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Improving Classroom Instruction and Student Learning for Resilient and Non-resilient English Language Learners

Yolanda N. Padrón, Hersh Waxman, Ann P. Brown, and Robert A. Powers, University of Houston

Some English language learners (ELLs) do well in school despite coming from school and home environments that present many obstacles for learning. It is important to know why these students, who are at risk of academic failure, are resilient and successful in school while other ELLs from equally stressful environments are unsuccessful or non-resilient. This educational resiliency perspective is meaningful because it focuses on the predictors of academic success rather than on academic failure. It enables us to specifically identify those "alterable" factors that distinguish successful and less successful students. The thrust in this area of research is to extend previous studies that merely identified and categorized students at risk of failure and shift to studies that focus on identifying potential individual and school processes that lead to and foster success (Wang, Haertel, & Walberg, 1994; Winfield, 1991).

During the past 4 years of the CREDE project, "Improving Classroom Instruction and Student Learning for Resilient and Non-Resilient English Language Learners," we conducted research with approximately 1,000 fourth- and fifth-grade students from 21 classrooms in three elementary schools identified as having large proportions of ELLs (i.e., more than 80%) as well as having students from high-poverty families (about 90% received free or reduced-cost lunches). Classroom teachers were asked to identify their population of students at risk (e.g., students from families of low socioeconomic status, living with a single parent, relative, or guardian). Students identified as "gifted or talented" or "special education" were excluded from the population in order to avoid potential effects related to ability differences. From the final pool of students at risk of failure, teachers selected up to three "resilient" and three "non-resilient" students in their class. "Resilient" students were high achieving on both standardized achievement tests and daily school work, were very motivated, and had excellent attendance. "Non-resilient" students were low achieving on both standardized achievement tests and daily school work, were not motivated, and had poor attendance. The following sections briefly summarize some of the key findings from our work as we focused on the concept of resiliency.

Classroom Observation Results

Systematic classroom observations were conducted to examine if there were differences between the classroom behaviors of resilient and non-resilient students. The observations showed teachers using whole-class instructional settings about 80% of the time. During this time, teachers generally assigned tasks in which students were required to spend large proportions of time working on passive learning activities, such as written assignments, watching, or listening. Students were observed working in individualized settings and small group settings approximately 10% of the time. Both resilient and non-resilient students were observed interacting with their teacher only about 10% of the time and with other students only about 8% of the time. Resilient students were observed being "on-task" about 83% of the time, whereas non-resilient students were observed being "on-task" only 63% of the time.

Classroom Learning Environment and Student Interview Results

Resilient and non-resilient students completed questionnaires to determine their perceptions of their classroom and instructional learning environment. The learning environment findings indicated that resilient elementary school students perceived a more positive instructional learning environment and were more satisfied with their reading and language arts classrooms than non-resilient students. In addition, resilient students had higher self-concepts in reading than non-resilient students. On the other hand, non-resilient ELLs reported that they had more difficulty with their classwork than resilient ELLs.

In addition to the self-report questionnaires, students were individually interviewed by trained researchers. The student interview results revealed several distinctive background and attitudinal differences between the two categories of students. Resilient students, for example, reported speaking Spanish more often to their parents and friends than non-resilient students. About 44% of the non-resilient students indicated that they had repeated a grade in school, whereas only 11% of the resilient students said that they had repeated a grade. Nearly twice as many non-resilient students as resilient students listed reading as their hardest subject and indicated that they do not like reading. Furthermore, non-resilient students reported that they got in trouble in school more often than resilient students. Nearly 60% of the resilient students indicated that they had positive relationships with their classroom teachers, whereas only 28% of the non-resilient students indicated that they had positive relationships with their teachers.

Students also completed an adapted version of the Reading Strategies Questionnaire (Hahn, 1984; Padrón & Waxman, 1988) which measures the extent to which students report using a variety of "weak" and "strong" cognitive reading strategies. We found that resilient students used strong reading strategies significantly more often and weak strategies significantly less often than non-resilient students. Resilient students, for example, reported using the strong strategies of *thinking about what I am reading*, *focusing on the main ideas*, and *telling the story in my own words* significantly more than non-resilient students. On the other hand, non-resilient students used the weak strategy of *skipping parts of the story I did not understand* significantly more often than resilient students.

Teacher Interview Results

Each teacher was interviewed individually during the second year of the project. The findings revealed that each teacher could easily identify several patterns of behavior that distinguished resilient students from non-resilient students. Teachers perceived parent involvement, student self-motivation, and student self-esteem to be the major factors contributing to students' resiliency. The teachers reported that almost any instructional approach worked with resilient students, whereas they said that cooperative learning, a structured curriculum, and "hands-on" activities were the most effective strategies for non-resilient students. The teachers also reported that teacher-directed instruction was the most ineffective instructional approach for both resilient and non-resilient students.

It is noteworthy that these are the same teachers who were observed using teacher-directed instructional approaches most of the time. In other words, there is a great discrepancy between what teachers say are the most effective instructional practices and the actual instructional practices that they typically use in their classrooms.

Discussion

Through our observations, we found that the instructional context or culture of instruction that permeated nearly every classroom, every school, and every year was the teacher-directed instructional model where teachers actively lead and control all of the activities in the classroom, while students passively respond to instruction by merely watching or listening. Instructional activities such as small group work and independent work were seldom observed. Furthermore, we found that the intellectual level of the curriculum was low and that the culture of the classroom focused on "getting work done" rather than on more authentic or culturally relevant learning situations. The curriculum focused on low levels of learning, and there was an emphasis on "drill and repetition" in order to prepare students to answer questions on the state-mandated assessment tests. These instructional practices constitute a basic skills, mastery orientation, or "pedagogy of poverty" approach, that has pervasive, negative effects on student motivation and learning (Haberman, 1991; Padrón & Waxman, 1999).

Changing the culture of teacher-directed instruction to a more student-centered instructional model that is based on effective pedagogy standards, however, is not an easy task. We used the results from our research to develop an instructional program called the Pedagogy to Improve Resiliency Program (PIRP) to enable teachers to change their classroom practices and foster the educational resiliency of ELLs. This program incorporates generic instructional components, such as reciprocal teaching and culturally relevant instruction, along with CREDE's Five Standards for Effective Pedagogy (Tharp, 1997). PIRP focuses on providing teachers with knowledge of several resiliency-building strategies such as (a) offering opportunities to develop close relationships with students, (b) increasing students' sense of mastery in their lives, (c) building social competencies as well as academic skills, (d) reducing stress in children's lives, and (e) generating school and community resources to support the children's needs (North Central Regional Educational Laboratory, 1994). Within the PIRP design, we also present teachers with feedback based on systematic observations of their classroom instruction, the classroom learning environment, and the differences between the resilient and non-resilient students in their classrooms. The feedback is designed to help teachers understand and reflect on their current instructional strengths and weaknesses and consequently improve their instruction (Waxman & Huang, 1999).

While conducting this research, we became greatly concerned by the fact that nearly all of the teachers could easily identify the resilient and non-resilient students in their classes, yet they took little action in the areas of remediation or individualization. The teachers knew that there were differences between the two groups of students, but they were never observed adapting their instruction to accommodate the needs of non-resilient students. Furthermore, many teachers indicated during their interviews that teacher-directed instruction was the most inappropriate instructional approach for non-resilient students, yet it was the predominant approach used in most classrooms. We are optimistic, however, that programs like PIRP, that focus on improving classroom instruction, creating a positive classroom learning environment, and fostering resiliency in children, will improve the learning of all students and reduce the current educational gaps between resilient and non-resilient ELLs.

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For more information on PIRP and the research supporting it, contact Dr. Yolanda Padrón, College of Education, University of Houston, Houston, TX 77204-5872, Email: Ypadron@UH.edu, or visit http://www.crede.ucsc.edu/Programs/Program5/Project5_4.html.

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