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## Re-Entering Schools After the Pandemic: An Analysis of Helping Children After a Disaster

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## Re-Entering Schools After the Pandemic: An Analysis of Helping Children After a Disaster

### Abstract

Modern schools have not had experience dealing with a pandemic, and as such, there is no pattern to follow when working with students as they re-enter the school system. Pahl draws comparisons from research on disaster recovery and lays out a plan for re-entering schools post-pandemic. The plan takes trauma into account while focusing on resiliency, utilizing student input and creating opportunities to review strengths and supports over time.

### Keywords

Pandemic, trauma recovery, disaster recovery, resilience, re-entry

### Author Bio

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## Introduction

The year 2020 has brought unexpected challenges for which there is no guidebook. It has been just over a century since the last pandemic and modern systems do not operate as they did in the early 1900s. The tasks ahead for schools are monumental, but not insurmountable when equipped with the right tools. Lacking a pattern to follow, one must dig into the relatable research to determine not only viable, but valuable, plans of action.

A pandemic can be likened to a natural disaster, or even a man-made disaster. Boon et al. (2012) defined *disaster* as an occurrence that interrupts community functioning in such a way that the community lacks the skills and tools to respond effectively. The pandemic has certainly interfered with community function, creating negative consequences such as loss of life, income, property, and environmental benefits. Therefore, a disaster is perhaps the closest comparison that can be made to a pandemic. The typical functioning of schools has been a notable disruption, and research on disaster points to a number of topics to consider when planning for re-entry to schools, including trauma, recovery and resiliency.

### ***Trauma***

Grolnick et al. (2018) stated that “research over the last few decades has documented the potential negative effects of disaster, whether man-made or natural, on individuals’ adjustment” (p. 216). Educators then should anticipate some level of trauma experienced when students return to school, which may stem from differing aspects of personal circumstances. Wooten (2013) delineated those potential negative effects in terms of losses such as mental or emotional well-being, financial or possessions, changes in roles that shape identity perceptions, relationships, personal physical health, or that of a loved one.

Schools should also be aware that students may experience new traumas during the pandemic such as violence, substance abuse by their caregivers, or physical or sexual abuse. Cohen et al. (2009) noted “community-wide disasters may allow for new exposures to violence, during evacuation or amidst post-disaster crowding and difficult living conditions, and thus may exacerbate recovery” (p. 56). The authors called these “secondary traumas” because they are not a direct result from the disaster itself.

After the disaster, Cohen et al. (2009) stated that, “a significant minority of children who are more vulnerable will have ongoing difficulties” (p. 55). Further, “children with past trauma histories of sexual abuse, domestic violence, traumatic deaths, or other serious traumas may experience a ‘retriggering’ of previous PTSD symptoms upon exposure to a new trauma such as a disaster” (p. 56). According to Grolnick et al. (2018), “after disasters, children’s long-term mental health responses are similar to those following other types of trauma (e.g., PTSD, depression)” (p. 217).

At times, schools will be aware of students with prior trauma that may be reactivated, however, schools do not have detailed trauma histories on every student served. Given the research and our relatable understanding, schools should be prepared to encounter students with trauma directly related to the pandemic, encountered during the pandemic, or triggered from experiencing the pandemic. A critical question then is how schools should prepare.

### ***Resilience***

Disaster researchers seemed to have a common focus on developing resilience after the event (Boon et al., 2012; Boon et al., 2016; Cohen et al., 2009; Grolnick et al., 2018; Wooten, 2013). Many researchers focus on the Bronfenbrenner’s bioecological theory as a foundation for

building resilience. Bronfenbrenner's seminal theory views the community in terms of subsystems from the individual to the community as a whole (Boon et al., 2012).

Similarities exist between Bronfenbrenner's model and the Asset Based Community Development (ABCD) model developed by Kretzmann and McKnight (1993). The ABCD model looks at the strengths of different aspects of the community, the individual, community members, and institutions within the community. Five systems can be found in the Bronfenbrenner model: microsystems, mesosystems, exosystems, macrosystems, and chronosystems (Boon et al., 2012). The microsystem is comparable to the individual, the mesosystems can be likened to the community members, and the exosystem aligns with the community entities. While these comparisons can be drawn between the ABCD model and the systems, further extensions are seen in the Bronfenbrenner model to include macrosystems that look at the societal level and chronosystem that considers time (Boon et al., 2012).

Like Kretzmann and McKnight's (1993) ABCD model, Richardson's (2002) resilience theory is based on strengths of personal systems for the recovery process. Richardson, however, noted external and internal assets that provide "protective factors" for individuals experiencing adversity (Richardson, 2002). A disruption or disturbance in baseline functioning must be present for the process of resiliency to take place. Individuals respond differently to those disruptions and return to baseline with differing levels of success, sometimes based on learning from previous events. "To cope with life's prompts, humans cultivate, through previous disruptions, resilient qualities so that most events become routine and less likely to be disruptive" (Richardson, 2002, p. 311).

Reintegration, Richardson (2002) explained, occurs in a positive, or negative, manner as people return to baseline after a life altering event. "Dysfunctional reintegration occurs when

people resort to substances, destructive behaviors, or other means to deal with the life prompts” (Richardson, 2002, p. 312). According to Grolnick (2018), “children’s reactions to disaster can come in the form of short-term distress, exacerbation of preexisting mental health symptoms, or development of new mental health disorders” (p. 219). Wooten (2013) put it in this way: “Life trajectories are variable and can change due to influence of protective processes, personal characteristics, and environmental resources” (p. 703). Educators cannot predict whether reintegration is going to occur in a positive or dysfunctional manner.

*Resilience* is “the process of coping with adversity, change, or opportunity in a manner that results in the identification, fortification, and enrichment of resilient qualities or protective factors” (Richardson, 2002, p. 308). Richardson went on to say that “resilient reintegration is to experience some insight or growth through disruptions” (p. 312). Knowledge of trauma and resilience lays the groundwork for schools to promote “resilient reintegration” as Richardson (2002) noted, “that results in growth, knowledge, self-understanding, and increased strength of resilient qualities” (p. 310).

### **Problem Statement**

A pandemic spread across the globe at the opening of 2020. Uncertainty spread just as quickly as COVID-19 did, changing the lives of Americans with a swiftness that did not allow for thorough planning. In one state after another, schools were suddenly closed, with no return date. In the states that did not close for the entire year, the closure dates have repeatedly been extended and the future remains unknown.

Disaster recovery research has revealed that many young people experience trauma before, during and after a disaster. Educators cannot be certain which learners will come with

new trauma or exacerbated trauma that will disrupt learning. What they can be sure of is that all of the returning learners will have experienced significant disturbances in their lives.

The question then becomes how to re-enter schools in a way that fosters resilience rather than increases the difficulty in recovery. There is no pandemic recovery guidebook for schools, but it is certain that staff and students need a clear process to re-enter school buildings.

### **Proposed Solution**

Re-entering schools is indicative of the recovery stage of the disaster. According to Boon et al. (2012) recovery is the process that moves people from the initial dysfunction of the disaster into the resilience stage. “Resilience, on the other hand, may involve transient disturbances, last as long as several weeks, but generally involves a stable trajectory of healthy functioning” (Boon et al., 2012, p. 385).

The goal of schools must be to come alongside students during the recovery stage with processes and tools that will lead the learners to resilience. This can be done with a tool that fosters resilience and can be revisited with purpose as students travel along the recovery trajectory toward resiliency.

Disaster researchers have implemented therapeutic interventions such as psychological first aid, trauma focused cognitive behavior therapy, cognitive behavior intervention for trauma in schools, individual therapy, and therapy groups, to name a few. Grolnick et al. (2018) revealed that no particular intervention rises to the top as being significantly more effective than another. Parent involvement may increase the level of success in reducing symptoms, and interventions implemented by mental health professionals may be slightly more effective than those implemented by teachers and paraprofessionals (Grolnick et al., 2018, p. 218).

Grolnick et al. (2018) found that interventions are effective in helping youth recover after disaster, but research indicates that implementing interventions is more important than which intervention is utilized. Drawing upon the work of Bronfenbrenner (Boon et al. 2012) and Kretzmann and McKnight (1993), a strengths-based tool can be created that provides information to educators while building resilience at the individual level. The tool can be used by multiple providers in the school and can be revisited with students to monitor growth and illuminate needs for additional connections or resources (see Appendix A).

The Strengths and Supports Square blends elements of the Asset Based Community Development asset map (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993) and the “conceptual scheme of Bronfenbrenner’s systems” (Boon et al., 2012, p. 390). Students will have opportunities to have open conversations about developing resiliency after the pandemic by learning to diagram their strengths and supports and use the existing tools they identify within themselves and their community.

Prior to re-entering school, educators should create a step-by-step plan for implementing the Strengths and Supports Square. It is paramount that the plan includes training school personnel on the use of the tool, dates and times that the tool will be introduced to the students, and deadlines for tool completion. Further, follow-up dates must be set prior to re-entering school along with identifying available supports within the school and community. Schools may wish to consider having staff complete the Strengths and Supports Square for themselves prior to implementing it with students, creating deeper understanding of the tool and their own resiliency reintegration.

## **Conclusion**

Schools will surely see students returning to school after the pandemic with varying levels of trauma experiences. Trauma experiences may be newly related to the pandemic, triggers from past traumas or secondary traumas that occur during the pandemic. Schools must be prepared to address the needs of students as they re-enter the buildings. Research shows that implementing interventions is effective in dealing with disaster related trauma, but does not identify one superior intervention.

A resiliency approach will help to build students' awareness of their own strengths and the supports they have available to them within their school and community. The Strengths and Supports Square provides a synopsis of positives in students' lives and illuminates where growth options exist. The tool will assist schools as they attempt to guide students in diagramming the assets they have available to develop resilient reintegration to school. If the research revealed anything, it is that having a plan for re-entry is of utmost importance.

## Appendix A

Student:

Strengths and Supports Square

Date:



Supports that would help expand strengths:

Date to Follow up:

Adapted from Asset Based Community Development asset map (Kretzmann and McKnight, 1993) and the “conceptual scheme of Bronfenbrenner’s systems” (Boon et al., 2012, p. 390)

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