Dropout Prevention through the School Library: Dispositions, Relationships, and Instructional Practices

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In the United States of America, each year almost one-third of all public high school students drop out before graduating and receiving a diploma. School librarians can play a critical role in strengthening and improving the academic achievement of all students, but especially those who are at-risk of dropping out of school. In this article, students most at-risk of dropout are identified. A research-based framework to improve student achievement through dispositions of the school librarian, nurturing relationships and supportive environments, and effective instructional practices is identified. Practical suggestions about specific school library programs are made. The article concludes with a section on implications for practice and suggestions for further study.

Introduction

In 2006, the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) reported that approximately 3.5 million 16- to 24-year olds in the United States were not enrolled in high school and had not earned a high school diploma or alternative credential. Swanson (2003) of the Urban Institute, a social policy research group based in Washington, DC, estimates that the high school graduation rate for the class of 2001 is 68 percent. According to Balfanz and Legters (2004), researchers from Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, Maryland, 18 percent of American high schools graduate fewer than 60 percent of their students in four years, which is the expected amount of time needed to graduate from high school. The African proverb that "it takes a village to raise a child" is appropriate to the educational setting in which all participants—including school librarians—must be actively involved in helping students to achieve academically, emotionally, and socially.

A survey of 470 students who dropped out revealed that they believed they could have succeeded if coursework had been more challenging, if classrooms had been more engaging, and if they had tried harder (Bridgeland, Dilulio & Morrison, 2006). The school library program can be an "umbrella" of support for students at-risk of dropout when evidence-based approaches such as engaging and relevant curricula, increased personal attention, and improved relationships with adults are core principles (Jones & Zambone, 2007, 2009).

In the past 60 years or so, more than 75 studies have concluded that school library programs lead to increased student achievement (Lonsdale, 2003). Hopkins (1989) found that

elementary school librarians contribute to student's positive self-concept and academic achievement through activities, programs, and instructional opportunities that stress cooperation, independence, success, positive atmosphere, challenge, and feelings of value or acceptance. Lance, Rodney and Hamilton-Pennell's studies in Colorado, replicated in other states, indicate that school libraries can impact student achievement when the school librarian plans and collaborates with classroom teachers, develops and manages quality collections, integrates technology into learning and teaching, provides leadership, and cooperates with other types of librarians (Lance & Loertscher, 2005).

In the book *The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference* (2000), Gladwell describes how negative situations "can be reversed, can be tipped, by tinkering with the smallest details of the immediate environment" (p. 146). Likewise, it is simple research-based practices such as dispositions of care, nurturing relationships and supportive environments, and effective instruction that make a difference (Schargel, 2005; Werner & Smith, 1992; Williams, 2003).

Although the focus of this article is dropout prevention, the strategies presented here which draw heavily from the resiliency and dropout literature can be applied and modified by school librarians to strengthen and benefit students regardless of their *at-riskness*. The article begins with a brief overview of the factors that contribute to dropout. This is followed by a discussion of the dispositions, relationships and nurturing environments, and instructional practices that strengthen at-risk students. The article concludes with implications for practice and suggestions for further study.

Students At-risk for School Failure

Communities in Schools, in collaboration with the National Dropout Prevention Center/Network, conducted an extensive analysis of 44 research studies to identify the risk factors that significantly increase the likelihood of student dropout (Hammond, Linton, Smink & Drew, 2007). Although there is no single risk factor that accurately predicts who is at-risk of dropping out and dropouts are not a homogenous group, the chance of dropping out is often a long process of disengagement that may begin before a child enters school.

In the United States, the most significant predictor for dropping out is low-socioeconomic status (Almeida, Johnson & Steinbert, 2006). School performance and socioeconomic background are more highly correlated in the United States than in other countries, such as Finland, and "in general, top performing educational systems have smaller socioeconomic gaps in performance" (McKinsey & Co., 2009, p. 2). Many factors influence dropout, such as ethnicity (Capps, Fix, Murray, Ost, Passel & Herwantoro, 2007; Orfield, Losen, Wald, & Swanson, 2006; Kozol, 2005), immigrant status (Pong, 2003), special needs (US Department of Education, 2007), and violence and trauma (Perry, 1999). A significant finding by Hammond et al. (2007) is that efforts to improve dropout "often used some combination of personal assets and skill building, academic support, family outreach and environment/organization change" (p. 8).

For all children, low school achievement, grade retention, poor school attendance, low educational expectations, and low socioeconomic status are significant factors. Risk factors specific to middle school students (age 11 to 14) are high family mobility, low family

engagement with school, and lack of family discussions about school. Risk factors specific to high school students (age 15 to 18) are high number of hours worked, parenthood, low commitment to school, no extracurricular participation, low education of parents, and not living with both natural parents (Hammond et al., 2007).

Students are likely to disengage and drop out when the educational system does not "work" for them. The term *demographic imperative* is used to state the rationale for taking action to alter the disparities in opportunities and outcomes deeply embedded in the American educational system (Banks et al., 2005):

> The argument for the demographic imperative usually includes statistics about the increasingly diverse student population, the still relatively homogeneous teaching force and the "demographic divide," especially the marked disparities in educational opportunities, resources, and achievement among student groups who differ from one another racially, culturally, and socioeconomically. (p. 236)

School librarians are morally obliged, as are all educators, to ensure that students reach a high level of achievement by providing learning opportunities and environments that lead to success. "A common finding in resilience research is the power of a teacher—often without realizing it—to tip the scale from risk to resilience" (Benard, 2003, p. 117).

Standards and Dispositions to Strengthen Students

The demographic imperative (Banks et al., 2005) requires school librarians to take action to ensure that all students achieve. School librarians who exhibit certain dispositions become turnaround school librarians and build turnaround school library programs (Jones & Zambone, 2009). *Turnaround* is the term Benard (1993) uses to identify practices and behaviors that move students along the pathway from risk to resilience. Disposition is another word for these practices and behaviors. But what exactly are dispositions? Which dispositions strengthen at-risk students?

Dispositions are observable behaviors that are "exhibited frequently… in the absence of coercion … constituting a habit of mind under some conscious and voluntary control … intentional and oriented to broad goals" (Katz, 1993, p. 16) that are "chosen by the teacher in particular contexts and at particular times" (Katz & Raths, 1986, p. 7). *Habits of mind* is a term often used with dispositions to describe the act of "behaving intelligently when confronted with problems, the answers to which are not immediately known" (Costa & Kallick, n.d.). A problem such as student dropout requires school librarians to invoke the habits of mind and dispositions described in this article.

The dispositions of effective beginning teachers are identified by two American standards organizations. The Council of Chief State School Officers' *Model Standards for Beginning Teacher Licensing, Assessing, and Dispositions: A Resource for State Dialogue* (1992) identifies dispositions for each of its ten standards, which include understanding the diversity of students, socially interacting with students, developing healthy and helping relationships with children and youth, and understanding a variety of instructional strategies. The standards

of the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) address knowledge, skills, and dispositions of beginning teachers. The dispositional expectations are that candidates will: (1) work with students, family, colleagues, and communities that reflect the professional disposition expected of professional educators; (2) demonstrate classroom behavior that creates caring and supportive learning environments; (3) recognize when their own professional dispositions may need to be adjusted and are able to develop plans to do so (NCATE, 2000, p. 20). The two professional dispositions specifically identified by NCATE are "fairness and the belief that all students can learn" (2008, p. 22).

The inclusion of Dispositions in Action in the American Association of School Librarian's (ALA, 2007) *Standards for the 21st-Century Learner* has brought dispositions to the forefront of discussions about effective school librarianship. Dispositions are observable behaviors and behavioral choices (Katz, 1993) that are "best acquired, taught, and caught through modeling" (Bush & Jones, 2009). In a sense, the AASL Dispositions in Action become the *de facto* dispositions for school librarians who model these dispositions for students because "accomplished teachers are models of educated persons, exemplifying the virtues they inspire in students" (National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, 2002, n.p.).

In the mid-1990s, Collinson (1996) surveyed exemplary teachers and found that they excelled in three areas: professional knowledge about the subject matter, curriculum, and pedagogy; interpersonal knowledge to form positive relationships with students, the educational community, and the local community; and intrapersonal knowledge that focuses on the qualities of reflection, ethics, and dispositions. A decade later, Kathleen Cushman (2006) asked 65 students to describe the qualities of teachers they most wanted. Students told Cushman they wanted engaging classes taught by teachers who like and care about the material they teach, treat their students as smart and capable of challenging work, and are respectful, caring, and trustworthy.

Brown and Skinner (2007) propose a dispositional model for interacting with at-risk students based on building trusting relationships. The model consists of five recommendations: to listen to students before offering advice; validate students' feelings; problem-solve by "guiding at-risk students to take an active role in solving their problems" (p. 3); show positive regard and caring for students by taking a personal interest in students; and to provide hope by nurturing "an at-risk student's dream of a better life" (p. 4).

Other than the AASL Dispositions in Action contained in its *Standards for the 21st-Century Learner* (ALA, 2007), little has been written about dispositions of exemplary school librarians. Bush and Jones (in press) surmise that exemplary school librarians are professionally disposed to effective leadership, collaboration, instruction, information literacy, advocacy, and communication as well as the personal disposition of care. Even though these professional dispositions are knowledge and skill based, they require the school librarian to be disposed to want to act as leader, collaborator, and so forth, and behave accordingly. Katz and Raths (1986) write that one can be skilled without having a disposition towards that skill. For example, even when students are skillful and comprehending readers, their skill alone does not ensure they will frequently and voluntarily engage in reading—in other words, exhibit the disposition of reading.

The strategies for strengthening at-risk students presented in the next sections depend on the dispositions of the school librarian to be disposed to develop beneficial relationships, create nurturing environments, and employ effective instructional practices.

The First Strategy: Nurturing Relationships and Environments

Between one-half and two-thirds of children growing up at-risk who live in situations characterized by poverty and in families challenged by adversities such as mental illness, alcoholism, and abuse are able nonetheless to overcome hardships to live meaningful and productive lives (Edwards, 2001). The reason some children are able to withstand significant challenges—these children are called resilient—is a matter of possessing the internal and external assets that protect them from the long-term consequences of adversity. With help, children can "bounce back successfully despite exposure to severe risks" (Benard, 1993, p. 44).
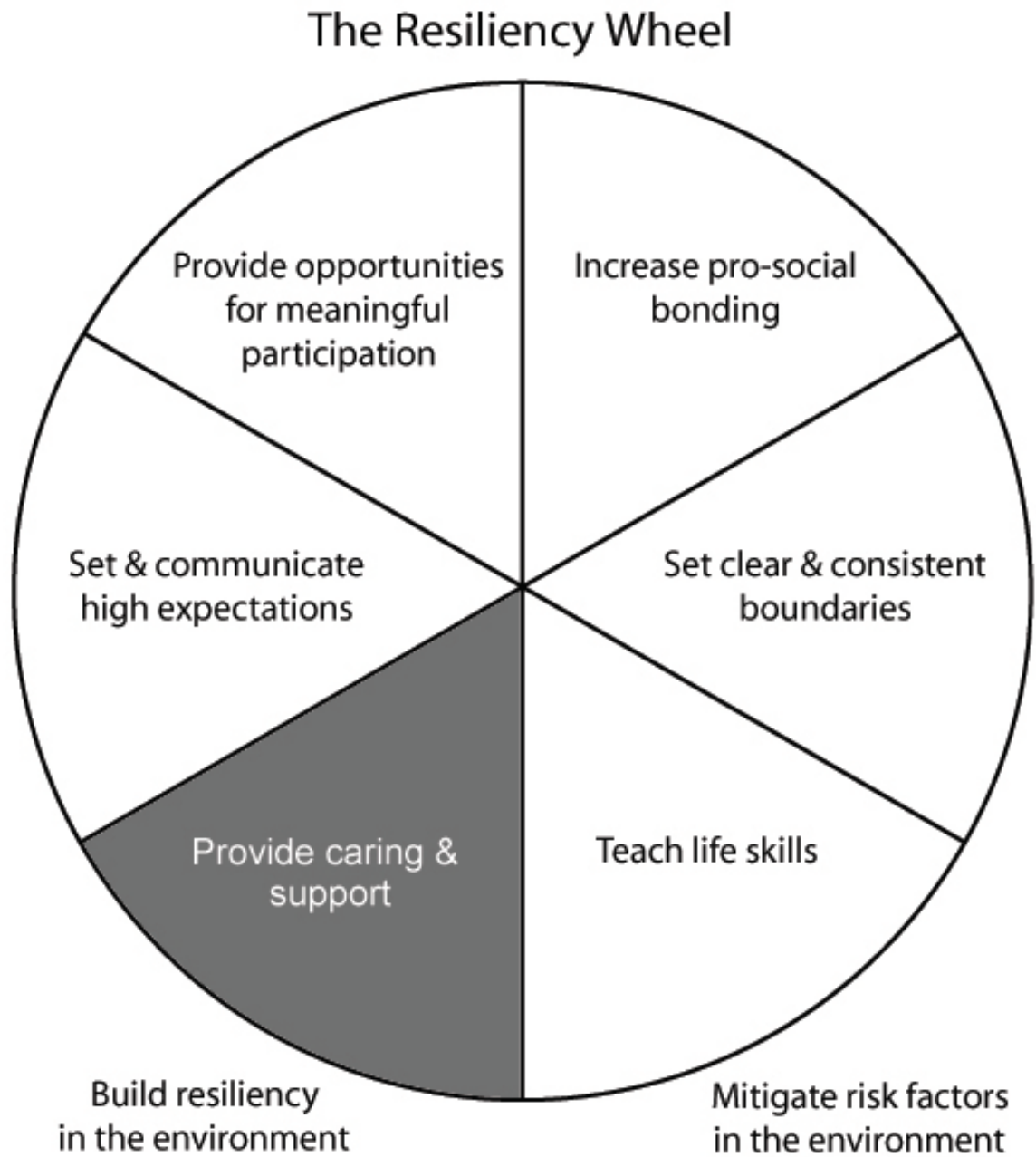
The importance of nurturing environments appears throughout the literature. For instance, Grogger (1997) found that students were 5.7 percent less likely to graduate in a school with a high incidence of violence. A study conducted in the mid-1990s by the Educational Development Center found that only half of all children felt safe in school; this resulting in approximately 160,000 students missing school each day, which may contribute to school failure and dropout (2008).   However, the most significant research that highlights the importance of a nurturing environment as well as warm relationships is the groundbreaking Kauai Longitudinal Study by Werner and Smith (1992) that found that a significant number of children who experienced challenges and trauma were nevertheless able to meet their age-appropriate development tasks when certain protective factors were added to their environment.

The Resiliency Wheel Framework. The "Resiliency Wheel" (Henderson, n.d.), Figure 1, provides a graphical representation of the elements that create an environment that reduces risk and builds resilience in students. Protective factors added to the environment increase resiliency. Likewise, a second group of factors lessens or mitigates risks. School librarians who incorporate the six spokes of the "Resiliency Wheel" into their school library program strengthen students.

Adding protective factors to the environment represents the first strategy to build resilience. These protective factors are caring and supportive relationships, high expectations, and opportunities for meaningful participation. Of these, caring and supportive relationships is the most important protective factor because "it seems almost impossible to successfully 'overcome' adversity without the presence of caring" (Henderson & Milstein, 2002, p. 13). A significant finding in the Kauai Longitudinal Study was that resilient children established close bonds with at least one caretaker or substitute parent, they found emotional support outside their own families, and "some had a favorite teacher who had become a role model, friend, and confident for them" (Werner & Smith, 1992, p. 57). School librarians disposed to caring and nurturing are accessible, they encourage conversation and spend time with students, they ask for the students' input, and they provide developmentally appropriate resources and instruction.

The second protective factor, high expectations, is communicated through challenging and engaging lessons requiring students to stretch cognitively and intellectually. Inherent in

Figure 1. The Resiliency Wheel

The Resiliency Wheel

Provide opportunities for meaningful participation

Increase pro-social bonding

Set & communicate high expectations

Set clear & consistent boundaries

Provide caring & support

Teach life skills

Build resiliency in the environment

Mitigate risk factors in the environment

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high expectations is a "no-excuses" message (Benard, 2003). Wilson and Corbett's (2001) study of Philadelphia schools found that "teachers' refusal to accept any excuses for failure" separated the classrooms in which students succeeded from those in which they did not (p. 121).

The third protective factor is opportunities for meaningful participation. A survey of 577 Italian high school students age 14 to 19 found that involvement in formal group activities and civic engagement led to increased sense of community and individuals' well-being and developmental outcomes (Albanesi, Cicognani, and Zani, 2007). They conclude that "to increase social well-being, it is important to provide adolescents with more opportunities to experience a sense of belonging to the peers' groups and promote pro-social behaviors in the community context" (Albanesi et al., p. 387). Opportunities for students to participate in the school library run the gamut from providing their input about programs and activities to participating on advisory committees and in clubs.

A second strategy for increasing resiliency is by *lessening* risk factors in the environment through pro-social bonding, setting clear and consistent boundaries, and teaching "life skills." Hosting activities that facilitate collaboration among students and encourage friendships increases the likelihood of pro-social bonding. *The Lunch Bunch* is one example. This award-winning program was created by Nelle Martin, a school librarian in Florida, when she noticed that the same students sat alone in the school library every day during lunch. Martin talked to these students and discovered that most were new to the school and had not yet connected to other students. She encouraged pro-social bonding by introducing students to one another and permitting them to bring their lunches to the library and eat together in an out-of-the-way spot. She purchased games for them to play and assigned minor chores around the library. This program earned Martin the Florida Association of Media in Education's first Amanda Award in 2002 in recognition of her efforts to strengthen youth by developing programs that promote resilience. In her application for the Amanda Award, Martin described how students flourished as they developed friendships and connected to the school through the library.

Other practical ways to increase pro-social bonding are by: (1) helping students develop hobbies and to connect with other hobbyists by creating a monthly after-school program such as a *HobbyFest* to bring members of the community and students together, (2) creating cooperative learning opportunities, (3) teaching and modeling communication skills whereby relationships are developed and maintained, and (4) selecting students to serve on the school library's advisory board based on desire to participate, not grade point average, popularity, or teacher recommendation.
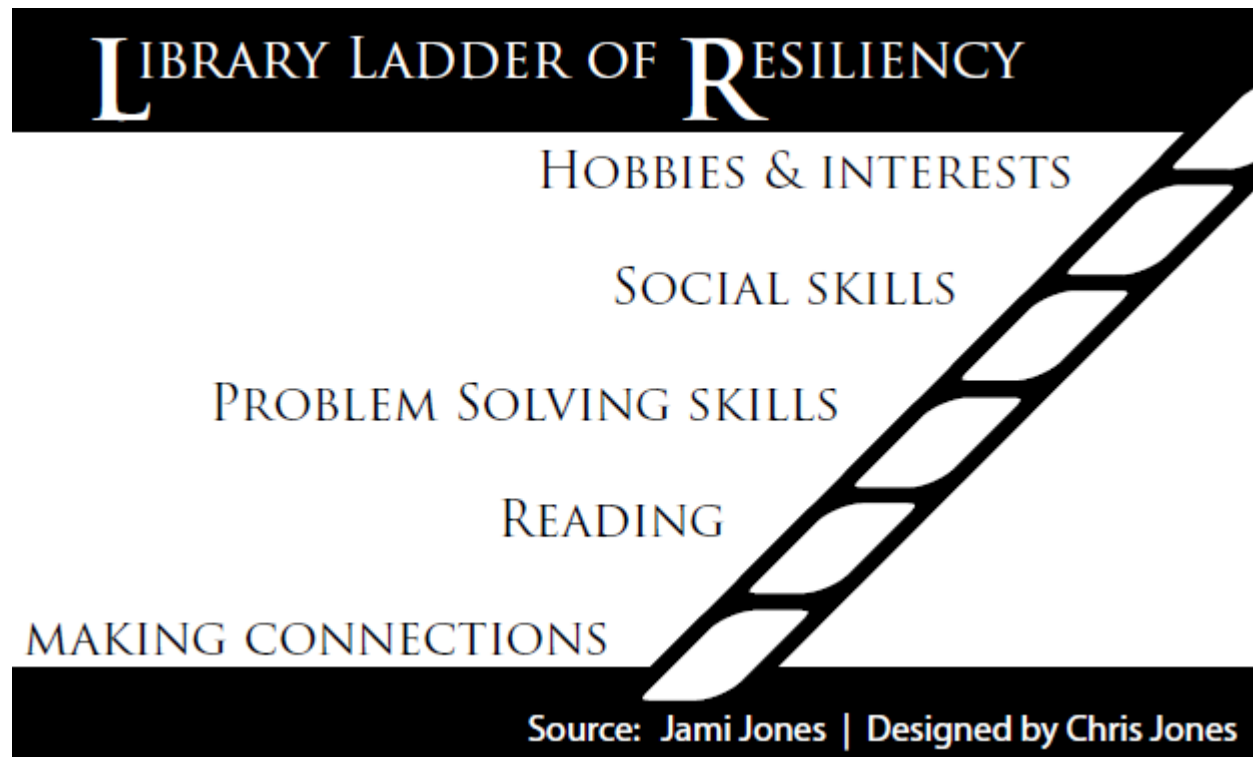
The second way to lessen risk factors in the environment is to develop clear boundaries and to treat students equitably and fairly according to consistent rules and consequences. A third way is to teach "life skills" by helping students organize clubs and events that require problem-solving, decision-making, and communication skills. Modeling "life skills" is perhaps the most effective way to teach them.

The Library Ladder of Resiliency. A second framework for librarians who want to strengthen students is the *Library Ladder of Resiliency*, Figure 2, which complements the Resiliency Wheel. The two can be used together to promote resiliency, improve self-esteem, and strengthen achievement in students. The Library Ladder of Resiliency consists of five rungs, each representing a protective factor found in Werner and Smith's (1992) resiliency

research. The five rungs are mentoring, reading, problem-solving skills, social skills, and hobbies and interests. Unlike Henderson's Resiliency Wheel, the Library Ladder of Resiliency is developed specifically for librarians to

Figure 2. *The Library Ladder of Resiliency*

LIBRARY LADDER OF RESILIENCY

HOBBIES & INTERESTS

SOCIAL SKILLS

PROBLEM SOLVING SKILLS

READING

MAKING CONNECTIONS

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incorporate the findings of the resiliency research into the library's programs and services. Although each rung is likely being carried out, recognizing the importance of each element to at-risk students is impetus to developing additional programs and services in these areas. The five rungs are described below.

Making Connections, or Mentoring. The value of mentoring cannot be underestimated. Time and again, studies have shown that the greatest protective factor for children and teens is caring relationships with adults (Laursen & Birmingham, 2005). Mentoring is relational and requires school librarians to know their students; mentoring will have an impact on collection development and on instruction. Collection development is built on the premise that librarians know their clientele and communities and continually assess user expectations and needs (Evans, 2000). Likewise, the importance of instruction and how people learn is rooted in relationships (Dewey, 1902/1990). School librarians promote literacy best when they know their students and can provide them with the *right* books at the *right* times (Jones & Zambone, 2009). Additionally, when school librarians know their students they can

develop information literacy lessons that are meaningful and interesting because they are built around their authentic questions and concerns.

   Reading. Werner and Smith (1992) found that many resilient children were competent readers and that "effective reading skills by grade four was one of the most potent predictors of successful adult adaptation" (p. 205). The research of Garmezy and Rutter (1983) on poor black youth in London found that children who exhibited qualities of resilience lived in homes "marked by the presence of books" (p. 75). School librarians have an important role to play in providing students with various opportunities to read and enjoy literature through activities such as book clubs and booktalking and bringing attention to news items of interest.

   Problem-solving skills. School librarians develop problem-solving skills by teaching information literacy (Taylor, 2006). After school clubs, activities, and games in which students learn and practice problem solving and critical thinking in creative and novel ways is a requirement in today's "flat world" (Friedman, 2005). Friedman, in his book *The World is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-First Century* described a flat world as one that is marked by uncertainty and change and where a vast amount of new information and knowledge is produced that impacts jobs and established ways of doing things. To thrive in a flat world, people must commit to lifelong learning, sharpen and keep skill sets up to date, and develop collaborative abilities to work with people from various countries and ethnicities (Friedman, 2005).

   Social skills. Students who have well-developed social skills are able to make and keep friends, thereby increasing their own resilience (Werner & Smith, 1992). Social skills are developed through a variety of activities in which students communicate, work, and study together in a nurturing and supportive environment.

   Hobbies and interests. Werner and Smith in their seminal research study on resiliency found that "extracurricular activities played an important part in the lives of resilient youth" (1992, p. 57). School librarians help to build self-esteem and competence by encouraging students to develop hobbies and interests, which may require them to use the library's collection and other resources thereby developing information skills.

The Second Strategy: Instructional Practices

 An important disposition and skill that school librarians bring to the demographic imperative is their quality of teaching (Bush & Jones, 2009). Two frameworks for considering and improving instructional practice are Marzano's *What Works in Schools: Translating Research into Action* and the guidelines of the National Dropout Prevention Center/Network.   Both frameworks result from the synthesis and analysis of research. According to Marzano, "if we follow the guidance offered from 35 years of research, we enter an era of unprecedented effectiveness for the public practice of education—one in which the vast majority of schools can be highly effective in promoting student's learning" (2003, p. 1). Strategies particularly relevant to the school librarian are outlined below.

- Students need a guaranteed and viable curriculum, that is, they need a combination of opportunity to learn and time to learn. Teachers must be clear about what subject matter is to be taught, and they must ensure that students have the time needed to learn that subject matter. For school librarians, this translates into the responsibility to teach a rigorous research-based information literacy curriculum which incorporates the four standards of the American Association for School Librarians:
    1. inquire, think critically, and gain knowledge
    2. draw conclusions, make informed decisions, apply knowledge to new situations, and create new knowledge
    3. share knowledge and participate ethically and productively as members of our democratic society
    4. pursue personal and aesthetic growth (ALA, 2007).

- Students need instruction that is challenging and has clearly articulated learning goals. Students in classes in which clear learning goals were communicated experienced a 21 percentage point difference in achievement (Marzano, 2003, p. 35). According to Collinson (1996) and Cushman (2006), students want challenging work not "bird units," a term coined by Loertscher to describe "low-level cut and paste activities, such as transferring facts from library resources on to worksheets or just cutting information off the Internet to paste in a report" (Loertscher, n.d.) Loertscher suggests that little comes out of "bird units" but plagiarism. Students know when they are being cheated by classroom teachers and school librarians who design "bird units" requiring little effort to complete. Cushman, who interviewed 65 students to gather their perspectives on high school culture and climate, writes that when "classes offer only a steady diet of tedium, these students would just as soon forget about school and look to the media, the streets, or peer relationships for interest and stimulation" (2006, p. 34).

- Students need individualized and differentiated instruction that respects their unique interests and past learning experiences because "the 'one-size-fits-all' strategy governing the current structures of schools ignores the complexity of the dynamics influencing the gaps among groups" (Williams, 2003, p. 15). The most effective way to learn something is to connect it to prior knowledge, but first teachers must understand what their students know by pre-testing and questioning and through observation (National Dropout Prevention Network/Center, 2009). Many dropouts are intelligent students who are kinesthetic learners and need action, fun, and excitement in their classwork (Schargal, 2005), but if school librarians do not know this, then they may continue to instruct in ways that do not fit.

- Specific instructional strategies impact more strongly on students' learning than others. Nine instructional strategies identified by Marzano, Pickering, and Pollock (2001) that positively affect student achievement (in order of greatest to lesser impact) are: identifying similarities and differences; summarizing and note taking; reinforcing effort and providing recognition; homework and practice; nonlinguistic representations; cooperative learning;

setting objectives and providing feedback; generating and testing hypotheses; and cues, questions and advance organizers.

Implications

Brown and Skinner (2007) note that working with at-risk students is a challenge but that "taking a personal interest in each student is where educators need to begin" (p. 1). What it takes to move children from a position of at-risk to achievement has been identified by many researchers and is presented in this article (see, for example, National Dropout Prevention Network/Center, 2009; Schargal, 2005; Warner & Smith, 1992). The "tipping point" (Gladwell, 2000) is a teacher who cares about the students, their environment, and the instruction they receive, but little is written specifically about the school librarian as "tipping point." Efforts to collect research-based evidence about the role of the school librarian in dropout prevention are necessary.

A secondary thrust is to research the practices of exemplary school librarians and to ensure that these dispositions and behaviors are embedded into the library school curricula. There is anecdotal evidence that school librarians who are disposed to apply the findings of resiliency and dropout prevention identified in this article can have an impact on students' achievement. However, these efforts and results must be documented. In closing, "I have a dream" (King, 1963) that one day all students will achieve academically, socially, and emotionally and that the integral role of the school librarian in their achievement will be recognized.

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