Resilience, Hope, and Concrete Plans of Action for Schools and Caring Communities

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ABSTRACT: This paper presents a hypothetical framework (as a four-part model in diagram form) for the examination of the concept of resilience as it relates to child development. Resilience is considered from a socio-ecological perspective. The relationship between resilience and stress is explored and stress and interventions from both internal and external sources is examined in relation to the promotion of resilient behaviours in children. Reported efforts to influence children's resilience are examined for common features, resulting in a four-part model, which will lead to further research. The common features of current efforts by schools to increase resilience in children include: 1) support students to help them recognize alternatives; 2) make students mindful of their options; 3) create supports that help students act with intentionality; and 4) help students think in longer terms and move toward establishing consistency in their behaviours to help them reach life goals. The connections between increased resilience, mindful acts, intentionality, and long-term goals are considered.

Keywords: resilience, mindful behaviour, socio ecological perspective, intentionality

RESUMÉ: Afin d'examiner le concept de résilience en matière de développement chez l'enfant, une structure hypothétique (les quatre parties du schéma) est adoptée. A l'intérieur de facteurs socio-écologiques, on analyse la résilience, ses liens avec le stress et les observations de sources internes et externes en tenant compte des encouragements donnés à l'enfant pour être plus endurant. On examine les efforts déployés qui favorisent la résistance chez les enfants afin de trouver leurs points communs ce qui fait que le modèle comporte quatre parties et conduira à des études plus poussées. Les points communs dans les

efforts actuels offerts par les écoles pour renforcer la résistance chez l'enfant comprennent :

1) l'aide apportée aux élèves pour qu'ils trouvent des solutions

2) leurs faire prendre conscience de leurs possibilités

3) les encourager à agir intentionnellement

4) les aider à penser à long terme et faire que leurs comportements soient conduits par la cohérence pour qu'ils puissent atteindre leurs buts dans la vie. Les liens entre le renforcement de la résilience, les actions pleinement pensées intentionnellement et les buts à long terme, sont pris en compte.

Mots-clés : résilience/résistance, être pleinement conscients de leurs comportements, facteurs socio-écologiques, intentionnellement

Introduction

A recent TV commercial for Xbox features the distinctive voice of actor Sylvester Stallone to accompany video of a muscled zybot moving through a decimated landscape. The voice, with passion and conviction, states that, "It's not how hard you can hit. It's how hard you can *get* hit and keep on going". That is a pragmatic definition of resilience.

Life hits people unevenly. Some people experience relatively little dis-function and trauma in their lives, while others live with both every day. In a recent TV documentary about an ARTSCAN project on northern reserves in Canada, musicians who had brought musical instruments to northern communities in an effort to engage children in music as an approach to instill hope and creativity into areas of extreme poverty and dis-function, played outdoors for a small group of children of various ages who had collected from the local streets. It was not a concert; there was no admission or fanfare; just music in a desolate background. The striking thing about the images in the documentary was the juxtaposition of the beauty of the music and the video of the group of about a dozen children, probably all under about 12 years old, enraptured by the music, faces full of interest, with each child grasping a bright blue plastic bag in one hand. The air was full of beautiful sounds from guitars and flutes; the blue bags were full of gasoline.

Occasionally, a child in the group would bring the opening of the blue bag to his or her face and breathe deeply. As they sniffed the gasoline, shining eyes never waivered from the musicians. It was obvious that their interest in the music and how it was being made was a distraction from the normal practice of constant sniffing. This project is a demonstration of hope that powerful strategies will redirect some less resilient lifestyle choices.

Definitions for resilience vary. The term resilience is often defined as an individual's ability to overcome adversity and continue his or her normal development (Resilience Research Centre website at http://resilienceresearch.org). However, this same site recognizes variants in the definition of resilience that seem more active and reflect more self-advocacy for personal wellbeing.

In the context of exposure to significant adversity, resilience is both the capacity of individuals to navigate their way to the psychological, social, cultural, and physical resources that sustain their wellbeing, and their capacity individually and collectively to negotiate for these resources to be provided in culturally meaningful ways (See also Ungar, 2001,2008; Ungar et al., 2007, 2008).

There is little doubt from a review of research about resilience, that this topic has taken on great significance in the last 15 years in all aspects of society that address services for social well-being, schools included. The Unger definition of resilience is a concept that recognizes the social nature of human development. This perspective is often referred to as a social ecological perspective.

A social ecological understanding of resilience decenters our understanding of resilience, arguing that much more of a person's positive development under stress can be accounted for by external rather than internal factors (Unger, Amaraasignam, & Liedenberg @ resilienceresearch.org/research projects; accessed online Feb. 18, 2015).

In this social ecological view of resilience, we take a hopeful stance. That is, we view resilience as a skill that can be learned. For those who are justifiably alarmed about the almost daily news of another terrorist attack somewhere in the world, this is encouraging. That is, if we consider resiliency to be a skill that can be learned, we take a hopeful social ecological view. The premise

of this approach to resiliency supposes that, if we can come to a clear understanding of what makes one person resilient in the face of adversity, while another is less resilient, or even totally un-resilient, we can begin to understand how to intervene to provide the supports and develop the self-management skills that can promote the former and avoid the latter.

Recognition that this socio-ecological view of resilience is widely accepted, is evident in a simple online search of the topic. Each site provides further resources for those who have an interest in the topic of building resilience. Some of the most dominant resilience websites include:

Building Resilience in Young Children (Best Start): http://bit.do/resilienceBestStart

Resilience Research in Children (Penn Resiliency Project): http://bit.do/resiliencePenn

How Resilience Works (Harvard Business Review): http://bit.do/resilienceHarvard

Resilience Research Centre: http://bit.do/resilienceResearch

Resilience (Greater Good, at Berkley): http://bit.do/resilienceBerkley

Resilience and Grit Resource Roundup (Edutopia): http://bit.do/resilienceEdutopia

Resilience and Learning (ASCD): http://bit.do/resilienceASCD

In this paper, we attempt to consolidate the current research about resilience into a visual conceptual framework that has the potential to guide school and family actions to promote and strengthen resilience in children.

Resilience, Stress and Research

Previous research connects the idea of resilience to effortful types of self-regulation (Eisenberg, Spinard, & Morris, 2002) and uses the juxtaposition of effortful self-regulation and more passive forms of control as indicators for predicting resiliency, adjustment, and social competence. This work recognizes that we should not think of a person as being resilient or not resilient; rather, we should consider social competency as inclusive of various degrees of resilience that are contextualized by the requirements of social functioning. That is, resilience, and a corresponding lack of

resilience, can be viewed as existing on a scale and existing within a context. The same person may be admirably resilient in one context while their behaviours may be a cause for concern about their lack of resilience in another context. Eisenberg et al., (2002) also found that children who experienced flexible external regulation rather than over-control ultimately evolved as more resilient. For example, if a child is given a gentle external reminder when behaviour is an issue, s/he can be led to understand how to self-correct rather than relying on someone else to monitor the behaviour and suggest the correction. Eisenberg at al. concluded that regulation and control are critical constructs in the study of resiliency, social adaptation, and mental health.

Further research (Nettles, Mucherah, & Jones, 2000) showed that children's perceived exposure to violence, arguably one of the least desirable social contexts for developing mental health in children, has significant negative effects on academic performance, as evident in mathematics and reading indicators. An extensive study by Garmezy, Masten, & Tellegen (1984), examined "stress resistance", which is arguably the same social construct as resilience. In this study, the researchers examined the adaptability of 261 children in three groups/cohorts, all identified as having experienced different forms of life stresses. They examined the children's adaptations by considering academic achievement, classroom behavioural competence, and social competence. These researchers found a number of interesting correlations to the three indicators of resilience they examined. These findings included:

- IQ was a stronger indicator of resilience as measured by academic engagement than socio-economic factors (SES);
- IQ scores added 34% to variations in engagement;
- IQ scores, however, had very little to do with variations in the students' tendency to be disruptive;
- High stress scores were indicators of high classroom disruptiveness;
- High and low stress levels were reliable indicators of competence; that is, protective factors such as higher academic achievement, stronger classroom behavioural competence, and higher social competence, are predictors of resilience at higher stress levels but may not differentiate between children when stress levels are lower;

- There was no evidence that the effect of stress was conditional on SES; and
- IQ acts to a degree to be a protective factor against stress; high IQ children maintain high performance on standardized tests at both high and low levels of stress while low IQ children's test performance declines as a function of higher stress.

Notwithstanding new views on the plasticity of IQ, this earlier research points to the value of focusing on adaptive and resilient individual and familial characteristics in an effort to understand prevention of maladaptive childhood behaviours.

Other researchers (McTighe, Washburn & Liew, 2009) have focused on identifying personality factors that predict academic success as measured by reading as a predictor of academic resilience. They advocate that literacy skills and emotional development should be treated in conjunction as a responsive measure to promote resilience. This co-treatment approach places the student's temperament and self-beliefs in the same forum as two aspects that contribute to academic success albeit in different manners. These authors found links between early effortful controls and later literacy success, using 6 principles to guide their approaches: 1) acceptance; 2) assessment; 3) modeling practices; 4) feedback; 5) goal-setting; and, 6) self-evaluation. Engagement and self-efficacy create persistence in the learner, which, in turn, predisposes the learner to seek help from others, including from other students, without fear of being labeled as incapable. This strategy for seeking and finding appropriate and timely supports sustains motivation and supports further persistence. Motivation supported by persistence leads to resilience.

From Deficits to Strengths

Lately, researchers and authors are positioning strength-based approaches to resiliency above deficit-based approaches (Hurlington, 2010). While early research and theory on resilience and stress coping strategies dealt with attempts to identify correlates that affected or predicted resilient behaviours, more recent approaches appear to highlight a multiplicity of internal factors, coupled with several external factors that may contribute to

strengthened resiliency. The recent literature focuses on identifying resilience protective factors, treating lack of resilience somewhat like a disease, which we can vaccinate against with the right combination of effortful and focused protective factors. Bonnie Benard (1995) promotes 4 key measures to develop resilience, which she feels can be expanded (remember the scale!) in children. These measures include:

- understanding and believing that every young person has the capacity for healthy development and learning success;
- knowing the specific individual strengths which relate to healthy development and success with learning;
- understanding the communal responsibility of families, communities and schools as contributors to each child's healthy development; and
- adults in each child's sphere of influence must believe in their capacity to change the life trajectory of each child, from peril to resilience.

Benard's approach emphasizes the co-influence of caring relationships, lofty goals, and opportunities for meaningful contributions by individual children, regardless of their backgrounds and social environments. This ecological, constructivist model for building resilience in children has resulted in a number of approaches in schools to create the pre-condition of a positive and supportive environment that is the background for building positive relationships, reaching toward long term goals, and making contributions that motivate further positive engagement in a self-renewing cycle.

Schools have a limited timeframe in which they can promote resilience in children. However, Hurlington (2010) proposes ways that schools can meet the constraints on their influential capacity and teach students to conquer challenges in their lives. First among these strategies is to foster relationships by knowing the students and their non-school life circumstances, by understanding their personal strengths, and motivating them to know their peers as a supportive resource bank. The second approach includes the school's efforts to hold, co-create, and maintain high standards, while simultaneously helping students to reach those standards and pursue lofty goals for personal success. Finally, schools are encouraged to provide students with occasions for meaningful

participation and contribution to the social dynamic of the school, allowing them to live resilience as a process by experiencing the fruits of their efforts. These approaches provide a positive framework for schools to consider their role in developing children's resilience.

In their efforts to describe specific school projects and initiatives designed to foster and promote resilience, Bondy, Ross, Gallingane, & Hambacher (2007), tracked novice teachers' efforts to establish a positive classroom tone and high standards in schools that have historically been challenged by counter-productive student behaviours. They found that these teachers acted immediately and emphatically to this end as they encountered students on the first day of school. They used insistence, immediate redirection, and culturally responsive and respectful strategies to give primacy to their efforts to create positive psychological environments in their classrooms. Their efforts included core lessons to teach the importance of building relationships of mutual support and respect in the classroom. They were explicit in stating and reinforcing classroom rules. Consequences were evident and predictable. "I" messages were used frequently to reinforce the belief that each child could be successful (i.e., " I know you can do it."). To show respect for the students' culture, these teachers used familiar words and expressions, referenced popular culture, interacted directly and in a directed way with students (e.g., call-and-response), and used directive language (i.e., explaining and giving clear directions). The combinations of these approaches created a respectful, consistent, orderly, and culturally responsive caring classroom ethos. All of these approaches together create a classroom environment that sustains the psychological elements needed for resiliency to be built. When teachers care enough to be firm, direct, and consistent, they support the success culture that, in turn, supports individual resilience. In such an environment, trying to achieve is valued, and respect, not command, dominates the interactions in the classroom.

Aligning Our Expectations for Pre-Conditions to Develop Resilience as a School Outcome

Other researchers (The Learning Partnership, 2012), build on previous conceptions of resilience to identify criteria which are thought to promote resilience in children. There are, predictably, some overlaps with previous research work but also some unique criteria are identified in this recent work. These resilience criteria include: nurturing relationships (perhaps a more active variant of caring relationships), developing a positive identity, power and control, social justice, access to resources, sense of belonging, and culture. Readers will find it self-evident that none of these criteria is an absolute value. All seven can be placed on a continuum of degree (e.g., having some power and control vs. having total power and control).

Schools have historically been very creative and resourceful in working toward development of a school culture that is invitational, relationship focused, able to provide resources outside of their original educational mandate, welcoming to create a sense of belonging, and increasingly responsive to the breadth of cultures that are represented in their student populations. For example, schools have provided interest clubs, operated breakfast and nutrition programs, provided empathy training (e.g., Connection Circles), provided after-hours access to gyms, libraries, and computer labs for students and community members, engaged in home visits, organized buddy reading programs, provided winter clothing and winter sports equipment exchanges, removed end-of-class bells, organized family literacy and book backpack events, adjusted the length of the school day for students who cannot profit from a full school day, organized multicultural events (e.g., community dinners, Historica Fairs, cultural dress fashion shows, etc.), run "Second Step" social skill development programs, translated newsletters and other school communications, organized credit recovery options in secondary schools, displayed welcoming cultural symbols prominently, provided special interest option courses, provided peer mentorship programs, established staff mentors for at-risk students, promoted parent networking, used conduct reflection sheets to help students consider the impacts of their behaviours, used peer mediators to solve student conflicts, run various types of fund raisers for charities, selected resources

that address social and societal issues, engaged students in social action and human and animal rights issues, provided home form teachers, designed survey courses to help secondary students identify career interests, and trained teachers and school ambassadors in anti-bullying strategies. These approaches and many others have the potential to impact the cultural norms in a school, provided they are managed well and sustained over time. An essential condition of good management of such programs and initiatives is school clarity about the expected and realized impacts of their efforts. If schools keep putting energy and resources into a particular initiative without monitoring its short and longer-term impacts, valuable human resources are wasted.

What seems common to all of these efforts to create more resilience and, therefore better learning contexts, for students are four key elements, which provide a clear framework for moving forward with further efforts to improve resilience in students. All of the interventions we have reviewed try to: 1) support students to help them recognize alternatives; 2) make students mindful of their options; 3) create supports that help students act with intentionality; and 4) help students think in longer terms and move toward establishing consistency in their behaviours to help them reach life goals. It seems that these common elements are layered into the design of all of our initiatives that are established to improve resiliency in children (see Figure 1).
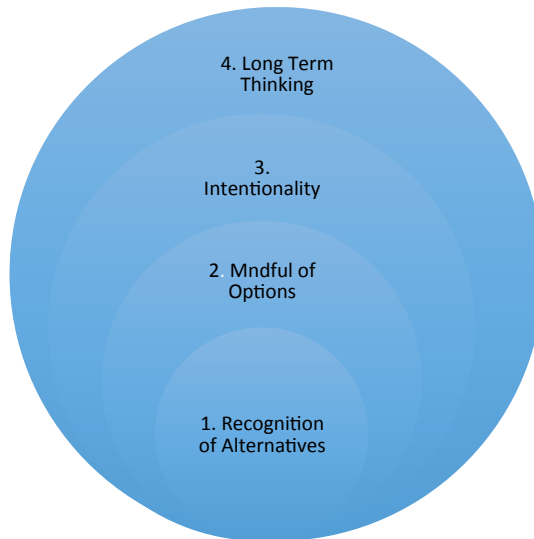
Figure 1. Layering Influences to Develop Resilient Children

Sustainability, Distributed Leadership, Resilience, and a Way Forward

It seems important to make our way forward with efforts to improve resiliency in children by bringing a sustainability element into the plan. Several decades ago, school jurisdictions began to engage in processes that were often referred to as succession planning. The idea behind succession planning was that leaders in schools would predictably change. This often occurred in some schools as a reflection of Board policies that rotated school administrators every 5 or so years. After reflecting on the impact of this practice, many school jurisdictions realized that when the leadership of a school changed, very often the initiatives and practices of the school changed as well, regardless of the effectiveness of the practices. In response to this, schools began to address distributed leadership in schools, in recognition that, if other people on staff lead a variety of positive initiatives, those initiatives were more likely to have a life in the culture of the school beyond the tenure of a single administrator (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Distributed Leadership Model to Sustain Resiliency Initiatives

It seems self-evident that the more people who are involved in leading resiliency-enriching initiatives, the more initiatives can be offered. Also, if more initiatives are offered to students, more students are likely to engage in the initiatives because they are more likely to find strategies that interest them and address their needs.

Mindfulness: Turning Over Personal Responsibility for Resilience to the Learner

Figure 1 introduced the idea that resiliency may be an outcome of several influences operating within a person and in the environment around that person, in a layered way. Layers represent the idea that these influences may happen simultaneously or in close connection. We hypothesize that 4 influences create these layers: the ability to recognize alternatives, mindfulness, intentionality, and consistency of life goals.

The ability to recognize alternatives

Some years ago, one of the authors supervised pre-service teachers as they taught on an international practicum placement. Their placement was in the remote regions of Kenya, on the Maasi Mara. On one of the teaching days, I was talking with a secondary school female student. She looked to be about 16 years old. As we stood and talked, surrounded by mud huts, donkeys that some had brought to school, desert cactus and gracious acacia trees, a jet plane flew over, leaving a dramatic contrail across the otherwise cloudless sky. The girl looked up and asked, "You come in that?" It was a dramatic reminder that some people cannot imagine a different life than they have because the options are unknown to them. This may also be true of many students who live in debilitating poverty or with violence, food insecurity, and/or dysfunctional family dynamics. How can they want to work toward a different future if they can't even imagine a different future or realize that not all people live as they do? As we seek to build resiliency in children, our first goal must be to help them imagine the future they want. Showing them a wide range of options must be part of our efforts.

Mindfulness

Mindfulness is often defined as controlled awareness used in a deliberate attempt to gain control by being aware of what is happening at the present moment. In a study of physical activity, researchers found that intentions predicted physical activity (i.e., for exercise) among mindful people and therefore provided a useful construct that helps us understand the intention-behaviour relationship (Chatzisarantis & Hagger, 2007). In classrooms, teachers can help students become mindful by teaching them to bracket outside concerns as they address new learning, providing students with daily agendas to help them create a mindset for upcoming events, starting each lesson by explaining what knowledge, skills, or experiences will have developed during the next learning episode, and providing structured opportunities to reflect on personal learning during the day and at the end of each school day. These strategies help students realize that efforts have led to results. Mindfulness can also be used to help students identify criteria and standards for their work and plans to meet those criteria and standards.

Intentionality

Teaching is a hopeful exercise. We teach so others will learn. However, we can go wrong if we start our teaching with the assumption that students want to learn what we plan to teach. Part of creating resilience in children is to help them see the value in what we want them to learn. When they see this value, they can form the intention to learn it, use mindfulness strategies to attend to their learning, and recognize that this learning may be advantageous to them and support attainment of alternatives they have identified.

Consistency of Life Goals

Having long-term goals is a way to sustain our own effortful motivation to learn. Long-term goals will look and sound very different depending on the age of the students we teach. However, even with very young students, we should help them establish age appropriate long-term goals to help them experience the satisfaction of reaching goals and the intrinsic reward of realizing that effort, focus/mindfulness, and intentionality support achievement of their goals.

Conclusion

There is a wide range of resources available to teachers and to parents to support their efforts to build resilience in children. However, if we start these efforts without a strong conceptual framework to support our approaches to building this important skill in students we run two risks. First, we may inadvertently create hopeful learning environments but only sporadically if school wide and sustained efforts are not in place to make these efforts a consistent priority. At present, there does not appear to be any research into the potential impact of such inconsistency. Distributed leadership is one strategy that we have suggested to support intervention sustainability. Second, we can undermine our own best intentions by assuming impacts. That is, if we provide one form of service, well intended to support resiliency in children, and assume that because we have done this well intended thing, that resiliency has been the result, we risk being complacent about trying to impact complex skills with simplistic strategies. That is

not to say that our efforts are wasted. However, we need much more hard data about the resiliency benefits of programs and supports that we assume are creating or bolstering resiliency. The model provided in this paper (Figure 1) suggests some pathways for further investigation.

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Further Web Based References to Explore

Building Resilience! by Loreto Secondary School, Bray, video is
available at this YouTube video link :
  http://bit.do/resilienceLoreto
Educating for Happiness and Resilience, video is available at this
YouTube video link:
  http://bit.do/resilienceEducating
Ann Masten on Inside Resilient Children, video is available at this
YouTube video link:
  http://bit.do/resilienceInside

Resilience in Children; The Agenda, video is available at this YouTube video link:
  http://bit.do/resilienceAgenda
How to Bring up Emotionally Resilient Children by Dr. Shoshana Garfield, video is available at this YouTube video link:
  http://bit.do/resilienceGarfield
Resiliency in Schools, video is available at this YouTube video link:
  http://bit.do/resilienceSchools
Outsmarting Stress and Enhancing Resilience, video is available at this YouTube video link :
  http://bit.do/resilienceOutsmarting
Dr. Megan McElheran discusses "Trauma Change Resilience" at the 2011 TEDxYYC, video is available at this YouTube video link:
  http://bit.do/resilienceTrauma
Building your Child's Resilience, video is available at this YouTube video link:
  http://bit.do/resilienceBuilding
Attachment and Resilience -- the power of one: Dr. Erica Liu Wollin at TEDxHongKong 2013, video is available at this YouTube video link:
  http://bit.do/resilienceAttachment

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