Toward a Resilience-Based Model of School Social Work: 
The Turn-Around Mentor

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"Our greatest glory is not in never falling, but in rising every time we fall."

-Confucius

The Challenge

When first invited to write this chapter on the implications of resilience theory for social work practice with school age children, my initial inclination was to decline the offer. It was not because of any lack of interest in the subject matter. Indeed, I have long been intrigued by the complexities of the human condition, especially as they relate to children. In fact, I have taught human development theory for the better part of my adult life. My ambivalence was precipitated by an awareness of the fact that there were numerous scholars much better qualified than I who had devoted their lives to the study of this intriguing topic (see, for example, Garmezy & Rutter, 1983; Anthony, 1987; Werner & Smith, 1992; Smokowski, 1998 to mention only a few). Collectively, their work chronicles the emergence of the resilience construct and the subsequent transition from a deficit to a strengths-based conception of human behavior, a perspective I have come to personally embrace as well as espouse in my own teaching.

As I struggled with the challenge of whether to accept the invitation, I realized that I was not at all certain that I understood this developing paradigm well enough to speak knowledgeably about its implications for social work practice in academic settings. Despite a proliferation in the body of research on how the interdependent notions of risk and protective factors conspire to help explain the complex phenomenon of resilience (Luthar & Zigler, 1991; Fraser, Richman, & Galinsky, 1999), relatively little has been written concerning a parallel theory of action. This may in part account for why so many social workers typically endorse a strengths-based perspective, but when pressed to explain it, have so much difficulty articulating exactly how this perspective gets translated into their practice routines. Since I share this same sense of "disconnect" between personal values and professional actions, I could not resist the opportunity to explore the meaning of resilience in my own life, and in so doing, possibly discover some of the basic principles that may be of value to my practitioner colleagues who labor in the vineyards school based social work.

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This chapter appears in a text edited by Roberta Greene (2001), Resilience Theory and Research for Social Work Practice, Washington, DC: National Association of Social Workers. All inquiries should be sent to Gerald T. Powers, Ph.D., Professor and Director of the Ph.D. Program, Indiana University School of Social Work [gpowers@iupui.edu].
The Background

The resilience construct gained prominence in the professional literature about forty years ago in response to a perplexing question: Why is it that some children seem to have the ability to deal with adversity despite exposure to severe risk? In the intervening decades, this question has captured the imagination of a growing number of researchers and practitioners in the human service field. The question itself reflects an important conceptual shift in the dominant view of human development. During the 1950s and beyond the prevailing paradigm had been tied to the linear notion that personality evolves over time in response to a series of challenges associated with a set of relatively fixed developmental stages (Erikson, 1950; Kelly, 1955). Given this model, it was assumed that the critical components of personality were for the most part determined during the formative years of psychosexual development. Once that personality template was in place, it was believed to be more or less frozen in time and immutable over the life course.

Based on this notion, a number of longitudinal studies, such as those conducted by Moss and Susman (1980), attempted to identify patterns of consistency between types of personality and the nature of problems encountered at various stages in the developmental cycle. Although these longitudinal studies failed to sustain the underlying theoretical premise, the research itself served to reinforce a deficit view of human behavior, a view that characterizes individuals as victims of their own epigenetically encoded limitations. Unfortunately, the notion of a "one size fits all" model of human development failed to adequately recognize the combination of idiosyncratic capacities and strengths that speak to an individual's uniqueness. As Murphy observed as early as 1962, "It is something of a paradox that a nation which has exulted in its rapid expansion and its scientific technological achievements should have developed so vast a "problem" literature: a literature often expressing difficulties, social failures, blocked potentialities, and defeat.... In applying clinical ways of thinking formulated out of experience with broken adults, we were slow to see how the language of adequacy to meet life’s challenges could become the subject matter of psychological science" (Murphy, 1962, p. 17).

Paralleling the development of the "deficit model" has been a substantial body of epidemiological research indicating that people vary widely in their individual responses to the events of early life, including adversity, depending upon the nature and type of subsequent life experiences (Clarke & Clarke, 1984). Many people, including children, simply do not behave the way we think they should given the constellation of toxic conditions in which they live. In fact, Rutter (1989) found that even the most "adverse experiences in infancy carry few risks for later development if the subsequent rearing environment is a good one" (p. 23).

There is an impressive and expanding body of research to support Rutter's contention. It is well documented, for example, that poverty is associated with poor academic achievement (Sherman, 1994). Yet, not all poor children fail in school (Duncan, Brooks-Gunn, & Klebanov, 1994). The literature also suggests that adult abusers are more likely to have grown up in abusive families. Yet, the vast majority of abused children never become abusers themselves (Faber & Egeland, 1987). Although the children of parents with schizophrenia clearly have a higher risk of also developing the illness (Rende & Plomin, 1993), about 90% of these children remain
symptom free throughout their lives (Garmezy, 1987). Similar paradoxical findings apply to
children of divorce as well as children who grow up in substance abusing families (Wolin &
Wolin, 1995). Notwithstanding the untoward conditions experienced during their formative
years, the overwhelming majority of children grow up to lead rewarding and productive lives. As
Garmezy notes, these children “upset our prediction tables and in childhood bear the visible
indices that are hallmarks of competence – good peer relations, academic achievement,
commitment to education and to purposive life goals …” (quoted in Masten & Coatsworth,

Rutter (1985) found that, "even with the most severe stresses and the most glaring
adversities, it is unusual for more than half of children to succumb" (p. 589). How do we explain
these apparent anomalies, and what can we learn from the lives of those who seem to somehow
"beat the odds"? What are the mitigating or protective factors that seem to not only protect some
children from the toxic influence of negative life circumstances, but also somehow empower
them to flourish and ultimately thrive? Most importantly, how can this knowledge be re-
envisioned in terms of practice principles that can effectively guide our interventions with the
children we serve in our schools?

The purpose of this chapter is to explore these issues from a personal perspective, from
the perspective of what it means to be someone on the receiving end of a strengths-based
approach to helping. The intent is to provide a practical example, personal testimony if you will,
of how the resilience approach worked in the life of a real person, of how theory got translated
into practice within the context of a human relationship. In essence, it is an autobiographical
account, the story of how a relationship with a caring adult forever changed the course of the
author's life. It will attempt to explain those experiences within the context of a resilience
framework, moving back and forth between a first person account of personal experiences to a
theoretical justification supported by a growing body of empirical research. It will conclude with
a discussion of how the lessons learned from this experience might help inform our view of a
resilience model for school based social work that is consistent with this research foundation.

The Problem

It is difficult to pinpoint exactly when I first became aware of the fact that I hated school.
It certainly wasn't obvious to me the day I entered the first grade, but it did become increasingly
apparent as the year unfolded. At first, it was a sort of generalized dislike, not clearly associated
with anything in particular. As a six-year old child, I couldn't quite comprehend why I seemed to
be so different from my closest friends, all of whom appeared to look forward to the time they
spent in school. They seemed to be enjoying the very same challenges that I had grown to dread.
Each day, I can recall the sense of relief I felt when the three o'clock bell signaled the end of
what seemed to me to be an interminable prison sentence. I realize now that the sense of joy I felt
when the school day ended was precipitated, not only because it represented the end of a
prolonged painful experience, but more importantly, because it seemed to re-establish a sense of
equity with my friends. At three o'clock, order was somehow restored to the universe. I could
once again compete as an equal with friends who I was certain had come to view me as a
"dummy" during the previous eight hours.
It was sometime during the second grade that I became aware that my aversion to school was somehow linked to my inability to read. It became increasingly apparent to me that most of the other kids seemed to be enjoying the required reading classes and associated spelling bees. While most of the children competed eagerly for the teacher's attention in a desire to read aloud, I found myself sinking deeper into my desk hoping to become invisible. I dreaded the public embarrassment and humiliation that invariably accompanied my futile attempts to decipher what seemed to me to be a secret code understood by everyone in class but me. The more I struggled to maintain composure during these public recitals, the more anxious I became. I can recall the other students giggling as I stumbled over the simplest of words. This growing sense of inadequacy was exacerbated by periodic reminders by the teacher of my failure to maintain the standard of excellence that had been established by my older siblings. Frequent admonishments and occasional physical punishment served to reinforce the prevailing assumption that I wasn't trying hard enough, a message that elicited both frustration and anger. It took all the bravado I could muster to fight back the tears that accompanied an overwhelming sense of shame.

As is so often the case, what began as a fairly simple and circumscribed problem, gradually took on meaning at a much deeper level. Not only was I experiencing difficulties in school, but there was a growing concern among friends and relatives regarding how quiet and shy I had become. These outward manifestations of withdrawal simply served to disguise the internal sense of confusion, erosion of confidence, and feelings of hopelessness that typically accompany sustained failure.

By the third grade, it had become obvious to everyone, including my parents, that my inability to read was affecting virtually every aspect of my academic performance. My mother's heroic efforts to work with me on a nightly basis had no apparent benefits. Indeed, it seemed to exacerbate the situation. By this time, I was beginning to experience somatic symptoms. Every time I would attempt to read, my eyes would begin to water and I would feel nauseous. I remember being taken to an ophthalmologist in what I suspect was a form of wishful thinking on the part of my parents. Maybe faulty eyesight was the culprit. Maybe a pair of glasses could provide the magical solution to this troubling dilemma. My vision was fine.

As the number of people who became aware of the situation grew, so too did the tendency to define it as a problem. Since adults were unable to solve "the problem," it became increasingly clear to me that the deficit must reside within me. I began to think of myself as being flawed in some fundamental way that apparently defied remediation.

As I reflect upon this difficult period, I can imagine how this cluster of "symptoms" might have been viewed within the context of a deficit model had today's managed care environment existed during the 1940's. The likelihood is that the "principal diagnosis" would have been a personality disorder of some type, classified according to one or more of the categories outlined in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual* (American Psychiatric Association, 1994). At the very least, the problem would likely have been classified as a *Learning Disorder* as coded on Axis II - 315.9: "Reading achievement, as measured by individually administered standardized tests of reading accuracy or comprehension, is substantially below that expected given the person's chronological age, measured intelligence, and age-appropriate education."
In light of the accompanying excessive anxiety, it would not have been surprising to find a secondary diagnosis on Axis I, such as 300.02 - Generalized Anxiety Disorder. The associated tearing and nausea in the presence of stressful circumstances might also have suggested a Somatic Disorder (300.81) of some type, or more specifically, a Social Anxiety Disorder (300.23) defined as "A marked and persistent fear of one or more social or performance situations in which a person is exposed to … possible scrutiny by others. The individual fears that he or she will act in a way (or show anxiety symptoms) that will be humiliating or embarrassing." It is possible that an Axis IV diagnosis of Psychosocial and Environmental Problems might also have been identified if "academic problems; discord with teachers or classmates; (and/or an) inadequate school environment" were considered to be contributing factors (page 43). The Axis V, "Global Assessment of Functioning Scale" (GAF) would probably have been coded somewhere in the 51-60 range suggesting "moderate difficulty in social, occupational, or school functioning" (page 47). Indeed all of these characterizations were true.

Unfortunately, the driving imperative of deficit models such as the DSM-IV, is essentially one of identifying what's "wrong" with people. Emphasis is placed on classifying "the problem", the assumption being that the difficulties people experience are primarily a function of personal flaws in personality or character. Psychological stress tends to be viewed solely as an effect (i.e., a dependent variable) rather than as a possible cause (i.e., an independent variable) in a diagnostic calculus that emphasizes the primacy of personal limitations. To the extent to which individual liabilities and limitations become the primary locus of the professional's attention, individual strengths tend to get ignored, systemic factors fade into the background, and concern for the transactions between people and their environments become largely transparent. As a result, solutions get tied almost exclusively to efforts to remediate personal deficits. Such models not only serve to stigmatize the client, but also tend to divert attention away from any meaningful consideration of the inevitable and remarkable cluster of strengths that seems to reside within every individual as well as the environments they inhabit.

The Relationship of a Caring Adult

Over the years, I've come to appreciate some of the simple blessings of having grown up in a small coal-mining town in Pennsylvania over a half century ago. Ironically, one of those blessings was the total absence of any formal human service network to which I might have been referred for help. Another was the good fortune of experiencing a "problem" that predated the creation of the DSM. At that time, and in that place, when problems emerged, they were usually handled informally by one or more members of the extended family. In my case, it was my Uncle Edgar. He was the family member to whom every one seemed to turn whenever difficult problems arose, or at least it seemed that way to me. In this instance, he volunteered to deploy his considerable skills on my behalf. It seemed both inevitable and altogether natural to me that he would take me under his wing during this crisis since I had always felt that I held a special place in his life.
The year was 1947, long before the concepts of resilience or strengths-based practice had appeared on the professional horizon. Although he had no formal training in the behavior sciences, Uncle Edgar seemed to have an intuitive sense of what the concepts of resilience and strength were all about. It has never been clear to me exactly how he had attained these insights. I have always assumed that it was a product of his having experienced both extremes of the human condition - remarkable individual achievements and great personal tragedy.

He was an entrepreneur at heart, a man who was willing to try just about anything, if for no other reason than the challenge itself. He was one of those rare individuals who seemed to be able to do anything he put his mind to - build a house, repair a car, fix a watch or play the piano by ear. It didn't much matter what the challenge, he was always up to the task. He had initiated several very successful business ventures only to witness their demise as a result of the market crash of 1929. He was later disabled in an auto accident that left him partially paralyzed and hearing-impaired. Despite these personal setbacks, he seemed to have an indomitable spirit, a sense of optimism and self-confidence that was contagious and admired by virtually everyone who knew him, including myself.

Uncle Edgar always went out of his way to make me feel special. I’m not at all sure why. I suspect it may have had something to do with the emotional void he may have been feeling following the departure of his three grown children, all of whom were adults and successfully leading lives of their own. In any event, I became his indispensable little helper, his protégé. Whenever it came to important projects, he would make me feel as though the job could never have been completed without my help. He seemed to want to teach me everything he knew, patiently explaining even the smallest detail of everything we did together.

I mention all of this simply to emphasize the importance of how the helping person is seen in the eyes of the person being helped. Among the protective factors found to correlate most positively with resilience in children is the availability of caring adults (Smokowski, 1998). Social workers have always emphasized the importance of the helping relationship as a necessary if not sufficient condition for meaningful change. Especially during the formative years, children seem to have a natural propensity to follow the lead of role models whose behavior they admire, and this was certainly the case with respect to my Uncle Edgar. Although we never spoke of such matters, he was my hero, and somehow I knew that he knew that.

The Helping Process

I can recall vividly the excitement I felt as a child in anticipation of my visits to his apartment every Tuesday and Thursday evening. It was during these biweekly ventures that a whole new world opened up to me. Indeed, in less than a year, my life was transformed. In retrospect, I never really thought of my regular visits with Uncle Edgar as occasions to "work on my problem." As far as I was concerned, they were simply special opportunities for the two of us to share time together, opportunities to engage in all kinds of unique and interesting activities that made me feel good about myself.
During my initial visits, I can remember spending all of our time exploring the wonders of his woodworking shop, a haven that seemed to me to house virtually every tool known to man. It was clear that these tools were important to him, a realization that took on added meaning as he taught me how they worked and gradually entrusted me with their use. I can still recall the enormous sense of achievement I felt as we designed and completed our first project together – a birdhouse with a removable roof. He took this occasion to patiently read aloud the directions and safety precautions for every tool, a ritual that I subsequently came to realize was his subtle way of demonstrating how important it was that we knew how to read. I think that he was convinced that I would be more likely to want to learn to read if I first had a compelling reason to do so. As I look back on the time we spent together, nothing we did seems to have occurred by happenstance. He was planful and intentional every step along the way.

Our evenings together were carefully orchestrated. As we made our way to his den, a slightly disorganized but comfortable office area that guarded the door to his workshop, he would typically begin by asking me how my day had gone. Listening carefully, he would gently encourage me to share any struggles or frustrations I had experienced since our last visit together. As the evening unfolded, he would invariably find numerous opportunities to explore these experiences in greater depth, always uncovering new ways to enable me to see them as interesting challenges rather than defeats. The activities that surrounded our woodworking efforts always seemed to provide useful metaphors for the handling of day-to-day problems. Each project not only provided a tangible monument to our joint efforts, but more importantly, a unique opportunity for me to learn important lessons about life itself in an unobtrusive way. It is apparent to me now that, during these encounters, his immediate goal was to build my self-confidence, to convince me that I had special talents that were unlike those of any of my peers. He wanted me to believe that I could accomplish just about anything I put my mind to. That was the beginning.

One of the things that impressed me most about Uncle Edgar was his ability to get me to believe that everything we did together was for his benefit. There was always the pretense that our activities were designed to meet his needs rather than mine. He was the one who needed me, rather than vice versa. I can recall the first time we actually sat down to read together. He asked me whether it would be okay if we spent a little time reading from a short story he had started the day before. He was anxious to find out how the story would end before we worked on our next woodworking project.

I can recall sitting on the soft blue velvet sofa that dominated his den. We sat side-by-side, his right arm around my shoulder and his left hand balancing the book precariously on his lap. To this day, I can sense the warmth and safety of his body next to mine as I followed his bony index finger tracing each word across the page. His bifocals sitting precariously at the end of his nose, he pronounced each word slowly and with great passion. It was immediately apparent that this was not the usual fare of "Dick and Jane" to which I had become accustomed at school. It was an intriguing mystery about a young boy stranded on an island inhabited by beings from another planet. In some strange way, the dilemma experienced by this young protagonist seemed to resonate with my personal plight. It captured well the kinds of feelings I was experiencing during the seemingly endless hours I spent in school each day.
It was not until many years later that I fully appreciated how clever he really was in his efforts to capture my interest and imagination. He seemed intent on having me follow the words as he carefully and skillfully got me absorbed in the story. At the most compelling point, he tilted his head back, rubbed his eyes, and announced that he had a headache. He wondered whether I would continue reading the story so that we could discover the fate of our hero. As if passing on an important responsibility, he slid the book onto my lap, closed his eyes, and waited for me to continue the story.

At that moment, I was so engrossed in the plot that I was virtually unaware that I had begun to read. It was as if both of us had become an integral part of the story and that now it was my turn to continue the journey. While I was aware that now it was Uncle Edgar who was following my finger as it made its way across the page, I felt no pressure to "perform". Moving at my own pace, he seemed unconcerned whenever I stumbled over words and made what must have seemed like obvious and sometimes humorous mistakes. His prompts were few in number, and occurred only when the pronunciation of a word was crucial to the meaning of the story. He consistently acknowledged my efforts to pronounce words correctly and never failed to reassure me that I was doing an excellent job. I remember his reassuring admonition that "the most important thing about reading is that we understand what the author is trying to say." What Uncle Edgar was trying to say in his quiet and unassuming way was that it was okay for me to make mistakes. He was giving me permission to fail, a luxury I had never really experienced before.

That first reading encounter with Uncle Edgar was truly a transforming experience. For the first time in my life I realized that reading could indeed be fun. Uncle Edgar had made it fun. Despite my many mistakes, he had enabled me to feel that I had accomplished something very special. We celebrated that achievement, as became our custom every Tuesday and Thursday evening thereafter, by working together in his shop on one of our pet "projects".

From that evening on, we devoted a part of our time together to reading a story. At first these sessions lasted about fifteen minutes. Gradually they expanded to thirty minutes and sometimes as long as a full hour, always culminating with a rewarding trip to Uncle Edgar's shop and a treat prepared by Aunt Marie.

The more we read together, the more active Uncle Edgar became in teaching basic principles. His emphasis was always on comprehension, but he gradually worked at expanding my vocabulary. As we read, he would stop on certain words that he felt were important for me to be able to "sound out" phonetically. At the end of each reading session we would spend some time learning to spell the most interesting new words we had encountered in the story. He would carefully dissect each word into syllables from which we would then construct new and increasingly complex words. It became a sort of game in which he challenged me to create new words and new sounds. Each session, while much the same as the one before, always held new surprises.

I remember one particularly empowering spelling session in which Uncle Edgar revealed that he was going to share with me a word that no other human being in the known universe knew how to spell. He guaranteed me that no one, other than he and I, would ever be able to spell this special word - including my reading teacher! In fact, as if to emphasize the certainty of
his claim, he suggested that I challenge her to spell this mysterious word. To be fair, however, he cautioned that I should give my teacher at least three chances to accomplish the feat.

It is impossible for me to explain how excited and filled with anticipation I was at that very moment, as I eagerly waited for Uncle Edgar to reveal the secret of this "special word." Uncle Edgar looked over his shoulder as if to assure himself that no one else was eavesdropping, and then in a hardly audible voice, slowly pronounced and spelled the illusive word - S-Y-Z-Y-G-Y. The word he explained was pronounced "siz-i-gee". As I recall, it has something to do with the orbit of celestial bodies and their relationship to the sun. But that wasn't important at that particular moment. What was important was that I now had a word that no one else in the world knew how to spell save Uncle Edgar and me. I could hardly contain my enthusiasm as I waited for an opportunity to confront my reading teacher with this newly discovered Gordian Knot.

As Uncle Edgar had predicted, she was unable to unravel the mystery of that magical word, even after the allotted three attempts. The insight I gained and the sense of personal satisfaction and empowerment I felt at that moment has remained with me to this day. It was a turning point of sorts, an epiphany if you will. I felt that I had gained control of an important part of my life. Knowing that others as important as teachers could also misspell words somehow reassured me that I was not alone in my painful predicament. As my vocabulary grew, these spelling sessions took on added significance. My growing capacity to spell was improving my ability to read, and vice versa. I discovered a new found sense of confidence that was beginning to carry over to virtually every aspects of my academic performance.

When personal and environmental phenomena converge in ways that empower individuals, Werner and Smith refer to them as “self-righting tendencies”. They argue that the factors or processes that facilitate self-righting capacities "make a more profound impact on the life course of children who grow up under adverse conditions than do specific risk factors or stressful life events" (Werner & Smith, 1992, p. 202). The notion that all people are born with at least some innate self-righting capacities is consistent with White’s earlier concept of motivation which he coined as “effectance” (White, 1959, p. 321). Effectance refers to that innate urge that presumably resides within each of us to actively engage with our environment in an effort to make our influence felt, and to master tasks in a competent fashion. I felt that sense of competence on that memorable day, even as an eight-year-old child.

Despite the plausibility of “innate capacities”, there is little evidence to suggest that such capacities are capable of self-actualization in the absence of appropriate environmental conditions. Individual capacities flourish to the extent to which the opportunities available within the environment both permit and enable the individual to fulfill his/her potential. While there is little evidence to support Anthony’s characterization of resilient children as being “psychologically invulnerable” (Anthony, 1987), a growing body of research does suggest that vulnerability to risk can be mitigated substantially if the social ecology of the child’s environment contains appropriate protective factors (Luthar & Zigler, 1991; Mrazek & Haggerty, 1994). Coie and his colleagues found that protective factors not only serve to buffer the effects of risk, but can also facilitate intervention by directly decreasing an existing dysfunction (Coie, et al., 1993).
Both of these factors were certainly true for me as I struggled to cope with a set of personal and environmental conditions that as a child I could not even begin to comprehend. Among the many protective factors available to me were two that seemed particularly significant—a supportive and committed family atmosphere, and a positive adult role model who possessed the interest and skills necessary to tip the scale from risk to resilience. While it is unlikely that any of the events described above would have occurred without the strong and consistent support of my parents, for purposes of the current discussion, I shall emphasize the lessons learned within the context of my relationship with my Uncle Edgar. It was he who served as the primary catalyst for constructive change. For all practical purposes, he played the role that comes closest to my vision of an enlightened social worker, a role that Bernard (1991) refers to as a “turnaround mentor”.

Lessons Learned

As I reflect upon these early experiences, a number of practice-related principles emerge that speak directly to a strengths-based perspective of practice, all of which are entirely consistent with the existing body of research on resilience as well as traditional social work intervention within the school environment.

*Practice grounded on resilience principles assumes a strengths-based perspective and is implemented through human relationships:* Resilience can be thought of as the human capacity of individuals to transform and change, no matter what the risks. It presumes what Werner and Smith (1992, p. 202) refer to as an “innate self-righting mechanism” present in all human beings. We know that children are vulnerable to the toxic influences of the environmental conditions in which they live. Exposure to risk increases the probability of difficulties while protective factors have been found to buffer against the exposure to risk. The more risk factors that are present, the greater the risk. While exposure to one risk factor does not condemn a child to problems later in life, exposure to a greater number of risk factors increases a young person’s risk exponentially (Hawkins, Catalano, & Brewer, 1995). In other words, the presence of two or more risk factors in combination are likely to have a multiplicative rather than an additive effect (Rutter, 1983).

Some risk factors are common to most childhood problems, such as poverty, racial discrimination, inadequate educational opportunities, and parental conflict (Coie, et al., 1993; Luther & Zigler, 1991; Mrazrek & Haggerty, 1994). Fraser and Galinsky (1999) refer to them as “keystone” risks, that is, “those conditions or processes that make a child most vulnerable to problems and that, if left unattended, will cause problems to remain or worsen. On balance, keystone risks are the markers for intervention” (p. 269). However, the relative impact of any given risk factor may vary widely as a function of various demographic variables (e. g., race, ethnicity, gender and age) and/or individual traits (e. g., one’s genetic endowment and biological capacity). The probability of a child’s succeeding in school correlates positively with the adequacy of the school the child attends (Rutter, 1983), and children who experience some degree of success during the early stages of their academic careers are more likely to continue in school (Comer, 1984). Despite generalizations of this type, it is difficult to disentangle how variables interact in ways that place some children at greater risk than others. Exposure to similar risk constellations seems to impact children differently depending upon where a particular child
is relative to his/her developmental process as well as how the surrounding protective mechanisms function to interrupt the risk cycle (Masten, 1994; Rutter, 1994, 1987).

While it is enormously helpful to understand the factors that place some children at greater risk than others, a cautionary note is in order. It is extremely important that we guard against the tendency to develop an at-risk mindset. The danger in developing such a mindset is that it can tend to influence the way we view the children we serve, often leading to a search for problems rather than strengths. It may also incline us to categorize children as victims rather than as competent resources capable of making meaningful changes in their own lives.

Windfield (1994) argues that “We need to change our approach from one that emphasizes risks, deficits, and psychopathology to one that capitalizes on protection, strengths, and assets” (p. 3). This is the essence of what my Uncle Edgar had done for me. He seemed to intuitively understand the dispositional and contextual conditions that had predisposed me toward negative outcomes. While his approach appears to have taken these factors into consideration, he scrupulously avoided references to any deficits I may have had and went out of his way to build our relationship upon the strengths he perceived to exist within me and the immediate surrounding environment.

It was not until my “problem” was recast as a challenge as well as an opportunity for growth that I came to believe that it was something to be confronted rather than avoided. I had lost hope that anything meaningful could be done to remedy the situation short of a miracle. As French suggested as early as 1952, without the spark of hope, no one is likely to make the investment necessary to change the conditions of their lives (French, 1952). Uncle Edgar supplied the miracle in the form of a caring relationship grounded on unconditional trust and the steadfast belief that I was capable of more than I had ever imagined. Relationships, however, do not develop in a vacuum. They are a byproduct of the interactions between the people involved.

**Schools are ideally positioned to serve as the catalyst for the development of resilience in children:** The prevailing research on resilience suggests that schools provide ideal environments within which to promote the kinds of academic, personal and social competencies that have been found to correlate most highly with the development of resilient children, which in turn have been found to foreshadow effective adult adaptation. They are, as Doll and Lyon (1998) suggest, "ubiquitous caretaking environments" (p. 356) that persist across numerous developmental periods in the lives of most American children. No other existing social institution is as well positioned to serve as an effective catalyst for our efforts to translate the emerging body of research on resilience into actual practice.

While they should not be viewed as panaceas for all the world's ill, schools that foster resilience in children have been found to embody a range of protective factors and opportunity structures frequently cited in the research literature. For example, in her review of research on resilience, Benard (1991) found that schools "that establish high expectations for all kids - and give them the support necessary to achieve them - have incredibly high rates of academic success" (p.11). Similarly, one of the most reliable predictors of academic success among children is the accompanying level of family involvement. Many parents feel disenfranchised by the very schools to which they are required by law to send their children (Cox & Powers, 1998).
It is not surprising, therefore, that many of these same parents are reluctant to become actively involved in the day-to-day life of the school. Nevertheless, studies consistently demonstrate that parental involvement consistently correlates positively with student achievement, academic attendance, and graduation rates (Chan, 1987; Epstein, 1987; Moles, 1982), findings that appear to cut across racial, ethnic and social class differences (Peterson, 1989).

Children typically spend about a third of each day in school where they are usually exposed to competent caring adults. Most schools - at least those that have been found to be most effective - provide supportive environments in which high performance expectations are valued and children are held in positive regard (Freidberg, Prokosch, Teister, & Stein, 1990; Comer, 1980; Rutter, Maughan, Mortimore, Ouston, & Smith, 1979). There is also compelling evidence to support the contention that school-based family involvement programs have been effective (Maughan, 1988; Graue, Weinstein, & Walberg, 1983). In fact, efforts to involve parents in school activities have been found to produce more positive results than programs targeted exclusively at students (Comer, 1986; Walberg, 1984; Weikart, Epstein, Schweinhart, & Bond, 1978). The types of family involvement programs being implemented across the country vary widely and address a range of issues directly or indirectly related to strengthening the resilience of the family unit, including for example, involving families in school management, job training, career counseling health care, mental health and social support (Wang, Haertel, & Walberg, 1992). All such programs seem to have an empowering influence and reduce the level of stress experienced by at-risk families.

The key to motivating children to learn, therefore, seems to be closely linked to our ability to empower parents in ways that actively involve them in the education of their children. After all, for most children, parents are the "caring adults" and "mentors" to which the research refers when it identifies the kinds of protective factors that foster resilience (Masten, Best, & Garmezy, 1990). Masten et al. remind us that parents "nurture mastery motivation and self-esteem as well as physical growth. Parents provide information, learning opportunities, behavior models, and connections to other resources. When these transactional protective processes are absent or are severely limited for prolonged periods, a child may be significantly handicapped in subsequent adaptation by low self-esteem, inadequate information or social know-how, a disinclination to learn or interact with the world, and a distrust of people as resources: (p. 438).

These critical functions can be supported and strengthened to the extent to which schools provide members of each child's extended family opportunities for meaningful involvement in the daily life of the school. To accomplish this end, resilience models for school social work must be viewed within a larger ecological context based on a child-centered, family-focused, neighborhood-based frame of reference. It is at this most proximal level that school social workers can have an immediate and meaningful impact on the lives of children and their families. By suggesting this, I do not mean to discount the value and importance of our role as advocates for broader social change in the form of enlightened public policy at the macro level. Indeed, the kinds problems that children experience on a personal level are inextricably tied to the larger public issues that confront society as a whole, including discrimination, inadequate housing, the lack of universal health care, and the like. However, as Masten (1994, p 13) notes, the correlates of individual resilience in children that have been found to be more or less
ubiquitous across diverse situations suggest a set of factors that are most typically played out at the micro level, including:

- effective parenting;
- connections to other competent adults;
- appeal to other people, particularly adults;
- areas of talent or accomplishment valued by self and others;
- self-efficacy, self-worth, and hopefulness;
- religious faith or affiliations;
- socioeconomic advantages;
- good schools and other community assets; and
- good fortune.

Opportunities to influence most if not all of these protective factors are readily available within the ecological niche that exists when individual families, schools and neighborhoods interact in an intentional manner. While any one of these micro systems can potentially have a positive impact on a child's development, there is, as Epstein (1994) puts it, some evidence and strong logic behind the argument that, "When the home, the school, peers, and the larger community are working together, the greater impact is in a consistent direction" (p. 59).

**Resilience is a value-laden concept that gains meaning only within the context of the prevailing societal norms:** As much as we might like to idealize the concept of resilience and treat it as an innate capacity that emerges miraculously in some children in the face of adversity, there is little empirical evidence to support such a notion. Nevertheless, there has sometimes been a tendency to hypostatize the construct of resilience, to treat it solely as an idiosyncratic human characteristic or trait, which some children seem to possess and some do not. Such a view presumes a genetic foundation for resilience, the existence of which can neither be created nor fostered (Rigsby, 1994).

There is, of course, a problem with this narrow conception of resilience. It requires a post hoc explanation. As Bartelt (1994, p.101) correctly points out, "Resilience is never directly observed - it is always imputed." Since the existence of resilience can only be inferred on the basis of an individual's response to some perceived adversity, it is impossible to validate the concept in any scientific sense except in the context of a set of accompanying environmental conditions. A value judgement is made that an individual has somehow managed to triumph despite a set of circumstances that would reasonably lead one to predict failure. When people defy the odds, we classify them as resilient. When they fail to do so, they are assumed to be non-resilient.

Bartelt (1994, p.102) questions this logic on two fronts, "First it makes resilience an artifact of the investigator's model of achievement, a statistical residual of a specific causal model. Second, it fails to distinguish between adaptation to socially approved goals and to those that may be personally meaningful." When children adapt in ways that correspond to our socially approved set of expectations, we tend to think of them as being resilient. When they adapt in ways that fulfil some other set of expectations, we are inclined to think of them less favorably.
As Rigsby (1994, p. 92) cautions, one of the dangers of viewing resilience solely as a component of the self that enables success in the face of adversity is that it may inadvertently "reinforce the negative consequence of the old Horatio Alger myth: an implicit belief that anyone can make it if he or she tries hard enough." The corollary to this myth is, of course, the dangerous tendency to "blame the victim" (Ryan, 1971) whenever efforts to adapt prove unsuccessful.

It is important to keep in mind, therefore, that at its core, the concept of resilience is meaningless except as it is viewed within the context of some normative frame of reference that inevitably conveys the prevailing social/political bias. Given the contextual nature of resilience, it is important to begin any discussion involving the creation of programs designed to foster resilience with a deliberate consideration of the value issues that inevitably give meaning and substance to the criteria that will be used to define success. These values should inevitably reflect the views of the major stakeholders, including in the case of school-based programs, students and their families, teachers and school administrators, as well as representatives from the broader community within which the school is located.

Resilience is the response to a complex set of interactions involving the person, the environment and the available opportunities:

In describing the school community, Oxley (1994) draws upon Max Weber's sociological notion of community as a social group bound by personal as well as utilitarian ties. She suggests that, "members of a community care about one another on the basis of shared values and experiences and, in addition, perform practical functions for each other. Communities bestow feelings of belonging and identity" (p. 181).

These relational ties go well beyond the walls of the school and the involvement of families. They include the immediate neighborhood and the surrounding social institutions - including for example, churches, businesses, industries, police departments, community centers, health services, and so on - all of which share a common vision. As these various elements of the school/community begin to come together and share a common ethos regarding children, a synergistic effect begins to take place that results in reduced risk and vulnerability as well as increases in the availability of resources and protective processes.

As Rigsby (1994, p. 89) points out, "resilience grows out of the interaction of personality, social context, and opportunities for, or demands on, the person." To help identify educational practices that inspire and sustain achievement, Wang and her associates (1992) caution that schools need to mount a concerted effort to "identify school/community connections that serve to mobilize resources, promote positive attitudes and behavior that strengthen the enabling role of families, and ensure student learning success" (p. 66). Schools that adopt such a strategy find themselves on the cutting edge of a dramatically changing educational paradigm, one that places them at the epicenter of the social and psychological change, not only with respect to the children and families they serve, but also in relation to the communities in which they reside.

This contextual view of the resilience construct is consistent with the findings of a recent analysis of the research on the subject conducted by the National Institute of Mental Health (1995): "Studies to date suggest that there is no single source of resilience or vulnerability. Rather, many interacting factors come into play. They include not only individual genetic
predispositions, which express themselves in enduring aspects of temperament, personality and intelligence, but also qualities such as social skills and self esteem. These, in turn, are shaped by a variety of environmental influences" (p. 25).

In their review of the research, Doll and Lyon (1998) found that virtually all the studies on resilience in children reveal that, "resilience to adversity depends as much upon the characteristics of the important contexts in which children develop (e.g., family, school, community) as upon the characteristics of the children themselves" (p.356). Masten and Coatsworth (1998) also argue that, "Resilient children do not appear to possess mysterious or unique qualities; rather they have retained or secured important sources representing basic protective systems in human development. In other words, it appears that competence develops in the midst of adversity when, despite the situation at hand, fundamental systems that generally foster competence are operating to protect the child or counteract the threats to development" (p. 212).

It seems obvious to me that, had I not had the good fortune of having an Uncle Edgar, whatever potential I may have had to overcome my inability to read might well have gone unrealized without his timely intervention. I concur with Rigsby (1994), therefore, that "resilience is the response to a complex set of interactions involving person, social context, and opportunity" (p.89). The dynamic interplay among these internal and external sets of interactions across the life span can be captured in the following diagram:
ECCOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE OF RESILIENCE IN CHILDREN

PAST

GENETICALLY ENDOWED POTENTIAL OR CAPACITY FOR COMPETENT FUNCTIONING
(INTERNAL DETERMINANTS)

ACTUATING CIRCUMSTANCES OF EARLIER LIFE
(EXTERNAL DETERMINANTS)

PRESENT

FAMILY

< RESILIENCE >
INDIVIDUAL’S CURRENT CAPACITY FOR COMPETENT FUNCTIONING

SCHOOL

NEIGHBORHOOD & LARGER ENVIRONMENT
Implicit in this framework is the assumption that resilience is a dynamic phenomenon, varying in its nature and intensity over time in relation to a complex set of ever changing internal and external variables. Each of us enters life with a genetically encoded potential for growth; pre-dispositions, if you will, that represent inherent capacities destined to be realized to a greater or lesser extent through the interdependent processes of maturation and socialization. One of these capacities has been labeled resilience - a term used to describe a set of qualities that foster a process of successful adaptation and transformation despite risk and adversity (Benard, 1995).

Like all such capacities, resilience is the product of the interaction between our genetically endowed potential and the actuating circumstances encountered throughout life. While resilience is known to be nurtured by positive developmental experiences, it is reasonable to assume that one's capacity for resilience can be either enhanced or eroded depending upon the complex interplay among risk and protective factors encountered at any given point in time. If this is true, then school social workers are ideally positioned to help facilitate student access to the kinds of common experiences prevalent among schools found to be the most effective at fostering resilience in children: 1) supportive relationships with adults and peers, 2) cohesive and structured learning experiences, 3) high expectations for achievement and participation, and 4) increased opportunities for self-direction and development (Oxley, 1994).

As I reflect on my early experiences with Uncle Edgar, these four characteristics capture well the essence of his intervention strategy. It was within the context of our relationship that cohesive and structured learning experiences took place. He not only held out high expectations for achievement, but did so in a manner that both encouraged and reinforced participation. It was through his imaginative use of available environmental resources - especially within the safe environs of his study and the exciting challenges made available through his workshop - that he found ways to nurture and sustain my fledgling efforts toward self-direction and personal growth. In the final analysis, it is probably fair to say that none of the changes that took place within me during that pivotal developmental year would or could have occurred without his planful intervention. Whatever innate capacities I may have had at the time would likely have gone unrealized in the absence of our relationship and the appropriate set of intervening environmental conditions.

Conclusion

The writing of this chapter has allowed me to revisit my childhood in memory, but as Edelman (1992) cautions, memory is an active process of recategorization and reconstruction heavily influenced by our imagination and the values and perspectives we’ve adopted over the intervening years. It is never a matter of simply recording and reproducing the events of the past. As seen through the eyes of an adult and the lens of the resilience construct, remembering has forced me to reconstruct the events of childhood in ways that have given those events very personal and idiosyncratic meaning.

Any lessons derived from anecdotal experiences of this type should always be taken with a grain of salt, especially when those experiences are the product of individual constructions of “reality” recorded more than fifty years after the fact. Researchers are quite familiar with the
methodological perils associated with any attempt to generalize from an $N$ of one. There is certainly no way to validate any of my assumptions regarding the rationale behind my Uncle Edgar’s actions, nor is it reasonable to assume that someone else observing the same phenomena would have necessarily perceived or experienced those actions in exactly the same way. Despite these limitations, however, such constructions can be useful because they speak to the phenomenological nature of the human condition, including the subjective meanings we impose on the events that define the contours of our lives.

Under usual circumstances, qualitative inquiries of this type typically precede and ultimately lead to the creation and testing of grounded theory. In this instance, however, I have described a series of personal events that I believe are consistent with and lend credence to an extant body of empirical research derived largely by means of quantitative methods. Since the cluster of interventions employed by my Uncle obviously preceded the onset of resilience research, it cannot be argued that any of the insights derived from that research could possibly have helped inform his actions. The true test of a viable theory, however, is not only its ability to predict and control the future, but also its capacity to explain the past.

Whether Uncle Edgar consciously applied an intervention strategy that may have inadvertently foreshadowed contemporary strengths-based practice raises an intriguing question regarding the context of discovery. While such questions are of historical interest, they are largely irrelevant to the current discussion. The fact of the matter is that he functioned in ways that in retrospect have been vindicated by the intervening research, and it is the internal consistency between these independent events that contributes most convincingly to the credibility of an emerging theory of strengths-based practice.

Endnotes


