

9-1-2013

Journey to Solla Sollew: Teacher Candidates, Resiliency, and Children's Literature

Gayla Lohfink
Wichita State University

Susan Unruh
Wichita State University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://newprairiepress.org/advocate>



Part of the [Teacher Education and Professional Development Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Lohfink, Gayla and Unruh, Susan (2013) "Journey to Solla Sollew: Teacher Candidates, Resiliency, and Children's Literature," *The Advocate*: Vol. 21: No. 2. <https://doi.org/10.4148/2637-4552.1090>

This Research Article is brought to you for free and open access by New Prairie Press. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Advocate by an authorized administrator of New Prairie Press. For more information, please contact cads@k-state.edu.

Journey to Solla Sollew: Teacher Candidates, Resiliency, and Children's Literature

Abstract

Today's elementary student must learn coping strategies in order to deal with life's challenges—social, emotional, and academic—in his or her changing world. To foster the development of such learning, teacher preparation programs must include instruction in which teacher candidates study how to facilitate their students' awareness of mechanisms for recovering from life's setbacks and show resiliency. This article presents a training module for enhancing pre-service teachers' pedagogical knowledge of resiliency. Examples of recent publications of children's literature are shared and modeled as lessons to exemplify how this particular resource can be used to encourage resiliency in children.

Journey to *Solla Sollew*: Teacher Candidates, Resiliency, and Children's Literature

**Gayla Lohfink
Susan Unruh
Wichita State University**

Abstract

Today's elementary student must learn coping strategies in order to deal with life's challenges—social, emotional, and academic—in his or her changing world. To foster the development of such learning, teacher preparation programs must include instruction in which teacher candidates study how to facilitate their students' awareness of mechanisms for recovering from life's setbacks and show resiliency. This article presents a training module for enhancing pre-service teachers' pedagogical knowledge of resiliency. Examples of recent publications of children's literature are shared and modeled as lessons to exemplify how this particular resource can be used to encourage resiliency in children.

Introduction

I was real happy and carefree and young
And I lived in a placed called the Valley of Vung
And nothing, not anything ever went wrong
Until... well, one day...
I learned there are troubles
Of more than one kind.
Some come from ahead
And some come from behind...
So, I'll tell you what I have decided to do...
I'm off to the City of Solla Sollew...
Where they *never* have troubles! At least, very few...

(Taken from *I Had Trouble in Getting to Solla Sollew*, Dr. Seuss, 1965).

Today's teachers must not only facilitate a child's cognitive development; they must also figure out how to offer tangible support for the myriad of challenges a young child encounters. Curriculum, according to Stamps (2003), should include teaching children how to deal with conflict, physical and emotional problems that occur within school and at home, as well as the uncertainty of world issues, like terrorism and war. For today's child, a stressor may range from a relatively small problem, such as the discovery of a broken toy, to a dramatic event, like a parent's unemployment or military deployment (Roberts & Crawford, 2008). Unfortunately, in recent months, US elementary school children have witnessed catastrophic shootings in their classrooms, a kidnapping from a school bus, and devastating tornadoes that leveled their buildings. For them, exposure to traumatic events, such as home and/or community violence, can be linked to psychological distress, sometimes resulting in posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). These children may be fearful and show symptoms such as headaches and stomachaches, intensified emotional sensitivity, behavioral and emotional avoidance, and sleep disturbances (Baum, Rotter, Reidler, & Brom, 2009), which can, in turn, negatively affect their academic trajectory. Children who deal with trauma are at increased risk of failing grades, truancy, disciplinary actions (Carrion & Hull, 2009), and decreased reading ability (Delaney-Black et al., 2002).

More than ever before, teacher candidates need preparation in how to foster resilient skills in their young students for, as Dr. Seuss (1965) suggested in his children's book, *I Had Trouble in Getting to Solla Sollew*, today's childhood journey is one that comes with "troubles of more than one kind" (n.d.). While resiliency research (Rew, Grady, & Spoden, 2012) is well-documented, little has been written about the need for building teacher candidates' resourcefulness in this area. The purpose of this article is to share how recent picture book publications within a teacher training module can enhance pre-service teachers' pedagogical knowledge.

Through classroom activities, such as children's literature, teachers can promote *resiliency*, which Patterson and Kirkland (2007) explain as specific mechanisms for coping that one uses to recover from life's setbacks. While we recognize that children who experience significant trauma may require help from a professional counselor, psychologist, or therapist, we concur with Alat (2002) that teachers have a responsibility to intercede as well—by understanding what a child has experienced and offering activities that facilitate positive responses to negative circumstances.

Resilience Framework

Longitudinal studies of resilient children show that, despite their exposure to multiple stressors and high-risk environments, they became competent adults (Rew et al. 2012). One research team who followed individuals for three decades concluded that one out of three high risk children whose early life difficulties predicted problems in adolescence or adulthood actually developed into competent and healthy young adults (Henderson, 1998; Jones, 2005). By studying these children's coping strategies, the researchers were able to identify certain protective factors or resources the children utilized to offset adverse conditions (e.g., poverty, minority/racial status, or disruptions to the family unit). Research, according to Rew et al. (2012), suggests that characteristics within a child that facilitate his or her resiliency are temperament and the use of positive

coping styles (like tackling problems head-on). Resiliency factors within the environment involve child connectivity to any pro-social person, such as teachers, in a variety of extrafamilial contexts, such as schools (Doll & Lyon, 1998; Pianta & Walsh, 1998). Such connectedness or the “perception that adults care and can be counted on to provide instrumental and emotional support” (Rew et al. 2012, p. 169) can occur via teachers’ support, mentoring, encouragement, high expectations, leadership, and nurturing. Breslin (2005) argues that resiliency-based research provides a basis for educators to design approaches that help children learn positive coping skills. Preventive approaches that identify vulnerable children early and deliver interventions before problems become ingrained have shown the most promise (Pianta & Walsh, 1998).

Teacher Preparation Module for Developing Resilience

Although teachers are in a prime position to be the caring adults who can provide consistent support to traumatized children, they may well lack the training to do so (Baum, Rotter, Reidler & Brom, 2009). In a study after the Oklahoma City bombing, 57% of teachers reported that they were minimally prepared to deal with topics (such as grief and death) related to the bombing and 26% reported feeling completely unprepared (Reid & Dixon, 1999). A more recent qualitative study of teachers’ perspectives on providing support to traumatized children (Alisic, 2012) looked at teachers whose current and former pupils had been traumatized by various experiences, including the death of a parent, maltreatment, domestic violence, and war. One of the four core themes which evolved was “a need for more professional knowledge and know-how” (p. 54).

To prepare our teacher candidates in providing resiliency training, our module first communicates a conceptual foundation, but it also includes a component whereby candidates connect theory to practice (or application). Candidates research and reflect upon a particular coping strategy and then select a children’s picture book that offers fictional characters as models for such a strategy. The selected book should provide a rich human experience (Webster, 2010) that allows elementary students opportunities to live through another’s situation. Reading aloud the selected book requires candidates to determine pre-reading, during reading, and after reading questions as prompts to guide their students’ awareness of how characters cope with adversity.

An approach that helps students respond to stress effectively is “actively and creatively engage[ing] with their situation” (Webster, 2005, p. 44) or problem-solving a situation (Jones, 2005). Using this selected coping strategy, we present children’s picture books whose characters demonstrate how to confront a problem “head-on.” There are many choices in children’s literature that can be used to help children process their feelings about difficult events. In our module, only recent publications of children literature are presented. For example, in the appropriately titled picture book, *Gumption* (Broach, 2010), Peter shows young viewers how to creatively navigate the perils of an African expedition with his Uncle Nigel. Faced with snakes, elephants, crocodiles, and mountain gorillas, Peter displays ingenuity as he proves, “all it takes is a bit of gumption” (n.d.). Moose, on the other hand, in *Making the Moose out of Life* (Oldland (2010), has to figure out by himself that he is missing out on life. While his animal friends go puddle jumping, kite flying, and skiing, he takes no risks—that is, until a raging storm leaves

him shipwrecked. He decides at that point “to take life by the antlers” (n.d.) and to face his challenges of building a shelter, spearing fish, and finding a friend.

Other children’s books that portray more realistic characters’ confronting their problems include stories like, *A Storm called Katrina* (Uhlberg, 2011), in which ten-year-old Daniel must help his family reunite after being separated in the Superdome. He deals with his problem by first realizing he is not a “baby” and must use what he is good at—playing the cornet—as resolution. In the wordless picture book, *Flood* (Villa, 2013), pictures communicate a family’s preparation for an eminent storm, their feelings of despair as they flee the storm and return to see its devastation, and finally, their fortitude in rebuilding.

In modeling how to select picture books for their students, we ask our candidates to consider Malchiodi and Ginns-Gruenberg’s (2008) recommendations for choosing books that deal with trauma:

- First, teachers must preview the book(s) they are considering using. Will the book be understandable to the variety of cognitive, social, and emotional developmental levels in the classroom? Are the pictures and text engaging and appropriate? Can children relate to the characters without too much anxiety?
- Next, teachers should consider the relevance of the story to their students’ current lives. The story doesn’t have to be directly about current themes or traumas in students’ lives; it can be metaphorical or symbolic of students’ current struggles. Sometimes books in which the characters are animals are less threatening to children.
- The book should engage the imagination and senses. Books should be chosen that will comfort and reassure, or in which the protagonist solves a problem.

Following book selection, we help our candidates prepare for their read aloud events by modeling potential questions or (in our module) ways for them to explore the specific strategy of grappling with a problem head-on. To explain, we share the picture book, *Sometimes We Were Brave* (Brisson, 2010). It tells the story of Jerome, whose mother is a sailor. When her ship is in port, she and Jerome spend time together baking cookies, walking their dog, and reading. But when she’s away at sea, Jerome misses her and worries about her. He doesn’t feel brave, but he carries on doing what needs to be done. One day, Jerome takes his dog, Duffie, to a pet day at school. Duffie is scared in the unfamiliar setting but still performs by doing what Jerome asks him—walking, sitting, and shaking hands. Jerome’s teacher explains that being brave doesn’t mean that you’re not afraid; it means that you do what you’re supposed to even though you’re fearful. Thus, a major theme of the story is that feeling afraid is normal under certain circumstances, and we can help elementary children become aware that they show courage just by getting up in the morning, going to school, doing their homework, and participating in family life.

In our module, we first introduce this book by briefly describing this theme and model asking elementary children to tell or write what they already know about the topic: “*Sometimes we have to be apart from people that we love very much, like a parent or grandparent or friend. How do you feel when you can’t be with someone you love? Or, if this has never happened to you, how do you think you would feel?*” During the reading, we further extend the strategy of making connections by modeling how students connect by sharing orally their personal experiences. After reading the book, we offer such questions as those recommended by Malchiodi and Ginns-Gruenberg (2008) as potential ways to explore coping strategies:

Are you like any of the story’s characters?
 Do any of the characters remind you of someone?
 Who would you like to be in the story?
 Is there anything you would like to change about the story?
 How would you change the characters, what happened, or how the story ended?
 What is your favorite part of the story?
 Did anything in the story ever happen to you?
 What do you think will happen to the characters in the story tomorrow, in a few weeks, or a year from now? (p. 182)

Finally, in our module, we suggest that students may be given opportunities to act out parts of the story, draw pictures, or explore alternate endings in writing.

Importantly, we acknowledge to our teacher candidates that, as teachers, they need to be aware that some students, and/or their families, may need the services of a professional counselor or therapist during and following times of trauma. After hearing comments made during the book discussion or after reading what children write about the story, teachers may need to consult with the school psychologist, counselor, or social worker to see whether follow-up is needed. Truly, our intent with this training module is to help teacher candidates recognize stressors in elementary children’s lives and seek resources, like children’s literature, as potential tools for facilitating their development of resiliency—a pathway we hope will help them get to *Solla Sollew* (Dr. Seuss, 1965).

References

- Alat, K. (2002). Traumatic events and children: How early childhood educators can help. *Childhood Education*, 79(1), 2-8.
- Alicic, E. (2012). Teachers' perspectives on providing support to children after trauma: A qualitative study. *School Psychology Quarterly*, 27(1), 51-59. doi: 10.1037/a0028590
- Baum, N.L., Rotter, B., Reidler, E., & Brom, D. (2009). Building resilience in schools in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. *Journal of Child and Adolescent Trauma*, 2, 62-70. doi: 10.1080/19361520802694323
- Breslin, D. (2005). Children's capacity to develop resiliency: How to nurture it. *Young Children*, 60(1), 47-52.
- Carrion, V.G., & Hull, K. (2009). Treatment manual for trauma-exposed youth: Case studies. *Clinical Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 15(1), 27-38. doi:10.1177/1359104509338150
- Delaney-Black, V., Covington, C., Odnersma, S. J., Nordstrom-Klee, B., Templin, T., Ager, J., Janisse, J., & Soko, R.J. (2002). Violence exposure, trauma, and IQ and/or reading deficits among urban children. *Archives of Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine*, 156(3), 280-285.
- Doll, E., & Lyon, M.A. (1998). Risk and resilience: Implications for the delivery of educational and mental health services in the schools. *School Psychology Review*, 27, 348-363.
- Henderson, N. (1998). Make resiliency happen. *Education Digest*, 63, 15-18.
- Jones, J. L. (2005). Promoting resilience: Ways library media specialists strengthen children. *School Library Media Activities Monthly*, 22(3), 25-27.
- Malchiodi, C.A., & Ginns-Gruenberg, D. (2008). Trauma, loss, and bibliotherapy. In C.A. Malchiodi (Ed.), *Creative interventions with traumatized children* (pp. 167-185). New York: The Guilford Press.
- Patterson, J., & Kirkland, L. (2007). Sustaining resilient families for children in primary grades. *Childhood Education*, 84(1), 2-7.
- Pianta, R.C., & Walsh, D.J. (1998). Applying the construct of resilience in schools: Cautions from a developmental systems perspective. *School Psychology Review*, 27(3), 407-417.
- Reid, J. K., & Dixon, W. A. (1999). Teacher attitudes on coping with grief in the public school classroom. *Psychology in the Schools*, 36(3), 219-229.
- Rew, L., Grady, M. W., & Spoden, M. (2012). Childhood predictors of adolescent competence and self-worth in rural youth. *Journal of Child and Adolescent Psychiatric Nursing*, 25, 169-177.
- Roberts, S. K., & Crawford, P. A. (2008). Literature to help children cope with family stressors. *Young Children*, 63(5), 12-17.
- Stamps, L. S. (2003). Bibliotherapy: How books can help students cope with concerns and conflicts. *The Delta Kappa Gamma Bulletin*, 70(1), 25-29.
- Webster, P. S. (2010). Exploring thoughts and feelings about natural disasters, wars, terrorism, and peace through selections from literature for children. *Journal of Children's Literature*, 36(2), 43-50.

Children's Literature Cited

- Brissom, P. (2010). *Sometimes we were brave*. Illus. by F. Brassard. Honesdale, PA: Boyds Mills Press.
- Broach, E. (2010). *Gumption*. Illus. by R. Egielski. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Dr. Seuss. (1965). *I had trouble in getting to Solla Sollew*. New York: Random House.
- Oldland, N. (2010). *Making the moose out of life*. Tonawanda, NY: Kids Can Press Ltd.
- Uhlberg, M. (2011). *A storm called Katrina*. Illus. by C. Bootman. Atlanta, GA: Peachtree Publishers.
- Villa, A. (2013). *Flood*. North Mankato, MN: Capstone Young Readers.