Check-List for "Turnaround Teachers and Mentors"

by Nan Henderson, M.S.W., Ph.D.

Resiliency expert Bonnie Benard coined the term "Turnaround Teacher" in an article she wrote for Reaching Today's Youth, which was adapted by Resiliency In Action for a similar article, "How to Be a Turnaround Teacher/Mentor." The following "Check List" was inspired by Bonnie Benard's article, as well as my own study, reflection, and dialogue with thousands of teachers and students.

> One of the most wonderful things we see now in adulthood is that these children really remember one or two teachers who made the difference. They mourn some of those teachers more than they do their own family members because what went out of their lives [with the loss of these teachers] was a person who looked beyond outward experience, their behavior, and their oftentimes unkempt appearance, and saw the promise. (Werner, 2007, p.20)

Everyone can identify one or more special educators that had a profound positive impact on one's life. What it is about these educators that make them "turnaround teachers" i.e., people who foster resiliency in their students, facilitating the overcoming of challenges and inspiring life success? The resiliency research is filled with evidence of the power of "one person" to shift a life trajectory "from risk to resilient" and very often that one person is a treasured teacher.

One reason teachers may hold so much resiliency power is that "resiliency research points out over and over that the transformation…exits not in programmatic approaches per se but at the deeper level of relationships, beliefs, and expectations" (Benard, 2000). Teachers are in prime roles for creating these resiliency relationships, often spending more "quality time" with children each day than parents or other family members. Teachers can more consciously utilize the enormous power they have to build "bounce-back kids" by following these research-based suggestions for "turnaround teachers."

Turnaround teachers:

1. Provide Caring and Connection

   - ❑ convey the message they are "there" for a child or youth
   - ❑ communicate unconditional caring about the child or youth
   - ❑ meet the basic survival needs of students and their families
   - ❑ communicate "quiet availability," "fundamental positive regard" and
   - ❑ offer "simple sustained kindness" such as a greeting or smile (Higgins, 1994, pp.324-25)

- convey the messages "you matter" and "it doesn't matter what you have done in the past"
- do not take students behavior personally
- show compassion, "looking beneath the students' negative behavior and seeing their pain and suffering" (Benard, 2000).

2. Build Competence through Resiliency Beliefs, High Expectations, and Social/Emotional Learning

   - communicate a "deep belief in students' innate competence and self-righting capacities" and
   - challenge students to perform beyond what students believe they can do (Benard, 2000)
   - recognize existing strengths and competencies and mirror these to students
   - use these strengths in intervening with challenges and problems
   - teach "metacognition"—how thoughts and feelings influence behaviors, including
   - teaching that internalized environmental messages (thoughts) about not being good enough, smart enough, rich enough, etc. can be overcome
   - facilitate students learning other life skills such as anger management, assertiveness, communication skills, goal setting, and conflict resolution.

3. Let Children and Youth Contribute and Participate

   - allowing students to participate very actively in all that happens in school, including
   - encouraging students' involvement in creating and maintaining classroom rules and school policies, and
   - always asking for students' ideas and using their creativity in dealing with any classroom or school problem
   - create a physically and psychologically safe and structured environment for student participation, which includes
   - making learning more reflective and experiential (such as in service learning, cooperative learning, and project-based learning)
   - involving students in curriculum planning and evaluation strategies
   - utilizing students in the governing of the classroom and school.

Benard (2000) invites educators to "try an experiment of your own [in the coming weeks or months]…by choosing one of your most challenging students [and] spending at least a few minutes each day building your connection." She adds:

> Look for and identify all his or her competencies. Mirror back those strengths. Teach that student he or she has the power to create his or her own reality. Create opportunities to have the student participate and contribute…Be patient. Focus on small victories—they often grow into major transformations.

She concludes, “know that you are making a difference.” In fact, resiliency research recognizes that educators form an army of hundreds of thousands of unsung resiliency heroes who are every day building bounce-back kids. Using this list can help increase the power, effectiveness, and influence of all of these “turnaround teachers.”

References

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