

# Research Challenge: Developing a Comprehensive Approach to Evaluating a Practice-Generated Extension Life Skills Curriculum for Hard-to-Reach Adults and Teens

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## Abstract

*A field-based extension educator headquartered in a county office wrote an original life skills curriculum in 1998 that served as the core component of a new St. Louis area welfare-to-work pilot program called WorkWays™. The concept for the program was developed by a cross-disciplinary team of campus and field faculty and community partners, based on an ecological model of family resiliency. Administrative changes in the funding agency resulted in a drop in referrals to the program in its second year, leading the program director to shut down the program in June 2000. Both quantitative and qualitative evaluations were completed on WorkWays before it ended. The curriculum was published in June 2000 under the title, Tackling the Tough Skills™: A Curriculum Building Skills for Work and Life. Internet and word-of-mouth marketing resulted in distribution exceeding expectations. Ongoing requests are received for evaluation data. This paper seeks to begin developing a comprehensive approach to evaluate the curriculum from what is known in the social work profession as “the strengths perspective,” using Norman’s 11 Resiliency Factors as a means to more clearly identify and understand what Tackling the Tough Skills teaches and what participants learn. Other possible evaluation measures are also discussed.*

## Description of the Issue

### *Background*

Sweeping changes in the Federal welfare law in August 1996 resulted in a total overhaul of the nation’s welfare system. The new welfare law “signaled major changes for the field of adult education,” shifting U.S. welfare policy away from previous governmental support of adult basic and literacy education programs and toward a “work-first” approach to move welfare recipients into jobs quickly (Miller, 1999, p. 203).

In St. Louis, the director of welfare reform projected some 6,000 to 7,000 welfare recipients would begin the transition process by May 1997 (University of Missouri Outreach and Extension, 1997). Extension responded to a request from the state to develop a welfare-to-work program by forming a 22-member team of campus- and field-based faculty and administrators, and community partners. Over a period of eight months, this cross-disciplinary team conducted focus groups, searched the literature and discussed approaches.

The team decided the curriculum should be *holistic*, building individual strengths in context of family, work, and community. An ecological model of *family resiliency* was chosen as the conceptual base. The group submitted a proposal in March 1997 to establish the St. Louis WorkSmarts Program. It was funded in 1998 by a \$329,000 grant from the Missouri Department of Social Services, through its Division of Family Services (DFS). The program name was changed to WorkWays™ when it was funded.

WorkWays included three components: an educational program, community mentoring, and workplace liaison assistance. The curriculum was to serve as the cornerstone of the program, but a literature search turned up no educational resources deemed appropriate. The developing

team determined the key components of the curriculum to be *attitude, responsibility, communication, decision making/problem solving, and preparing for the workplace.*

Consequently, an original life skills curriculum was written in 1998 by Rosilee Trotta, urban youth and family specialist with University of Missouri Extension, a field-based extension educator headquartered in St. Louis County. Rosilee was a seasoned practitioner with more than 30 years of experience working with and teaching low-income, under-educated adults and teens. She was also a licensed clinical social worker and a registered nurse. The curriculum was piloted in WorkWays from November 1998 through June 2000. Rosilee served as program director.

Administrative changes in DFS in the St. Louis area in the fall of 1999 resulted in a drastic drop in referrals to WorkWays, leading the program director to end the program June 30, 2000. By the time it closed, WorkWays had impacted the lives of 193 people, with 145 completing the three-week educational program for a 75 percent completion rate.

Despite the program's end, the curriculum lived on. In June 2000 it was published by University of Missouri Extension under a new name, *Tackling the Tough Skills™: A Curriculum Building Skills for Work and Life.* A Web site created in July 2000 markets the curriculum to educators and other professionals working with hard-to-reach adults and teens.

Internet and word-of-mouth marketing resulted in interest exceeding expectations, with more than 1,200 books distributed in 49 states and 11 countries by July 2006. Its popularity with educators and program directors in teaching "soft skills" is evident. We have heard numerous comments from educators referred to *Tough Skills* by colleagues who were using it with hard-to-reach audiences. Now that the curriculum is no longer connected to an ongoing Extension program, evaluation is a greater challenge.

### *Context of my involvement*

I have been involved with *Tackling the Tough Skills* in both practice and research roles. As a practitioner: I have been a field-based faculty in marketing/communications with University of Missouri Extension since 1994; served as a member of the WorkWays planning team from its roots in 1996; edited and designed the *Tackling the Tough Skills* curriculum; and developed and maintain the curriculum's Web site. As a researcher: I have conducted research projects on *Tough Skills* as an adult education doctoral student at University of Missouri-St. Louis. I plan to pursue my doctoral research related to developing an approach to evaluate the curriculum.

### *Curriculum description*

*Tackling the Tough Skills* is a fun, highly interactive life skills curriculum that helps hard-to-reach adults and teens prepare for success in work and life. The curriculum is designed to build from beginning to end, but educators are free to use sections they want in whatever order. The book contains hands-on activities that teach critical thinking skills through individual reflection, classroom discussions, small group work, and role plays. Humorous text and illustrations make *Tackling the Tough Skills* enjoyable to use for both educators and participants.

### *Evaluations to date*

I identified at least nine evaluations and summary reports concerning either WorkWays or the *Tackling the Tough Skills* curriculum since 1999. Space does not permit listing them in this paper, but I plan to post them on the Web site in the future to make past evaluation information easily accessible for interested educators and administrators.

### *Possible Tough Skills activities to incorporate into evaluation*

Nancy Ellen Kiernan of Penn State Cooperative Extension maintains a program evaluation Web site targeted to Extension educators. One of her *experiential evaluation* strategies was used in a program dealing with sensitive information relating to young women convicted of a crime (Kiernan, n.d.). The evaluation was designed as an *unobtrusive, hands-on activity that was incorporated into the program* that caused participants to think reflectively and apply principles they learned. The educator was able to obtain before-after data from participants to understand if and how their thinking had changed over the course of the program.

Reflecting more on Kiernan's approach, I think this approach has a possible application to evaluating what participants learn from *Tough Skills*. I identified 29 activities in the *Tough Skills* curriculum that could possibly be used by educators as indicators of either participants' before-after thinking or evidence through role playing or other means that desired principles are being learned. Because *Tough Skills* contains so many activities that are built into the curriculum, it would seem to be one place to start in creating new ways to evaluate the curriculum.

### Importance of the Issue to Research and Practice

Development of *Tackling the Tough Skills* poses an interesting case study of the evolving nature of research to practice and practice to research. The usual perspective is that the natural progression is from research (theoretical) to practice (practical), as the name of the Midwest Research-to-Practice Conference implies. A different view of the concepts offered by Isenberg and Titus (1999) positions "practice" initially left of "research," demonstrating that "practice is ahead of research." Their model depicts a perpetual "back-and-forth relationship between research and practice" in a series of overlapping circles behind the first two (p. 146).

When I wrote the title of this paper in my proposal a few months ago, I referred to *Tough Skills* as a "practice-generated" life skills curriculum because I viewed it as emerging primarily from Rosilee's experience as a practitioner. I still think that is the best description of the curriculum. However, I forgot that development of the curriculum began conceptually on the "research" side, then proceeded to the "practice" side as Rosilee wrote the curriculum.

With *Tough Skills*, we have now moved back to the "research" side of Isenberg and Titus' (1999) model. Lack of evaluation findings may limit use and potential of the curriculum with educators needing to meet stricter requirements of potential funders. A recent national trend toward requiring "evidence-based research" (demonstrated in scientifically-valid studies) poses a "significant threat" (Martin & Rocco, 2005, p. 184) to continued funding of nationally legislated adult education programs.

### Explanation of Models and New Insights

#### *Resiliency*

Resiliency is "the ability to bounce back from stress and crisis" and is "displayed in individuals as optimism, resourcefulness, and determination" (Silliman, 1995, p. 3).

The conceptual base for the *Tackling the Tough Skills* curriculum was an ecological model of family resiliency adapted by Silliman (1995), based on work by Bronfenbrenner and Dunst (as cited in Silliman, 1995). The Individual is at the center, encircled first by Family, then by Community (see Figure 1). Together they form a "dynamic support system against the inevitable stresses of life" (Silliman, 1995, p. 3).

A book of resiliency research (Norman, 2000) targeted to social workers offers a helpful view of resiliency from “the strengths perspective” (Saleebey, 1996, as cited in Norman, 2000, p. 1). The new approach focuses social work practice on “coping rather than on risk, on opportunity rather than on fatalism, on wellness and self-repair rather than on illness and disability” (Norman, 2000, p. 1).

Exploring the concept of resiliency in more detail, Norman (2000) identifies and describes 11 “resiliency factors” found in research literature in the past few decades. She groups these factors into two groups, “personality related” and “interpersonally related” (p. 4). She said research efforts have shown the personality-related factors to help a person be *adaptive*, and the interpersonally-related factors to be *protective*.

*Resiliency factors: Personality related.*

**Self-efficacy** is the “single most important personality characteristic found to be associated with resilient outcome,” involving a feeling of “self-worth, a positive perception of one’s ability to perform required life tasks, and confidence that one can deal with whatever comes one’s way” (Norman, 2000, p. 5).

**Realistic appraisal of the environment** involves being able to differentiate between what is possible and impossible, and to realistically appraise consequences of actions.

**Social problem-solving skills** “reinforce one’s sense of self-esteem, sense of competency, and sense of mastery” (Norman, 2000, p. 6).

**Sense of direction or mission** concerns being given responsibility toward others, or having a special talent, passion, or strong interest that sparks a sense of meaning or purpose.

**Empathy** is “the capacity to understand and respond to another’s feelings.” Empathy is often considered a “traditional feminine characteristic,” but resilient people of both sexes were “more appreciative, gentle, nurturing and socially perceptive” (Norman, 2000, p. 7).

**Humor**, or quality of being funny or comical, has been found to augment resiliency by helping people maintain social relationships, reduce tension, and restore perspective.

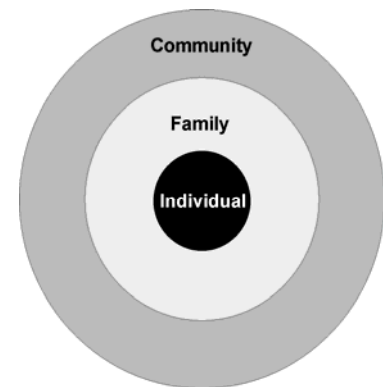
**Adaptive distancing** is the “ability to psychologically step back from a dysfunctional environment and to maintain a healthy separateness from the maladaptive patterns of significant others” (Norman, 2000, p. 7).

**Androgynous sex role behavior** was related to resiliency in a 30-year longitudinal study that found male and female resilient youngsters “demonstrated both traditionally masculine and feminine characteristics and acted in a flexible non-sex-typed manner,” with resilient girls more “independent and autonomous,” and resilient boys “more emotionally expressive, nurturant, and socially perceptive than their non-resilient counterparts” (Norman, 2000, p. 8).

*Resiliency factors: Interpersonally related.*

**Positive, caring relationships** is “the single most important factor promoting resiliency, not only in children and adolescents, but also in adults of all ages.” In the absence of caring family members, “resilient individuals seem to find replacements, or surrogates, to take their place,” such as other relatives, teachers, coaches, or other adults (Norman, 2000, p. 9).

**Figure 1.** Individuals, families and communities form a dynamic support system.



*Adapted from Silliman (1995)*

**Positive family or other intimate environment** involves having a supportive natural or surrogate family, or other environment “in which talents, competencies, and life choices are praised while mistakes, setbacks, and errors are constructively utilized for growth” (Norman, 2000, p. 9).

**“High-enough” expectations** are reachable, yet motivate performance and encourage excellence. “The person who hears the realistic message ‘You can do it!’ from significant others . . . internalizes a self-perception of adequacy and is motivated to reach and stretch to their full capacity” (Norman, 2000, p. 10).

### *Resiliency factors and the curriculum*

This list of resiliency factors enabled me to look at *Tough Skills* from a new perspective. I could see that most, if not all, of these factors seemed to be addressed in the curriculum. But how could I best analyze that and show the results? My husband, an engineer, saw my initial attempts at drawing relationships between resiliency factors and chapter contents and suggested I use a Quality Function Deployment, or QFD matrix. QFD is a tool used in industry and government as part of early design practices to organize, design and evaluate systems. The application is an “art” but typically involves mapping a vertical list of “whats,” or customer requirements, to a horizontal list of “hows,” or product performance measures (Squires, n.d., p. 1). I did not perform a complete QFD analysis, but I examined each *Tough Skills* chapter to determine presence or absence of each resiliency factor. Table 1 shows the results.

| Norman's Resiliency Factors     | Tackling the Tough Skills Chapters |                    |                    |   |                                   |
|---------------------------------|------------------------------------|--------------------|--------------------|---|-----------------------------------|
|                                 | I. Attitude                        | II. Responsibility | III. Communication | IV. Decision Making/<br>Problem Solving | V. Preparing for<br>the Workplace |
| <b>Personality Factors</b>      |                                    |                    |                    |   |                                   |
| Self-efficacy                   | ✓                                  | ✓                  | ✓                  | ✓                                       | ✓                                 |
| Realistic environment appraisal | ✓                                  | ✓                  | ✓                  | ✓                                       | ✓                                 |
| Social problem-solving skills   | ✓                                  | ✓                  | ✓                  | ✓                                       | ✓                                 |
| Sense of direction or mission   | ✓                                  | ✓                  | ✓                  | ✓                                       | ✓                                 |
| Empathy                         | ✓                                  | ✓                  | ✓                  |   |                                   |
| Humor                           | ✓                                  |                    | ✓                  |   |                                   |
| Adaptive distancing             | ✓                                  | ✓                  | ✓                  |   |                                   |
| Androgynous sex role behavior   | ✓                                  | ✓                  | ✓                  |   |                                   |
| <b>Interpersonal Factors</b>    |                                    |                    |                    |   |                                   |
| Positive, caring relationships  | ✓                                  | ✓                  | ✓                  | ✓                                       | ✓                                 |
| Positive family/environment     | ✓                                  | ✓                  | ✓                  | ✓                                       | ✓                                 |
| "High enough" expectations      | ✓                                  | ✓                  | ✓                  | ✓                                       | ✓                                 |

I found *all 11 resiliency factors to be evident in Tackling the Tough Skills*. Note that chapters I and III include evidence of all 11 factors; Chapter II lacks Humor content only. The fact that Chapter I in particular contains elements of all 11 factors supports *Tough Skills* author Rosilee Trotta’s suggestion to educators that the chapters follow a natural order.

### Implications for Research and Practice

This paper has identified a number of possible approaches to developing a comprehensive evaluation of *Tackling the Tough Skills*. Posting past evaluations on our Web site can be done, which would make our past evaluation data more easily accessible to those interested. The list of

11 resiliency factors can be summarized and posted on the Web, along with the description of findings in Table 1. This information would help practitioners better understand the concepts being taught in the curriculum, enabling them to be more intentional in their lesson planning and classroom teaching. A list of *Tough Skills* activities that might be incorporated in evaluation could also be posted on the Web and made available to users of the curriculum.

Two versions of a logic model could be developed to show the short- and long-term impact of the curriculum on both participants and educators. The 11 resiliency factors provide new insights into the concepts participants may be learning through *Tough Skills*. Feedback we have received from some educators using the curriculum indicates *Tough Skills* may be serving as a professional development tool that helps less experienced practitioners become more effective at teaching critical thinking skills.

Any doctoral research I do in the future will hopefully contribute to the evaluation conducted on the program. More ambitious evaluation strategies would require a funding source.

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