Building resilience and character in young people

Alcohol and Drug Prevention Briefing Paper

This briefing paper is part of a series produced by Mentor ADEPIS on alcohol and drug education and prevention, for teachers and practitioners.

Questions for schools

1. What is resilience?

2. Why is resilience important?

3. What is the role of schools and other education settings in helping to build resilience in children and young people?

Introduction

Building resilience in children and young people is one of the key principles of good education, and a necessary requirement in facilitating personal growth, whilst enabling children and young people to successfully navigate life and life challenges.

Creating 'well-rounded' young people with 'character', resilience, and 'grit' was recently announced to be one of the key priorities for the Department for Education[1].

But what does resilience mean? And how does this word translate into practice?

This briefing paper looks at resilience in the context of universal educational settings (both formal and informal). By giving definitions of key terms to provide a better understanding, it will then explore ways in which these can be contextualised and translated into practice. In so doing, it will highlight the role of schools and other educational (formal or informal) institutions and how they can contribute to the development of resilience in children and young people.

What is resilience?

Resilience, grit, self-control and character are terms that have been increasingly used in the context of education, health and well-being and; as the inter-related components aiding an individual's positive self-development.

Resilience refers to the capacity of an individual to restore good mental and emotional health following the onset of challenging and adverse situations.

Resilience can be a complex term, the meaning and definition of which can be shaped by, and adapted to various contexts and fields of expertise: for example within the spheres of mental health and well-being education, through to tackling international crises and disasters. There has, historically, been a range of research looking at resilience and consequently offering a variety of perspectives.

The first research wave viewed resilience as an 'inner' character trait characterising only those individuals who demonstrated good coping skills in the face of high-risks[2].

Subsequent research defined resilience as the result of a combination of various character traits and external factors, rather than determined by a single individual feature.

A further examination instead increased the

focus on the environment, asserting this as a major determinant of resilience. This approach claims that resilient individuals have grown and developed in environments where protective factors (promoting healthy living) were present. Recent studies in fact define resilience as a context specific process, which involves developmental change.

Among various definitions, resilience was also introduced as "an interactive concept that is concerned with the combination of serious risk experiences and a relatively positive psychological outcome despite those experiences" (Rutter 2006)[3] and "good adaptation under extenuating circumstances and, from a developmental perspective, meeting age salient developmental tasks in spite of serious threats to development" (Masten 2002)[4]. In other words, the ability to attain positive developmental, emotional and psychological outcomes despite a number of risk factors surrounding an individual.

For the purposes of this paper we will refer to resilience according to the following definition suggested by Dr. Michael Ungar (from the Resilience Resource Centre[5]), who maintains that resilience is better

Key Terms

Resilience is the capacity of an individual to 'bounce back' from adverse experiences[6], and to manage positive resources and skills, such as 'character' and 'grit', that can allow minimising negative outcomes of adverse circumstances.

Character is a set of capabilities (including application, self-direction, self-regulation, and empathy) and soft skills that allow people to achieve their potential[7].

Grit is "the tendency to sustain interest in, and effort towards very long-term goals".[8]

Self-control is "the voluntary regulation of behavioural, emotional, and attention impulses in the presence of momentarily gratifying temptations or diversions".[9]

understood as follows:

*"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 well-being, and their capacity individually and collectively to **negotiate** for these resources to be provided in culturally meaningful ways."*

Key messages about resilience

Bonnie Benard, a key contributor to resilience research, suggests that there are four fundamental messages that have come out of resilience research:

"1. Resilience is a capacity all young people have for healthy development and successful learning.

2. Certain personal strengths are associated with healthy development and successful learning.

3. Certain characteristics of families, schools and communities are associated with the development of personal strengths and, in turn, healthy development and successful learning.

4. Changing the life trajectories of children (and young people) from risk to resilience starts with changing the beliefs of the adults in their families, schools and communities."[10]

Resilience is therefore not created by inner characteristics of individuals; rather it is shaped by experiences, opportunities, relationships, and the environment in which these develop.

The environment affects children and young people's lives through the presence of risk and protective factors: whilst the first are more likely to increase individual's vulnerability, the latter are more likely to increase resilience.

Why is resilience important? And what is the role of schools and other education settings in building resilience?

Research has shown that non-cognitive skills in general play a key role in determining academic outcomes. Character

and resilience (and better coping strategies) are crucial not only in improving academic performance, but also longer term health outcomes and future employment prospects.

Character and resilience are also fundamental factors in reducing the chances of participating in unhealthy risky behaviours.

As we pointed out in previous publications, risky behaviours are many and inter-connected: the involvement in a risky behaviour increases the exposure to a number of additional risk factors, and the likelihood of an individual being involved in multiple risky behaviours. Where this happens it could be described as 'compound risk'. By definition, being involved in behaviours that can damage health, such as smoking, is likely to have a direct impact on a young person's well-being. For this reason, increasing resilience among children and young people is also a key factor for reducing health inequalities.

However, as noted in a recent publication by Public Health England, both "resilience and adversity are distributed unequally across the population and are related to broader socio-economic inequalities which have common causes - power, money, resources that shape the conditions people live and their opportunities, experiences and relationships".[11]

Schools (and other educational institutions) through the delivery of universal education and associated provision, have scope and responsibility to further reduce existing gaps among students, and lessen inequalities among their pupils, by increasing the resilience of their students, their families and the wider community.

In order to do so, it is crucial to ensure a good balance between the provision of universal services and the assignment of additional resources to more vulnerable individuals in order to reduce existing health inequalities.[12]

Resilience into practice:

In order to effectively improve the health and well-being of children and young people, it is important to focus on the positives in their lives. This can help to build a greater sense of safety and strength, whilst tackling current, and preparing to cope with future adversities. This can be done through 'strengthening life-skills, enhancing self-efficacy, nurturing their creativity and ensuring external resources are available when they need to draw on them'.[13]

In order to shape resilient individuals, schools and other educational institutions should focus on increasing protective factors acting on three different areas: Individual, interpersonal, and the wider school and/or community.

Individual:

- Improving achievements
- Supporting transitions
- Promoting healthy behaviours

Interpersonal:

- Parents and carers
- Teachers and other staff
- Friends

School and community:
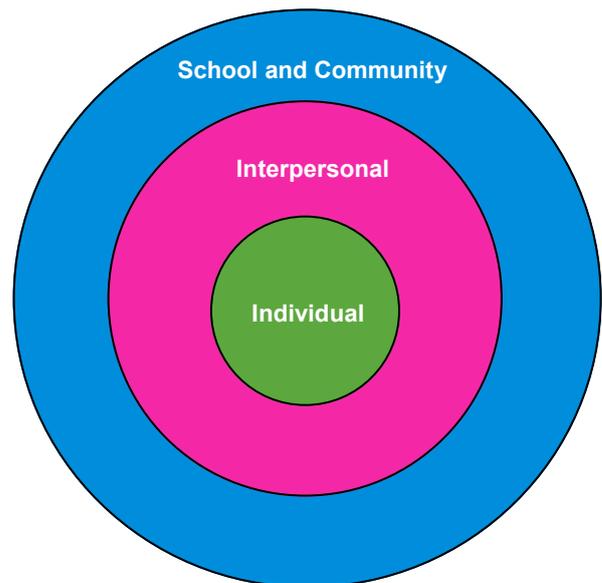
- Whole school approach
- The school as a community hub [14]

Figure 1 shows the various but interlinked levels of intervention

Individual	What to do and why?	Examples
Improving achievements	**Setting high expectations and academic standards to improve achievement:** evidence suggests that individuals who perform well academically are more resilient. Strong grit as defined previously, good results at school, and staying in education for longer are protective factors that decrease exposure to risk in both the short and long-term. However, not only academic results and high standards contribute to building resilient individuals, but also confidence in physical abilities, interest in sport, music, or art, are all crucial to building on children and young people's strengths, passions and interests.[15]	Useful examples for meaningful participation for students may include: • The use of co-operative learning strategies; • Involving students in setting the curriculum; • Convening classroom meetings to solve classroom problems; • Involving children and young people in assessment and goal-setting; • Involving children and young people in setting classroom rules; • Assigning children and young people roles of responsibility within the classroom or school community.[16]
	Providing opportunities for participation and contribution: It is very important that children are engaged at school and share positive experiences in the school community. Evidence proves that engagement and positive experiences have a major role in overcoming adversities. School teachers should, alongside academic achievement, value engagement, enjoyment and play.[17] Promoting meaningful participation also means offering students the opportunity to take responsibility over activities or tasks that suit them. This prevents the development of anti-academic attitudes and potentially an involvement in risky behaviours.[18]	
Supporting transitions	**Supporting transitions - specifically from primary to secondary school: ensuring social adjustment, institutional adjustment, and curriculum interest and continuity.**[19] Positive experiences of transition from primary to secondary school have been proven to affect the health and well-being of individuals later on in life. Moreover transitions, if not supported accordingly, may represent a time of risk and emotional distress for children, which can also undermine resilience, and increase the likelihood of uptake of risky behaviours.	In particular, it is very important that secondary schools provide relevant support to their new pupils, such as: • 'Help with getting to know their way around the school; • Procedures to help pupils adapt,; • Visits to schools; • Induction and taster days; • Support and assistance with lessons and homework; • Good communication with parents and provision of feedback about their child's progress and behaviour'.[20]
	Ensure effective communication and information sharing is in place between local primary schools and secondary schools, to allow a smooth transition.	

Promoting healthy behaviours	**Building healthy behaviours at an early stage can prevent the involvement in risky behaviours** in later stages in life. Research suggests that individuals lacking resilience are more likely to engage in unhealthy or risky behaviours. But also that engaging in unhealthy or risky behaviours is likely to increase vulnerability and reduce resilience[21], initiating a positive feedback loop. Therefore programmes or approaches aimed at reducing risky behaviours and promoting healthy behaviours may contribute to increasing resilience. Building resilience through the promotion of healthy behaviours also contributes to reducing existing health inequalities among pupils.[22]	Promoting social and emotional learning can be one of the various ways of promoting healthy behaviours. Social and emotional learning involves the processes through which children and young adults develop and effectively master the knowledge, skills and attitudes needed to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, understand, feel and demonstrate empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions. (see Early Intervention and Prevention briefing paper).
Interpersonal	**Facilitating the development of caring relationships with family, teachers and friends.**	**Examples**
Parents and carers	**Schools and other educational institutions should function as a means of support for the development and improvement of positive relationships between parents and carers and their children.** Family support and positive relationships with parents and carers are crucial for building resilience. Schools and other educational institutions should take a leading role in promoting a positive learning environment at home, through engaging parents in taking interest and supporting their children's learning. This will increase the chance of young people staying in education and increase attainment.	Schools and other educational institutions should encourage parental engagement in the child's education, by building links with families and working closely with parents and carers. This not only contributes to building stronger communication between schools and parents, but also to increasing and improving interactions and communication between parents/carers and their children.[23] Schools can also play a key role in helping improving parenting skills through parenting programmes – outlining the importance of authoritative parenting. An example of a successful parenting programme is EFFEKT, an evidence-based programme developed in Sweden. Other examples can be found here.
Teachers and other staff	**Ensure all teachers and members of staff represent a positive and trusted role model.** Teachers' support is crucial for children and young people's development (including the development of character and resilience). Evidence has shown that support from teachers and other members of staff is particularly beneficial for those children and young people from disadvantaged backgrounds or those facing multiple adversities.[24] Schools and other education institutions should recognise the important protective effects that a trusted adult can have on a young person, and allow the development of those trusting and positive relationships.[25]	School governors and headteachers, as well as SMT should ensure that all teachers, educators, and other members of staff are objective, empathic, non-judgemental and understanding.[26]

Friends	**Promote and further develop support mechanisms through peer-to-peer interaction:** Existing informal support mechanisms (such as peers, neighbours, other non-kin relations) play a fundamental role supporting the development of children and young people. These mechanisms should be allowed and further developed to ensure supportive and positive relationships increase protective factors and increase resilience. Schools also play a major role in helping children and young people build positive and healthy relationships, resisting peer pressure, whilst promoting mutual respect and positive emotional wellbeing.	It is important to provide anti-bullying interventions [27]- educating peer and staff groups to reduce stigma and promote positive emotional wellbeing.
School and Community	**What to do and why?**	**Examples**
Whole school approach	**Whole school focus and approach to promoting health and well-being:** School governors, head-teachers, and SMTs should ensure that a whole school approach to health and well-being is promoted, not only by taking into account the social and emotional development of pupils and students, but also and very importantly that of members of staff, and of parents within the school community. This can also be supported through the implementation of consistent and efficient needs assessments, and Joint Strategic Needs Assessments.	Teachers and other members of staff are best in place to build young people's resilience, however this task becomes unachievable if staff members are not resilient or supported themselves. "Resilient schools show support for staff through: • Opportunities for staff development; • Effective, competent and caring management; • Good Occupational Health and Safety standards; • Recognition of staff for good work and contributions to the school".[28]
The school as a community hub	**Connecting residents, students and their families to resources and sources of support available in the local neighbourhood.** In so doing, schools and other education institutions should promote cross-sector approaches and collaborations (i.e. sign-posting to various sources of information or relevant external support).	A way of contributing to building resilience, whilst functioning as community hub is promoting students' engagement at community level, such as volunteering, being aware of their positive contribution to society, being a source of support to one another within and outside the school community.

Measuring resilience

Understanding how to measure resilience is neither clear, nor simple. Although sophisticated tools have been developed and are currently available to estimate levels of resilience in both young people and adults, obtaining a concrete measurement and understanding still remains hard to achieve.

Among existing tools, the Resilience Scale for Adolescents (READ) allows measurement of individual positive attributes, such as: personal competences, social competences, goal orientation, self-efficacy, as well as positive social resources within and outside the family environment. Find out more.

It has also been emphasised that the measurement of the overall well-being of a population can shed light on the resilience of those individuals.

Conclusion

This paper gave a brief overview on what resilience is and ways in which educational institutions could play a role in helping building resilience in young people.

Resilience is the capacity of an individual to 'bounce back' despite adversity. Schools (and other educational institutions) have scope to secure various levels of support to enable children and young people to grow up as resilient individuals, by facilitating the development of protective factors in the different areas outlined above.

To find out more about resilience, or existing interventions aimed at developing character and resilience in children and young people please check these useful links:

- Boing boing
- Resilience Research Centre
- Resiliency Resource Centre
- Public Health England: Building children and young people's resilience in schools

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