousness” (Reyes, 2006, p. 51). Stated otherwise, when human beings grow up in a culture where they are looked upon as not as good as others in society, that self-perception of who they are, what they are worth, and what they can accomplish in life becomes so ingrained in their consciousness that to rise above that mental image is, in and
RESILIENCY IN INCARCERATED YOUTH

of itself, a monumental challenge to overcome. Although this individual study cannot be

generalized to a larger group, it does provide a lens through which we can observe and begin to

understand the perspectives and struggles of juveniles in detention facilities and what it takes to
develop a new identity outside of what they have known most of their lives. This research related
directly to the juveniles I served in the juvenile detention facility who had similar obstacles
outside of school to overcome to be successful in the classroom.

In contrast, research also shows that in schools and youth service programs, adults
building relationships can powerfully motivate and support students to focus on creating a new

life (Bendtro, Brokenleg, & Van Bockern, 2009). The establishment of positive relationships can
increase trust that will assist in resisting return to the familiar old (e.g., gang) culture.

Parental and Family Factors

Literature also suggests that parental support affects academic achievement among youth

who become delinquent. Studies have found that members of minority groups (e.g., Asians,
Latinos, and African-Americans) raised in families characterized by an authoritative parenting
style that included high levels of parental support, behavioral monitoring, and lower levels of
psychological control were healthier and more competent than adolescents raised in less
authoritative homes (Chung & Le, 2005; Codjoe, 2007). (Jeynes 2005) in an examination of the
relationship between parental involvement, academic achievement, gender, and socioeconomic
status found highly involved parents to be a predictor of positive academic outcomes for African-
American seniors. Chung & Le (2005) confirmed the importance of parent involvement and
concludes that parental engagement in school appears to be a protective factor in promoting
RESILIENCY IN INCARCERATED YOUTH
academic achievement and simultaneously decreasing the negative influence of delinquent peers (Chung & Le, 2005).

Mistry, White, Benner, and Huynh (2009) conducted a 3-year longitudinal study on the simultaneous influence of single mothers' and teachers' educational expectations on low-income youth's academic achievement and found that parental expectations predicted higher levels of student achievement. This confirmed previous findings of parental expectations correlating with student reading and math achievement and teachers’ reports of student competence (Reynolds and Gill, 1994) and higher grades and graduation rates (Zhan & Sherradan, 2003). Misty and colleagues so found that teacher expectations were high due to high expectations from parents. Although participants all were single parent and low-income households, students’ ideology on the importance of education changed as they matured through high school. They became more responsible and increased their level of wanting to learn.

**Neighborhood Factors**

An examination of juvenile offenders across African-American, Caucasian, and Latino communities showed that, in all three communities. Offenders had poor academic outcomes compared to their non-offender peers (Chung, Steinberg, Mulvey, 2011). Differences between Caucasian offenders and those of color increased as juveniles moved across various decision points (e.g., consideration for trial as an adult versus juvenile). Chung and colleagues also examined neighborhood effects on juvenile offender academic achievement as well as student demographics such as assessed cognitive ability, court related factors, and family and school contexts. Data were self-reported and only from males. Regardless of these limitations, findings suggest that youth develop expectations about the academic and occupational potential based
RESILIENCY IN INCARCERATED YOUTH
upon perceived opportunity in their social context and that these self-fulfilling expectations could explain neighborhood effects on achievement outcomes. Young offenders also showed better academic outcomes in residential settings because they were schooled regularly and attended classes in more closely supervised and smaller environments.

Eamon (2005) found that exposure to high-risk environments and parenting practices may influence academics. They found young Latino adolescents benefitting from less risky and structured parenting. The study included 388 randomly selected Latinos between the ages of 14 and 21. Findings indicate that neighborhoods have some effect on how students view education. Youths who reside in more wealthy neighborhoods tend to perform better academically compared to youths who live in resource-poor neighborhoods.

In a longitudinal study spanning 1966 to 1993, Ensminger, Lamkin, and Jacobson (1996) examined whether neighborhood poverty influenced African-Americans high school graduation and found that it did have an influence. They cited neighborhood factors such as absence of community, lack of neighborhood controls for behavior resources, job reduction and social isolation from mainstream values, and lack of work and educational opportunities as factors associated with lower graduation rates.

Other Factors Impacting Academic Achievement of Incarcerate Youth

Other factors impact academic achievement of incarcerated juveniles. Baltodano, and colleagues (2005) examined disability, ethnic background, and academic achievement of male youth in a long-term detention center, finding low academic achievement records and high rate of illiteracy among youth incarcerated for a long period of time. The researchers also found a significant difference in academic achievement by ethnic background. Native American students
RESILIENCY IN INCARCERATED YOUTH
performed low on the Woodcock-Johnson III achievement and DIBELS literacy assessment as compared to Caucasian youth, who scored the highest on both assessments. The overall academic achievement of all youth was well below national achievement means.

Resiliency and Effects of Resiliency

Resiliency can contribute to the alternatives presented to youth when facing obstacles. Brendtro, Brokenleg, and Van Bockern (2009) describe Dr. Janusz Korczak, a Polish-Jewish, teacher, pediatrician, and children’s author. Working as the director of an orphanage in Warsaw, he refused freedom and stayed with his nearly 200 orphans when they were sent to the Treblinka extermination camp. He was never seen again. But he was famous for how he articulated how children must be treated as “a citizen in embryo” no matter the weakness, dependence, and inexperience. He posited that respect for children’s dignity will unleash motivation and intelligence, and the responsible involvement for creating caring communities (Brendtro, Brokenleg, & Van Bockern, 2009). He believed children of various backgrounds should have the opportunity to make changes (be resilient) if they choose, with the support of educators and other adults. Brendtro, Brokenleg, and Van Bockern (2009) outline Korczak’s four approaches used for working with youth at-risk:

1. Relate to the reluctant – Use strategies for establishing positive adult-child relationships.

2. Use brain-friendly learning - Present alternative methods for organizing learning experiences to reverse patterns of failure and emptiness.

3. Discipline for responsibility - Use management approaches that counter irresponsibility and rebellion by mobilizing positive youth involvement.
RESILIENCY IN INCARCERATED YOUTH

4. Have the courage to care – Create opportunities for fostering pro-social values and behavior in youth whose lives are self-centered and lacking purpose.

These approaches help adults set aside negative perceptions of at-risk youth. Key is the realization that relationship-reluctant children need corrective positive and unconditional relationships to overcome insecure attachments (Brendtro et al., 2009). Although trust may have been broken, it can be reconstructed when children become comfortable enough to open up again. The self-fulfilling prophecy of expecting and repeating past failure also has to be addressed by showing students they can expect and achieve success rather that failue in future situations. Resiliency – the ability to adapt to change and rise above adversity - can be taught and replace a victim and failure mentality with hopeful future expectations.
Chapter Three

Methodology

The quick guide that is the product of this project was developed in order to share the researcher’s experiences and knowledge of working with students who are at risk in ways that support them not only academically and behaviorally, but emotionally.

Audience and Settings

This project was developed with classroom teachers in mind who work with students who are failing academically or struggling with behavior. Although the title of the project focuses on youth who are incarcerated, youth considered at risk attend school outside the walls of these facilities. Therefore, the intended audience really is anyone who works with students with academic and behavioral needs, but teachers in particular. The intended settings where this quick guide could be used include: both general education and alternative program classrooms such as detention facilities similar to where the researcher worked as a teacher. The quick guide is applicable to paraeducators and parents as well as community members. The content is applicable to those who know and support youth who at risk in any region or school in the country.

Procedures for Developing the Project

The perception on the part of many, is that students who are incarcerated do not do well in comprehensive secondary schools due to behavior issues and academic failure. So, why might
RESILIENCY IN INCARCERATED YOUTH

some of these students actually do better while incarcerated? It was important to the researcher to find out what it was that motivated students who previously did not prioritize academic success and self-management demonstrated at a stage of their lives when educators were to motivate students to try - to continue on to become productive members of society. It was also to encourage educators to develop positive relationships with their students and to encourage a different mindset when working with youth who are at risk. This guide could possibly help comprehensive middle schools and high schools think about ways to best retain at-risk students rather than sending them off to continuation high schools, adult schools, juvenile facilities, or to give up on them officially.

Given the researcher’s experience with students at the detention facility, she decided to start this project by looking at the literature related to student self-efficacy and self-determination, neighborhoods, parental and family factors. The researcher also wanted to learn more about resiliency and the effects of resiliency in the classroom. Selected books and websites also were researched to investigate some of the strategies teachers use in their classroom to promoted resiliency. Finally, some of the material examined were resources from the special education credential program completed by the researcher.

The researcher decided to keep the quick guide easily accessible and set out into four chapters. She wanted it to reflect her personal experiences through the telling of compelling stories about working with students at a juvenile detention facility. In the first chapter, the researcher decided to examine the notion of accountability among students at risk and use inspirational stories and journal writing to teach a more accurate view of accountability. The researcher decided that the next two chapters should focus upon dispositions – attitude and
RESILIENCY IN INCARCERATED YOUTH
compassion – for developing strong and positive relationships. The researcher decided the final chapter should be hopeful, so the focus was on celebrating *success* and fostering *perseverance*.

Two inspiring books are offered as resources and an Afterword was crafted to close tie together the chapters and directly speak to students, parents, and teachers.
RESILIENCY IN INCARCERATED YOUTH

Chapter Four

Results

The result of this project is a quick guide for teachers entitled *Building Student Resiliency: What I Learned from Teaching in a Juvenile Detention Facility* explicitly designed to address the needs of youth who are at risk of academic failure and crime commitment. It is also to encourage teachers to have compassion for students experiencing difficulties that can impact themselves as well as the community. The guide is divided into four chapters with an inspirational quote at the beginning of each chapter that relates to the chapter topic. The following four chapters are included in the guide:

1. Fostering Accountability as Part of Resiliency
2. Choosing Our Attitude
3. Compassion for Others and Self
4. Celebrating Perseverance and Success

The first chapter looks at teacher experiences describing the realization behind the lack of accountability in students. The teaching of accountability involves inspirational stories of women who defeated the odds of living with resentment due to challenges. Chapters 2 and 3 look at the attitudes and feelings towards students. A positive attitude and compassion increase the chances of developing strong and constructive relationships particularly with youth who are considered at risk. Compassion also includes self-compassion. With self-compassion, there is a safe learning environment.
RESILIENCY IN INCARCERATED YOUTH

The final chapter celebrates the success of students by looking at Motivational Fridays and graduation ceremonies at the juvenile detention facility. The purpose of Motivational Fridays was to encourage and inspire the students through hearing and responding to true stories of people who face challenges similar to the students and who overcame adversity. The messages are strong and provide the students courage to persevere.

At the start of each chapter of the quick guide, there is a quote intended to be a personal messages of encouragement for teachers, parents, and students. Each quote is intended to motivate readers of the quick guide to think about students in positive and hopeful ways. The Afterward also is intended to inspire and speak to students, parents, and teachers directly. The final quote in the Afterwards is a favorite and is there to inspire and reiterate the important role teachers have in shaping their students’ lives.
Chapter Five

Discussion

The product of this project is a quick guide for teachers, parents, and students entitled *Building Student Resiliency: What I Learned from Teaching in a Juvenile Detention Facility*. The quick guide resulted from the author’s experience educating youth who were incarcerated in a juvenile detention facility. The content of the guide is intended to encourage teachers who most certainly will have students who experience tough life situations and who struggle in the classroom. It offers advice to educators on how to develop student resiliency among students.

The guide focuses upon four teacher behaviors or dispositions that can foster resiliency in youth: (1) teaching of accountability, (2) choosing to have a positive attitude toward your students, (3) compassion for others and self, and (4) celebrating perseverance and success. To illustrate these behaviors and dispositions, I tell students’ stories, changing names and adjusting details to protect their identity. My desire is that, when reading this guide, readers view it not only as a piece of literature, but as hope that students who are at risk are teachable. Students who struggle academically and behaviorally have various abilities that they can apply to the community in a more positive manner. The more faith one has in these children, the more likely they will recognize the care from others which will allow for them to persevere the prosperity of life.
RESILIENCY IN INCARCERATED YOUTH

Limitations of Project

An obvious limitation of this project is the content of the quick guide represent only one teacher’s experiences and perspectives. The author acknowledges that there are various teaching styles, personalities, and student behaviors that may have an effect on the implementation of what have been addressed in the guide. Research was also limited to the author’s own for the majority. Lastly, the author recognizes that this has yet to be evaluated by other teachers and its practicality in the classroom.

Next Steps

The author’s primary goal in creating the quick guide is to have teachers use the guide as an encouragement for times when they struggle with their work supporting students at risk of failure. Therefore, I intend to distribute it electronically among teachers in my district so it is easily accessible and available for reading and reflecting upon. I also would like to develop a brief workshop that could be delivered as part of a staff meeting or professional development day that would introduce teachers to the guide and the notions included within it, particularly the notion of compassion.

Lessons Learned and Educational Implications

Much of the attention given to students considered at risk can be negative. They can be viewed as unteachable, a waste of time, and a problem to society. The stories of the young individuals in the project provided to be an eye opening experience for me as to what they really wanted. Although students at risk may not always admit it, they want approval, satisfaction, and support from others I learned that promoting resiliency allows for students to achieve mastery in
RESILIENCY IN INCARCERATED YOUTH

various areas. I learned that educators can and must set aside unfavorable perceptions and pessimistic feelings and replace them with high expectations and optimism. We can be a child’s last chance to know the pride of receiving a diploma and the satisfaction of a first day in a new career. The pattern of low achievement and crime will continue until one individual decides that it is enough.

Conclusion

I would like to close this final chapter of the project with my favorite quote from Haim Ginott’s book, Teacher and Child. It reminds me of the importance of a teacher’s dispositions and actions and to remember that we hold all children in the highest regard.

I have come to the frightening conclusion that I am the decisive element. It is my personal approach that creates the climate. It is my daily mood that makes the weather. I possess tremendous power to make life miserable or joyous. I can be a tool of torture or an instrument of inspiration, I can humiliate or humor, hurt or heal. In all situations, it is my response that decides whether a crisis is escalated or de-escalated, and a person is humanized or de-humanized. If we treat people as they are, we make them worse. If we treat people as they ought to be, we help them become what they are capable of becoming.

- Haim Ginott

My passion for working with youth at-risk encouraged the creation of this guide. I found that true compassion and commitment to our students make our careers more meaningful. Our job as educators never promised us freedom from stress, struggles, defiance, and long hours, but
RESILIENCY IN INCARCERATED YOUTH
for me, it did commit to the luxury of being able to experience success along with them. My faith
in and dedication to students has given me strength to continue on to contribute to children’s
lives and help them learn lessons that they may subsequently pass on to society.
RESILIENCY IN INCARCERATED YOUTH

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RESILIENCY IN INCARCERATED YOUTH


RESILIENCY IN INCARCERATED YOUTH

*Education*, 165-186.


RESILIENCY IN INCARCERATED YOUTH

Appendix A

Building Student Resiliency:

What I Learned from Teaching in a Juvenile Detention Facility
Building Student Resiliency:  
What I Learned From Teaching in a  
Juvenile Detention Facility  

By  

Denise M. Orozco, M.A.
Table of Contents

Acknowledgments ......................................................................................... 2

Introduction ................................................................................................. 3

Chapter 1: Fostering Accountability as Part of Resiliency ............ 6

Chapter 2: Choosing Our Attitude ......................................................... 10

Chapter 3: Compassion for Others and Self ...................................... 15

Chapter 4: Celebrating Perseverance and Success .................... 19

Recommended Reading and References ............................................. 23

Afterward ........................................................................................................ 24
Acknowledgements

My Lord Jesus Christ, from everything that I have been blessed with, I thank you and from the struggles that had to be endured, I thank you. You have given me a beautiful family and people who have given me the strength to continue on with passion. Your strong but sweet voice carries me through anything and everything. Without it, I would have given up.

To my amazing husband, I cannot express my gratitude and love for you enough. Your strength holds our family together even through difficult times. You are my happiness and my desire. Thank you for patience and support, my love.

My Tiki, Anthony, the day you were born was a new experience for me. It was the day when I learned a new form of unconditional love. Your smile and laughter encourages me to work harder just for you, and I cannot even specify any amount of love that I will always have for you.

I thank you mom for your advice and sacrifices that you made to make sure my siblings and I were taken care of. Thank you dad for your advice and support. My beautiful sister, words cannot express the love I have for you and your sense of humor. To my brother, thank you for our talks and for your choice to serve and protect our country; I love you. I am very proud of both of you.

In addition, I would like to acknowledge my bible groups, without your love and prayers, this would have been a more difficult experience. You are all awesome men and women of God and nothing is impossible for him. My finale is to the amazing Dr. Jacqueline Thousand. You were one of my main and greatest supporters even when I was in doubt. Your passion and positive character encouraged me to fulfill a dream that my son can be proud of.
Introduction

Life is invaluable. It is an opportunity for growth, for serving, and sharing compassion toward others. Unfortunately, with life, comes pain and stressors that cannot always be prevented. People of all ages experience loss, grief, anger, and discrimination.

Resiliency Defined

Resiliency has been defined as the ability to cope and adapt to change. In other words, being resilient allows children and youth to overcome difficulties in their lives (from link to the Department of Child Welfare's definition for resiliency). Nan Henderson, the president of Resiliency in Action, and international teacher and author on resiliency (2012) further defines resiliency as the ability to overcome all types of challenges (e.g., trauma, tragedy, personal crisis) in a way that the person bounces back stronger, wiser, and more personally powerful.

My personal experience of resiliency is as a set of positive characteristics that can be used to withstand and overcome negative experiences that can impact and impede a person’s life. Resiliency is not a protection from experiencing society’s challenges deficits. Instead, it is a way of interpreting life experiences that allows the person to overcome an experience.

An Educator’s Role to Promote Resiliency

Teachers are in classrooms to try to effect positive learning outcomes for all of their students, And among those students are those who could be identified as students who are impacted by a variety of life stressors (e.g., homelessness, family discord, bullying, involvement with drugs) may feel as if they are barely holding their heads above water trying to breathe because of the distress that has become part in their lives. Whatever these youth are
experiencing, these experiences can be distractions contributing to academic difficulties that, in the worst case, can prevent them from completing an educational path that is a road to success.

Given the reality of the classroom today, teachers often need to take on many roles over and above that of content teacher. Namely, teachers take on the role of therapist, parent, role model, and promoter of emotional and social grit or resilience. In what ways can teacher develop resiliency in their students as part of the classroom experience, so that students of various backgrounds are able to overcome some of their own personal obstacles? The purpose of this book is to answer that question.

As a teacher who formerly worked with youth incarcerated at a juvenile detention facility, I saw the impact of the various societal stressors affecting my students. I found it an essential part of my job to structure for my students opportunities in class to share the struggles they were experiencing inside and outside of the classroom.

Many of the stories my students told about their lives were so vivid and compelling that I almost became a part of them. I went as far as to volunteer to become a “juvenile delinquent” and join my students in jail for a weekend, so that I could experience firsthand what it was like to be detained alone in a dark room and have everything scheduled and controlled. My volunteer request was denied due to liability issues. I was not deterred. I decided to go ahead and focus in my teaching on building resiliency of the girls and boys in my classroom.

**Purpose and Preview of Chapters 1 - 4**

My personal experiences with these students have given me a new perspective on teaching. In this book, you will read a little bit about what I did with and learned from incarcerated youth. In the four chapters that follow, I describe four teacher behaviors or
dispositions that can foster resiliency in youth. They are 1) teaching of accountability, 2) choosing to have a positive attitude toward your students, 3) compassion for others and self, and 4) celebrating perseverance and success. To illustrate these behaviors and dispositions, I tell my students’ stories, changing their names and adjusting details in order to protect their identity. The content of the chapters is intended to encourage teachers who most certainly will have students who experience tough life situations and who struggle in the classroom. The key is to remember that every student is unique and fundamentally doing the best that they can, given their circumstances. Each student has a reason for a behavior and with that reason comes a personal story.

My hope is that the content of this book will help educators develop and hold an attitude of appreciation and hope for students considered at risk. For these students, there is still hope; there is still a possibility for greatness; there is still a future.
Chapter 1
Fostering Accountability as Part of Resiliency

Choose to let go.

Choose dignity.

Choose to forgive yourself.

Choose to forgive others.

Choose to see your value.

Choose to show the world you’re not a victim.

Choose to make us proud.

- Shannon L. Alder

Following time served, young men and women who have been incarcerated often find themselves back into the hands of temptation where they continue to repeat the same offensives for which they were originally convicted. Yes, youth who are released from the juvenile detention facility are each assigned a probation officer who is responsible for monitoring their behavior and assimilation back into the outside world. But these officers are not in the position to provide intensive support, education, or get personally involved with the many youth they oversee. And yet these youth need intensive support, education, and personal involvement on so many levels, particularly with regard to the development of personal accountability. From my experience as a teacher in the juvenile justice system, I found that many of the youth who were incarcerated and, in particular, those who were repeated offenders lack accountability not only for the crimes they committed, but for their own success. Many of these students had not been taught nor presented appropriate accountability outside the walls of the lock up facility, leaving it
to those who were these students to gain knowledge during school hours behind the locked doors.

Teaching accountability is not easy, especially when the students being instructed have had crime as part of their life and, perhaps, their life style. In my experience, young adults often view accountability as something negative, as something that results in negative, aversive consequences or punishments being applied to them from the outside. Yes, consequences can shape behavior, particularly positive ones, and accountability can be taught.

You can only imagine what it was like trying to explain positive consequences and accountability to a group of teenage girls who had experienced a meager amount of it. But after they “got” what it could look and sound like and experienced it with me, they began to absorb the information being given them. In order for me to demonstrate to these girls what positive choices could looked like, I shared video clips of young women who had experienced challenges in their lives that prevented them from making positive choices. These videos closely related to my group of girls in one way or another. Like them, these women grew up in poverty or came from unstable homes. Some women had children during their teenage years and were placed in foster homes for multiple reasons. Like my group of girls, these women grew up angry and resentful, but saw the harm that they had caused themselves and others and made the choice to change and take different path.

My students needed to see that many people encounter hardships, but their eventual accountability allowed them to survive and grow. My students’ “victim” mindset began to decrease as they viewed more clips. As an assignment, the girls each were to pick a specific video to reflect upon and analyze it in their journals. Each student was to describe the impact of
the choices the woman they selected as well as what they believed what their reasons were for
the woman’s negative choices. They also had to apply themselves in the same situation and
describe what they would have done differently. Students were then given the opportunity to
share.

Becky
Becky shared a story about how her mother was taking care of her daughter. She had
been in and out of the juvenile court system since she was 12 and did not know where to start in
taking care of her daughter. She told me, with tears in her eyes “I know I need to take care of her
because she is mine, but I keep messing up. I do not want this life for her.” I remembered this
young lady seeking answers in our classroom and leaving with some hope. One of the other girls
in the class told me that she had been unexpectedly released, but wanted to come back to
continue her work with us. I can only pray that she is giving her daughter a better life. She was
one of the few girls I taught who began to understand that accountability is not pointing blame at
anyone, but taking responsibility for what we do, learn from it, and applying it in order to serve
others in a way that will be benefit them and oneself.

As teachers, we must understand the background of the children we teach in order for us
to help them to understand our expectations and their own expectations for themselves.
Accountability – taking responsibility for academic choices and living within the bounds of
societal norms - can be taught. Teachers can help students develop this disposition and set of
behaviors by building trust and working as a team. Many of my students started off feeling
victimized, victimizing themselves, blaming others for their choices, and believing that their
negative choices were the only choices they could or should make. After sharing a positive outlook on accountability, they viewed themselves as stronger, more capable, and valuable.
Chapter 2
Choosing Our Attitude

*A teacher’s purpose is not to create students in his own image, but to develop students who can create their own image.*

- Author Unknown

In a world of poverty, failure, and resentment, one can only use their own attitude to change the environment in the classroom to meet the needs of students. Educators have attempted to teach youth who are considered at-risk in similar ways that they would to other students in the classroom; rigorous, dictating, and stern. Body language is read the moment one steps into a room. Students sense when a teacher enjoys their job as well as one who prefers not to be around much. I cannot stress enough that students who are considered at-risk often come from backgrounds that do not always allow for them to exhibit the positive behaviors that we as teachers expect from a model student. When our poor attitudes interfere, it is not a surprise when we receive it back.

As a teacher in a juvenile detention facility, I was surprised to hear students express that they actually enjoyed their classes more here than at their home schools because a) the learning environment was more positive, b) they were held accountable, and c) they were expected to perform their best at all times. You can imagine my surprise. These students were seeking accountability and high expectations! They especially felt that the teachers should put in more time and effort in helping them to learning.

Every day was a new day at the facility. Students often were released, changed to a different unit, or transferred to a prison once they reached the age of 18, depending upon the crime a student had committed. I found that students showed me more respect when I let them
know that I saw them as students who wanted to learn, not criminals. Being held in a facility where these children often spend lots of time alone in cold, concrete rooms, following a given schedule with no choice, made it difficult for them to keep a positive attitude and have fun in the learning environment. I understood the background of many of my students, so I tried to create a positive learning environment by being enthusiastic and activating the students’ sense of humor. Not only was it beneficial for them, but for me. Together, we were able to get through lessons more easily. I could enjoy my time teaching and students were able to absorb more knowledge that they could use in society.

Developing positive relations with a student requires a teacher to choose a positive attitude and a belief in the goodness and potential of a child. Our attitudes, as teachers, determine the feel of the classroom environment. Is it a joyful, expectant, hopeful place to enter or is it classroom where negative perceptions of certain students set up circumstances where a student’s behavior is considered defiance rather than an expression of distress or lack of self-management skills? The environment affects the learning of everyone. Teacher stereotyping of students based upon past reputations or others’ labeling of them can surely lead to students fulfilling those negative expectations and dispositions other than trying to establish a relationship.

Students viewed as at-risk are often already labeled as defiant, angry, impulsive, or “mentally ill” by the adults who are responsible for educating them in the first place. What we know is that if students hear this enough about themselves, they may adopted these labels as representation of who they are.
This acknowledged, teachers must be compelled to ignore these stereotypes and others’ perceptions of a child’s potential. Teachers, instead must rely upon our own choice of perceiving students in the most positive of lights, as we (and not others) choose to experience them.

As an educator at a juvenile detention facility, many of my students had numerous behavior reports included in their records, so at the start of school, they had been already labeled by school officials as “problem children.” Many of them shared with me that they felt they had been treated unfairly. Probably the most damaging thing that happened was when my students’ own peers would viewed and treated them as kids who “just had issues.”

Ana

Ana was a 13-year old girl who was medically diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder and bipolar disorder. For years, this young lady established a reputation of being defiant, having outbursts, and using foul language towards teachers. Teachers were not looking forward to having her the following year. They had a negative perception of her from the start, which was only intensified as she became more defiant. Putting my own emotional reactions aside, I decided to “listen to” and read her behavior. I learned that a reason for her defiance and for bringing lots of snacks to school was to get the attention and approval of her peers. She wanted to feel like she was part of the group. Although the peers she had attracted were not the most desirable, I understood what she wanted and lacked - a social life. So, that was where to begin with Ana, establishing a relationship with her and helping her to get her basic need for belonging met in other ways, so she could get beyond her current strategies for establishing peer relations that interfered with learning.
Ben

Ben was another one of my students who struggled academically and emotionally. He was perpetually angry and had a difficult time remaining in the classroom for more than fifteen minutes. Ben fought back by kicking and screaming when Probation came in to escort him out. His body was pinned to the ground. His red face was covered in sweat, while his eyes remained closed as tears ran down his cheeks due to the burning of the pepper spray. “You can’t f** do anything to me! I’ll be back and still be the same! F**** you guys!” That night, his voice would ring in my ears. I was not angry with his behavior; I sympathized with him, as he was consumed by so much anger. He was a repeated offender who had been in the system for years.

We do not have as much power as a teacher in the juvenile justice system as we would have liked. The county probation office makes the final decisions. Oftentimes, I felt powerless with students like Ben. I was able to develop a positive relationship with him in class, but when I was not there, he was unable to control himself and would act out in ways labeled defiant by his peers and staff. He was indeed a student with serious emotional needs; yet he was still also a child. Because he had already developed a reputation for being “psychotic, angry, and too hyperactive,” staff dreaded seeing him and threw him out because they did not want to “deal with him.”

Ben was a student who greatly needed emotional support and a student who did not receive it. With limited positive relationships with adults or anyone, for that matter, “interventions” proved ineffective. The last time I saw Ben, he was happy to see me. He shared with me that his probation officer said he would send him to prison the next time he had “an incident.” Ben was in the unit with young men who were waiting to be transferred over to prison due to serious crimes. Ben was not there because of his crime, but due to his mental health
challenges. It was a humiliating situation. He was prohibited from wearing shoes or having any material possessions of his own in his room. I had chosen my attitude about Ben. He was a child, a child who surely qualified for special education services under the disability category of Emotional Disturbance. He was a good kid who needed support to learn impulse control and communicating his needs to others. He was a kid who was pushed aside. As I left, Ben yelled, “Teacher D., when are you coming back, so that we can finish my school work?” I wanted him to know he could make good decisions, that he was NOT one of these young men with whom he shared his unit and this cell that stripped him of his humanity, but I knew that my own words would not be enough. I said to Ben, “I will come back and help you get back on track.” I never got the chance to come back. He was transferred out the next day; I never saw him again.
Chapter 3
Compassion for Others and Self

The most terrible poverty is loneliness, and the feeling of being unloved.

- Mother Teresa

Showing compassion and being committed to showing compassion for others and with ourselves allows teachers to maintain emotional balance when experiencing difficulties with student behavior in the classroom. By having and showing compassion, teachers demonstrate to students that they understand their students’ fears. Teachers need to remember that many students’ life experiences (homelessness, violence in the home or on the streets) are not under their control. It is easy to forget the fears that we had as young children – fears of parental divorce, bullying, not having friends, or not being attractive. The simple act of asking a student about their day and then genuinely listening has multiple benefits – reducing stress, making the classroom a safe place to tell the “truth,” and creating and maintaining a positive classroom culture.

Aaron: An Example of Compassion in Action

Aaron was one of my students who would have daily outbursts when he did not agree with a given consequence from his general education teacher. (I was his special education support person.) In our positive behavior support training in our special education credential program, we learn (and I believe) that distress behaviors (e.g., outbursts) have a communicative intent, meaning that the behavior is communicating that some need is not being met. We also know that there are antecedent triggers and life conditions (known as setting events) that precede and can precipitate behaviors.
Aaron was being raised by his mom who worked overtime to support him and his brother. Although Aaron and his brother were loved and had their basic needs (food, shelter, clothing) met, for Aaron this was not enough. I probed and discovered that Aaron’s father was not in his life. Aaron was angry at him for allowing the family to be torn apart. When I expressed my compassion, for his situation, he became more accessible. Although I agreed that consequences still needed to be applied when he made a poor choice in class, I also understood that he needed to learn to communicate his needs, but he did not know how to do it. We needed to teach and support him to show his disagreement with language OK to the general education teacher. So, we did. Aaron still continued to struggle emotionally, but increased his engagement, the amount of work he completed, and therefore, his academic progress.

**Self-Compassion**

As teachers, we take time to create the best and safest environment for our students. We plan group activities, organize, and differentiate our lessons to meet the needs of all of our students. We hang up inspirational quotes and try to plan incentives that would be most appropriate. We dream of our “perfect” students walking into our classroom with smiles on their faces, filling out their agendas, completing 100% of their homework, and participating 100% of the time in class. This often is not the reality of the day. Several students have not completed assignments, a number choose to socialize with their peers as an alternative to following teacher instructions. At the end of the day, a teacher can feel “burned out,” and not looking forward to the potential challenges of the following day. Being compassionate not only with our students but with ourselves is important to functioning effectively in the school environment.
Kristen Neff (link to information on self-compassion) is the originator of the concept and practices of self-compassion and author of the book, *Self-Compassion*. According to Neff’s research, studies have shown that the positive benefits of compassion, particularly self-compassion on teachers, which can, in turn have a positive effect on students. Namely, Neff notes the following (cited at greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/self_compassion_for_teachers):

People who practice self-compassion experience fewer negative emotions and stay emotionally balanced in difficult situations—both of which, according to another study on emotional exhaustion among teachers, assist with prevent the feeling of being burned out.

As a teacher, I have found the above to be true. I have found that part of my own compassion includes listening to myself. This requires building in our own quiet time to reflect upon our day not only at work, but at home. When we engage in such self-reflection, we give ourselves the opportunity to identify and then seek and secure support in areas in which we could use some help.

To illustrate this point, I need to let you know that I travel about an hour each way to work. This travel can be outrageous. But it also, can be beneficial, depending upon how this time is used. I have learned to enjoy the quiet time that allows for me to think about situations I have experienced throughout my day. It allows for me to experience, process, and possibly express my frustrations and stress as well as recognize and celebrate the positives with gratitude. It allows for reflection that can then bring growth.
With self-compassion, we are able to reframe negative or pessimistic thoughts about the classroom and students and trade them for optimistic ones about yourself and your students. Kristen Neff describes this phenomenon in the following way (cited at greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/self_compassion_for_teachers).

One of the most powerful things about compassion, is it makes you feel safe and calmer. Instead of just feeling empathy for your students—which is essentially feeling their pain—self-compassion allows you to embrace that pain with loving-kindness, which makes it bearable.

Students are astute and are able to read teacher disposition through the language and tone of voice we use as well as our body language. When we are compassionate and self-compassionate, students see it, and can learn through example to be and do the same as well.
Chapter 4
Celebrating Perseverance and Success

*I am only one, but still I am one. I cannot do everything, but still I can do something; and
because I cannot do everything, I will not refuse to do something that I can do.

- Helen Keller

Difficult life situations, lack of role models, poor self-esteem resulting from failures and challenges in self-regulation, seeming lack of choice, and power from living in poverty of family situations that are less than healthy for a child can pull a youth into what Esther Wright (1999), the author of *Why I Teach: Inspirational True Stories from Teachers who Make a Difference*, refers to a “cycle of failure.” The inspiration stories of teachers she tells in her book are clear evidence that teachers do have the power too and can pull students away from and out of this cycle. One clear way to do this is by celebrating perseverance and seemingly small successes of each student in the classroom. Encouraging our students to celebrate their own and one another’s efforts and achievements helps them to feel nurtured and important.

Some teachers do not realize that they may be the only aspiring and inspiring person that a young man and women may have in their life. They may be their only potential mentors who can support students to persevere and then celebrate their efforts. There are mentor programs that recognize and intervene with youth at risk. Programs such as provided through the New Jersey’s Transitional Education and Employment Management (T.E.E.M.) Gateway offer a unique "one-stop " center for juvenile mentoring, education, and employment support services for at-risk and disconnected urban youth (aka Opportunity Youth). By focusing on job training, and long-term
educational goals, youth can experience and be recognized for demonstrating their abilities to society. Evident supports such as these are powerful, but they are scarce.

**Motivational Fridays**

The one potential mentor and public source of structured success opportunities is a student’s teacher! We are role models whether we like it or not. Recognizing this, I took action and added to the academic curriculum for my students. I was determined to end the week productively and positively in class by focusing on people who had challenges and obstacles in their lives but had overcome these them. We celebrated their successes on what I called Motivational Fridays. On Motivational Friday, my students would view stories of people from various backgrounds who faced challenges but did not prevent them from becoming successful.

One of the most heartwarming and inspirational stories we examined on one Friday was about a father and son team who participated in an Ironman triathlon. The man was a single father who cared for his son who was quadriplegic. The son became interested in running for a charity and encouraged his father to participate. Dick and Rick Hoyt (link to Team Hoyt homepage; [link to video clip on Team Hoyt](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VgQpUxI1Ff8)) became committed to the Ironman competitions in order to inspire people and express that having a disability does not mean the end of the world but an opportunity to give hope to others.

I presented my students the YouTube video of the Hoyt team’s participation in their first 1997 Ironman competition. Looking around the room, I saw focus, tears, smiles, and disbelief on my students’ faces. Jasmine shared that the video had hit home because she thought of her younger brother who was also disabled. Other girls asked how it was possible for Rick to smile so much despite being unable to walk and speak without assistive technology. As we discussed
the video further, students seemed to “get” that the choices we make and the amount of faith that we have affect our future one way or another. I sensed a decrease in the “I don’t care” attitude and an increase in curiosity and hope. After starting Motivation Fridays, my students came to class more frequently with a smile on their face. They were curious about the lives of others and began asking what video they were going to watch the next week. The students were required to write a self-reflection following each video experience. It was so encouraging to see true progress in the quality of their thoughtfulness and the quality of their expressive writing because of the effort they put in on this consistent basis. I learned that these youth had abilities I wish I had. I was proud to have been allowed to see these abilities through their openness in their writing.

**Celebration of Passages**

The celebration of passages such as achieving a high school diploma and graduating are just some of the benefits that occur when students apply their abilities constructively. Most parents visualize their children walking in cap and gown across the stage, pressing their hands into the hand of the superintendent, and posing for the picture as they receive their diploma.

At the juvenile detention location at which I worked, we strove to make sure that this vision and this important milestone and passage of graduation could occur. The high school program at the juvenile detention facility focused on giving all students of age the opportunity to receive their high school diploma equivalency, General Equivalency Diploma (GED), as well as take entry-level college courses. It took considerable student-teacher collaboration, but I had the opportunity to witness four of my students graduate.
Although it was not the ideal place to experience the ceremonial day, the environment became more fulfilling due to the family and peers that attended. Brandy had the opportunity to give the commencement address at her graduation. She made a point to thank everyone who had at some point been involved in her success. I felt uncomfortable receiving her thanks, as I saw it as my responsibility to work to make this rite of passage and success celebration happen. However, I was so proud and it was greatly appreciated.

As educators and professionals, we have made a commitment to serve youth. We may not hold all the answers to every conflict, but we have the ability to help construct a young person’s future.
Recommended Readings and References


Afterward

Education colleague:
I thank you for giving me the opportunity to share my own experiences with you. I know appreciation of your dedication is not always revealed to you when you would like it to be, but you are doing an amazing job with all of your students. Reminisce the times when your students allowed you to catch a glimpse of their abilities and courage, to rely upon others’ support when needed. I am proud to say that I continue to learn from my students every day.

Parents:
By taking the time to read this booklet, it discloses that you are one compassionate person. Allow yourself to breathe and to do something considerate for yourself. You spend a great deal of time caring for children who will not always appreciate or understand that what you do is for their benefit. Spend time with loved ones and enjoy life as it comes. Leave work-related worries at work. This is your time, because you matter.

Students:
Your teachers and families want to guide you down an enlightened road. Teaching for resiliency benefits you. Resiliency cannot prevent life’s obstacles, but it can help how you approach troubles and ways that help you bounce back stronger, wiser, and more personally powerful.
I leave you with my favorite passage from Haim Ginott’s book, *Teacher and Child* as it reminds me of the importance of a teacher’s dispositions and actions and to remember that we hold all children in the highest regard.

*I have come to the terrifying conclusion that I am the decisive element. It is my personal approach that creates the climate. It is my daily mood that makes the weather. I possess tremendous power to make life miserable or joyous. I can be a tool of torture or an instrument of inspiration, I can humiliate or humor, hurt or heal. In all situations, it is my response that decides whether a crisis is escalated or de-escalated, and a person is humanized or de-humanized. If we treat people as they are, we make them worse. If we treat people as they ought to be, we help them become what they are capable of becoming.*

- Haim Ginott