

## Building Resilience Skills Using Children's Literature

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**Building Resilience Skills Using Children's  
Literature**

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### Abstract

Nearly half of U.S. children have faced at least one social or family-related trauma. These Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) have the potential for affecting physical and mental health, along with learning, and the effects often can be long-term and pervasive. The risks of these effects occurring, however, can be mitigated through the promotion of resilience strategies by parents, the broader community, and the children themselves. Teachers can help by teaching these strategies using children's literature. In personalizing these abstract principles, in showing rather than telling, and through the empathy that we develop for the story characters and others like them, stories offer gentle but powerful lessons that help children build resilience strategies. Teachers can draw on new and variations of tried-and-true reading activities to not only improve comprehension skills but also to foster the development of resilience strategies in their students.

*Keywords:* resilience, social and emotional learning, children's literature, reader response, Storyworld Possible Selves theory

### Building Resilience Skills Using Children's Literature

Which books inspired you as a young person? Did Jo March encourage you to be your authentic self, despite who others told you should be? Did Anne of Green Gables show you that hope and imagination are powerful antidotes to loneliness and alienation? Did you learn about self-reliance, resourcefulness and ingenuity from the Boxcar Children? Stories can be a powerful agent in teaching us how to approach the challenges in our lives. As Egan stated, "The story is not just some casual entertainment; it reflects a basic and powerful forming, in which we make sense of the world and experience" (1986, p. 2). Stories can teach children important life skills, such as how to be resilient in the face of life challenges that may include past or future traumas.

### Adverse Childhood Experiences and Resilience Factors

#### Effects of Adverse Childhood Experiences

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) refer to traumatic experiences that take place in childhood, and they affect children of all ethnic and socioeconomic groups. Nearly half of U.S. children have faced at least one social or family-related trauma, and nearly a quarter have experienced two or more (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2016). ACEs are divided into three categories. The category of *abuse* includes physical and sexual abuse, as well as emotional abuse. Emotional abuse includes bullying by family, peers, or others: "any action which "...demeans the sense of identity, dignity, and self-worth" (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2016, as cited in Romero, Roberson, & Warner, 2018, p. 2). The category of *family/household challenges* includes domestic violence, substance abuse, mental illness, a family member in prison, acrimonious divorce, and prolonged negative interactions between parents. The category of *neglect* includes parents' failure to show attention or love, to provide basic life necessities (including food, hygiene, medical and dental

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care), proper supervision, and protection from dangerous situations. Such experiences may affect physical and mental health, and the effects are often long-term and pervasive (Bethell, Newacheck, Hawes, & Halfon, 2014). Traumatic experiences may also have an effect on learning. Hammond (2015) noted that when the body's "safety-threat system" (p. 45) is overactive, the prefrontal cortex is negatively affected, impeding attention and cognitive processing abilities.

### **Childhood Resilience**

Adverse experiences, however, do not have to lead negative outcomes. Psychologist Peter Levine noted that, "Fortunately, because we are instinctual beings with the ability to feel, respond, and reflect, we possess the innate potential to heal even the most debilitating traumatic injuries." (Levine, 1997, p. 19). The ability to heal from trauma and to prevail socially, emotionally, and academically is strongly correlated to the resilience factors we possess. In a review of research literature on resilience, Sacks & Murphey (2018) noted clear evidence that the risk factors for trauma can be mitigated through protective and promotive cultivation of resilience skills by parents, the broader community, and the children themselves.

Resilience is "the ability to withstand, adapt to, and recover from adversity and stress" (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2015). It is the ability to "show healthy development in spite of adversity" (Encyclopedia on Early Childhood Development, n. d.). It is the "ability to cope with adversary and to develop in a positive way when faced with setbacks" (Petty, 2014). According to Masten & Powell, 2003,

Resilience refers to patterns of positive adaption in the context of significant risk or adversity. Resilience is an inference about a person's life that requires two fundamental judgements: (1) that a person is 'doing okay' and (2) that there is new or has been

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significant risk or adversity to overcome...Resilience is not a trait of an individual, though individuals though individuals manifest resilience in their behavior and life patterns” (p. 4).

According to Ginsberg (2006), “An essential question related to adversity and resilience is the individual’s development of an effective set of responses to stress” (p. 140).

Ginsberg laid out seven building blocks of resilience, all beginning with the letter “C”:

“Competence” is the idea that children are aware of their strengths. They feel empowered in their own lives and safe to make mistakes. “Confidence” helps children to navigate their worlds and deal with challenges. It is the awareness that they have survival skills and a belief that they can succeed. “Character” describes how the child sees him- or herself as a caring person with a belief system that includes a responsibility to others within his or her community. “Connection” includes having an adult or peers who holds the child to high expectations and who believe that he or she can overcome challenging circumstances. It also includes a space where they can interact positively with others, such as in a family, a classroom, a religious or cultural group, and the like. “Coping” includes having strategies help the child to react to stress in healthy ways, such as caring for his or her own body through diet, exercise, etc., having models of people and a repertoire of healthy ways to deal with stress, having an outlet for creative expression, having opportunities to communicate his or her thoughts verbally and in writing, knowing some relaxation techniques, and knowing how to make sound decisions. “Contribution” means attending to the well-being of others. Children know that they can make the world a better place, even in small ways, and are provided with opportunities to do so. They value service to others and know that their own difficult experiences and even mistakes position them to do so in a unique and positive way. They have one or more role models who encourage them to be the best

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person they can be. “Control” is the final building block in Ginsberg’s model. Control is a balance of understanding that the child has some control over his or her destiny yet is not responsible for all the negative things that may happen or have happened to him or her. Finally, the child knows how to take steps to meet her or his short- and long-term goals.

Children who undergo ACEs often emerge with strengths that include knowing how to stay calm in frightening situations, having compassion for the suffering of others, pushing on in spite of pain and fear, self-reliance and knowing how to take action on their own and others’ behalf, coming up with creative solutions, trusting their instincts, seeing the silver lining in any situation, knowing how to reach out to others for help and support, understanding that life can still be good despite its challenges, and pushing on to get things done (Dayton, 1997). By becoming aware of the resilience strategies and noting the strengths in others as a result or in spite of their negative experiences, children can become empowered to deal with similar experiences in their own lives.

### **Promoting Resilience Through Children’s Literature**

Teachers can help children to be aware of resilience strategies and their own strengths by drawing on children’s literature. Children’s literature offers examples that deepen children’s understandings of themselves and the inner and outer resources that may help them to survive and overcome negative experiences. Literature theorists tell us that story can help us to understand why we react to events in the ways that we do while showing us alternative courses of action and their consequences (Rosenblatt, 1995). Story can provide vicarious experiences onto which we can build and add our self-schemata (Miall & Kuiken 2002; Kuiken, Miall & Sikora 2004). Stories allow us to project our personal narrative experiences into the story world, which allows for “artistically motivated self-transformation” (Martinez, 2014, p. 110). They

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allow us to imagine scenarios and how we might behave, as we create images in our minds of what we have not experienced (Egan, 1986, p. 7). In personalizing abstract principles of behavior and character, by showing, rather than telling, and through the empathy that we develop for the story characters and others like them, story offers gentle but powerful lessons on making decisions that can positively impact our lives. Teachers can use a variety of strategies to help children become aware of how characters are resilient and strong in the face of the challenges they face.

**Defining “Resilience”**

Before they can identify resilience skills in story characters, children need to know what they are. Although middle- or high school students may easily be able to conceptualize the resilience strategies of competence, confidence, character, connection, coping, contribution, and control, the abstract nature of these terms may require teachers to use vernacular that is more developmentally appropriate. For example, instead of referring to the “competence” characteristic, teachers could call this “knowing what my strengths are” or “having power” (see Table 1: *Resilience Factors and Child-Friendly Terms*).

Children of all ages can explore the meaning and application of resilience skills with a four-square vocabulary activity. Four-square is a graphic organizer in which related words or concepts surround a central term (Brunn, 2002). While there are many versions of a four-square graphic organizer, they typically contain a square divided into four smaller squares or rectangles – one each for the word or phrase, synonyms, antonyms, or related words; a sentence using the word; and one or more pictures or symbols (see Figure 1: *Example of Resilience Four Square*). Teachers may wish to have younger children brainstorm the four-square elements on chart or butcher paper in a whole group or small group activity.

### **Building a “Resilience” Library**

Teachers can refer to the resilience terms multiple times throughout the school year and add to their visual aid with examples from stories, real or imagined, encountered throughout the school year. Many authors are gifted at portraying such experiences in ways that are sensitive to children’s personal experiences and emotions. Resilience strategies can be found in a variety of genres: biographies and autobiographies work just as well as many fictional picture books, folk tales, and realistic or contemporary novels. As teachers encounter stories that contain one particularly prominent resilience strategy, they may wish to keep a list of these “touchstone” texts (Ray, 1999) to refer to again and again (see Table 2: *Examples of Stories with Prominent Resilience Factors*).

### **Literacy Activities for Resilience Factors**

Teachers can adapt existing literacy activities to further explore ways in which story characters develop resilience and demonstrate strength. These include creating character trading cards, filling in graphic organizers for character traits, and writing summaries that focus on resilience strategies.

**Character trading cards.** Character trading cards can be adapted to display the character’s resilience skills. The Character Trading Cards Planning Sheet and the Trading Card Creator ask for a description of the character, his or her development throughout the story, statements, and actions. Teachers can scaffold these by reviewing the resilience strategies and providing sentence starters for students to use as they complete the Character Trading Cards Planning Sheet

[http://www.readwritethink.org/files/resources/lesson\\_images/lesson932/planning-sheet.pdf](http://www.readwritethink.org/files/resources/lesson_images/lesson932/planning-sheet.pdf) (See

Table 3: *Sentence Starters for Resilience Traits in Story Characters*. Children can then use the

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Trading Card Creator Interactive <http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/student-interactives/trading-card-creator-30056.html> to put them altogether for a particular character

**Graphic organizers.** Graphic organizers help children to visually organize their thoughts before, during, or after reading or writing. They help students with and without learning disabilities to identify and connect the main ideas in a story and to recall and retain information more effectively (Manoli & Papadopoulou, 2012). Graphic organizers can be adapted to focus on resilience through analysis of character reactions in response to story events. One way to highlight resilience characteristics of story characters is through a character analysis graphic organizer. In this activity, children or the teacher will fill in a graphic organizer that focuses on how characters demonstrate each resilience strategy while reading independently, in a small group, or aloud. Similarly, character strengths can be highlighted in a graphic organizer in which children focus on finding evidence in the text of research-based strengths of resilient children or to plot the story in terms of the character's actions or possible actions in relation to story events. Templates for all these activities can be found in Appendix A: *Character Analysis Graphic Organizers*.

The above activities work best as “during reading” activities, so that children can see how the character develops resilience from beginning to end. After reading, teachers can use a summarization map similar to the Somebody Wanted But So protocol (MacOn, Bewell, & Vogt, 1991) to provide an overview of the theme. The Somebody Felt Yet And protocol recognizes the fact that there may not be a happy ending, or even a resolution to every story, but that the character will prevail. Children can be encouraged to draw on a bank of resilience strategies to fill in the “Yet” portion of the graphic organizer. The “And” part might include the

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strengths that the character gained as a result of the traumatic experience. A template for this activity can be found in Appendix B: *Story Summary Graphic Organizer*.

These activities not only build reading comprehension skills of inference, cause and effect relationships, and finding the main idea, but they also provide children with the opportunity to process what resilience looks like in action and to become more aware of how to apply them to their own lives.

### **Conclusion**

Goldstein (2013) stated, “If we are to make a difference, we must understand these qualities of resilience. We must understand and harness the power of resilience in shaping the lives of children.” Teachers are on the frontline when it comes to building resilience skills in children yet are not always adequately prepared in how to deal with childhood trauma and its aftermath (Mader, 2015). By incorporating resilience skills and activities into the literacy curriculum, teachers can help children to recognize and develop tools to help them survive and thrive. Writer Anne Lamott wrote, “The stories we have loved, beginning with our earliest days, are how we have survived and grown....Stories have saved us...our sanity, our hearts, and our families.” By sharing stories and highlighting the resilience skills of the characters, we help to build important survival skills in our students that will last a lifetime.

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Table 1: *Resilience Factors and Child-Friendly Terms*

Resilience Factor	Child-Friendly Term
Competence	“knowing what my strengths are” “having power”
Confidence	“believing in myself” “feeling good about myself”
Character	“doing the right thing” “treating others the way that I would want to be treated”
Connection	“finding helpers” “finding the people who care about me”
Coping	“knowing what I can do when I feel” “managing my feelings”
Contribution	“making the world a better place”

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Table 2: *Examples of Stories with Prominent Resilience Factors*

Prominent Resilience Factor	Touchstone Texts
Competence	<i>Becoming Naomi Leon</i> (grades 4-7)
Confidence	<i>Totally Joe</i> (grades 4 and up)
Character	<i>Martin's Big Words</i> (grades 3-5)
Connections	<i>Kofi's Mom</i> (grades K-2)
Contribution	<i>Malala's Magic Pencil</i> (grades 2-5)
Control	<i>The Boy Who Harnessed the Wind</i> (grades 2-5)
Coping	<i>A Place Where Sunflowers Grow</i> (grades 2-5)

Table 3: *Sentence Starters for Resilience Traits in Story Characters*

1. Description	What personal strengths does _____ have that help to deal with challenges?
2. Insights	What are some ways that _____ deals with stress throughout the story?
3. Development	How does _____ deal with challenges?
4. Statements and Actions	Who helps _____ to deal with his/her challenges? How does _____ show that he/she cares about others?
5. My Impressions	What resilience strategies do you share with _____?

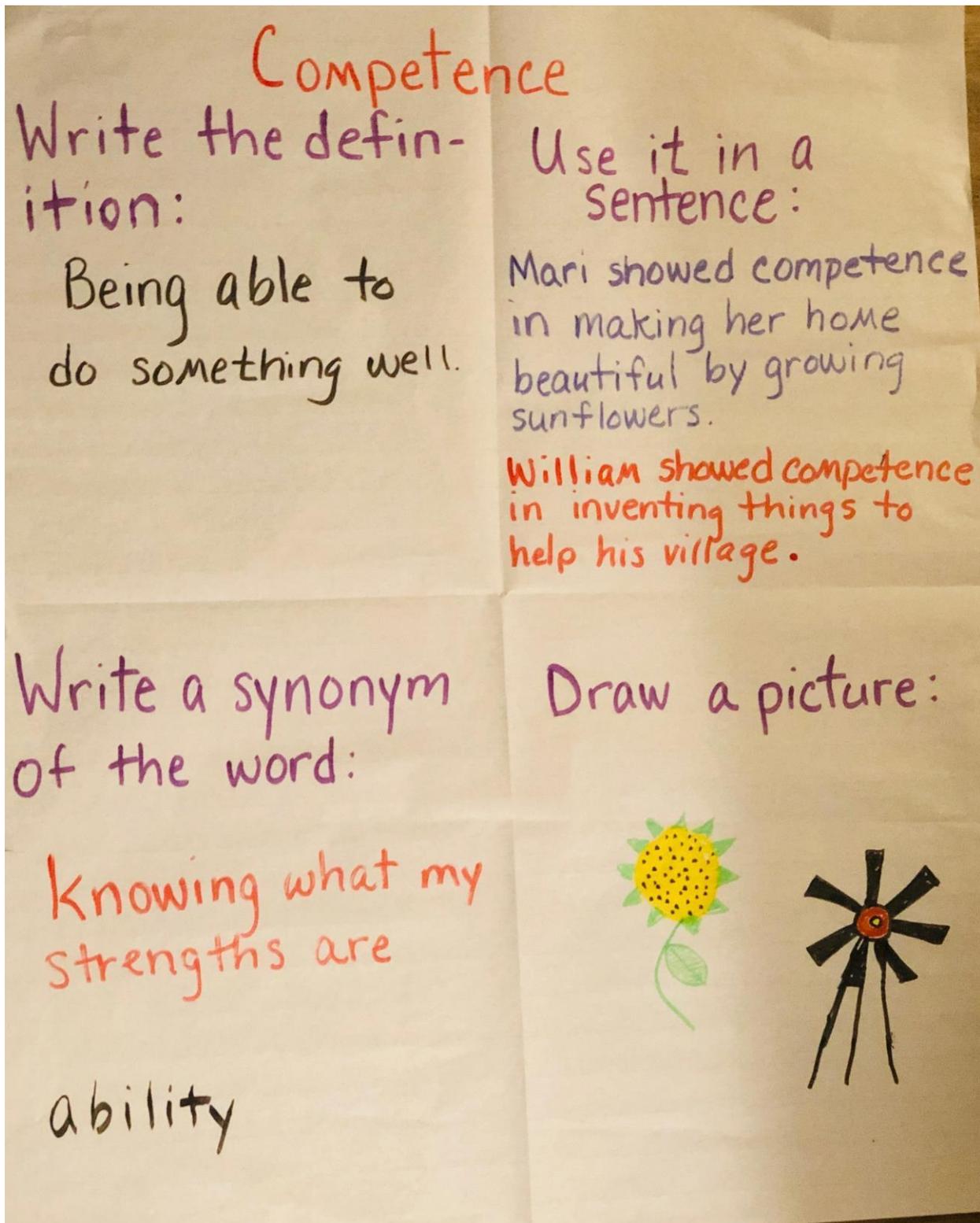


Figure 1: Example of Resilience Four Square

## Appendix A

### Character Analysis Graphic Organizers

My Name \_\_\_\_\_

Name of Book \_\_\_\_\_

Character's Name \_\_\_\_\_

**How does the main character in your story show that he/she is resilient?**

<p><b>Competence</b></p> <p>knowing what his or her strengths are</p>	
<p><b>Confidence</b></p> <p>believing in him/herself</p>	
<p><b>Character</b></p> <p>doing the right thing</p>	
<p><b>Connection</b></p> <p>finding helpers</p>	
<p><b>Coping</b></p> <p>knowing what he/she can do with bad feelings</p>	
<p><b>Contribution</b></p> <p>making the world a better place</p>	
<p><b>Control</b></p> <p>knowing he/she can do it</p>	

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### Character Challenges

What challenges did the character face throughout the story? Think about what the character did and what he or she could have done.

Challenge #1:

The character could have responded to the challenge by \_\_\_\_\_, but instead he or she \_\_\_\_\_.

Challenge #2:

The character could have responded to the challenge by \_\_\_\_\_, but instead he or she \_\_\_\_\_.

Challenge #3:

The character could have responded to the challenge by \_\_\_\_\_, but instead he or she \_\_\_\_\_.

Challenge #4:

The character could have responded to the challenge by \_\_\_\_\_, but instead he or she \_\_\_\_\_.

### Character Strengths Analysis

1. Which of these strengths does your character have that either came from or helped him or her face to face life challenges? Provide evidence from the text to support your answers.

1. \_\_\_\_ Keeps a “cool head”; knows what needs to be done in a scary situation

Evidence \_\_\_\_\_

Page # \_\_\_\_\_

2. \_\_\_\_ Has compassion for other people in scary situations

Evidence \_\_\_\_\_

Page # \_\_\_\_\_

3. \_\_\_\_ Doesn't give up, even when sad or scared

Evidence \_\_\_\_\_

Page # \_\_\_\_\_

4. \_\_\_\_ Knows how to take care of self

Evidence \_\_\_\_\_

Page # \_\_\_\_\_

5. \_\_\_\_ Has creative solutions for problems

Evidence \_\_\_\_\_

Page # \_\_\_\_\_

6. \_\_\_\_ Trusts own feelings about what to do in difficult situations

Evidence \_\_\_\_\_

Page # \_\_\_\_\_

7. \_\_\_\_ Knows how to reach out to other people for help and support.

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Evidence \_\_\_\_\_

Page # \_\_\_\_\_

8. \_\_\_\_ Has a positive attitude toward life.

Evidence \_\_\_\_\_

Page # \_\_\_\_\_

Do you have any of the same strengths as the character? Explain an example from your own life:

Appendix B

Story Summary Graphic Organizer

## Somebody Felt Yet And

Directions: Fill in the graphic organizer. Remember what you learned about the resilience skills of competence, confidence, character, connections, contribution, control, and coping as you fill in the “yet” part.

\_\_\_\_\_ (main character)

felt \_\_\_\_\_.

Yet, \_\_\_\_\_,

and \_\_\_\_\_.

### Example:

Yoon

Felt frustrated and helpless in getting her special bracelet back from the bully.

Yet, she remembers a story that gives her confidence to outwit the bully.

And, she is able to think of a plan to get her bracelet back.

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Take Action

1. Talk with your peers about common ACEs that the students in your school and classroom face.
2. Teach each resilience strategy individually using the four-square model or other method.
3. Find children's literature in which characters faced the same challenges.
4. Help your students to name the character's challenge or challenges, and to locate the resilience strategies that the character developed to deal with the challenge.
5. Discuss how the character developed strengths throughout the story.
6. Encourage students to find examples of resilience in other stories.

### More to Explore

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### Pause and Ponder

1. What were your favorite books as a child? Were the characters resilient? If so, in what ways?
2. What did you learn from the characters that helped you to build your own resilience skills?
2. What life challenges do you see among your students? What resilience skills might they need to learn?
3. What books might help them to learn these skills? What other activities could you do in your classroom to teach resilience skills?

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