Resilience in school: What do we mean when we talk about ‘resilience’?

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‘Resilience’ is a word often used in everyday life and in education. But what exactly do we mean when we talk about resilience? In research, the most widely accepted understanding is that resilience is positive adaptation to adversity. Research has shown us that anyone can be resilient, with the right resources – even children in areas of political conflict can show resilience.¹ This commonplace occurrence of resilience has been coined ‘ordinary magic’ by researcher Ann Masten:

“What began as a quest to understand the extraordinary has revealed the power of the ordinary. Resilience does not come from rare and special qualities, but from the everyday magic of ordinary, normative human resources in the minds, brains and bodies of children, in their families and relationships, and in their communities.”²

So, what are these resources that support resilience?

In research, these resources are known as ‘protective factors’. Essentially, resilience happens when an individual is exposed to adversity or risk, but also has access to factors that moderate (i.e. reduce or prevent) the potential negative impact of this adversity. Some examples are:

- Problem-solving skills³
- Self-regulation skills³
- Positive self-perceptions³
- Positive family climate³
- Parents involved in child’s education³
- Close peer relationships³
- Positive school engagement⁴
- Community engagement⁵

These protective factors sit in different ‘domains’, which can be thought of as the layers of a person’s environment, each of which affects development. The figure below shows a model of this, developed by Urie Bronfenbrenner.⁶ It is believed that protective factors have the greatest effect when they occur together, and when they are spread across various domains.⁷ So, in this line of thinking, a young person with lots of protective factors across different areas of their lives is more likely to adapt to adversity.
However, the evidence suggests protective factors do not always have the same effects for different groups of people – in short, they are not always protective. These factors act differently based on various characteristics, including gender, age, SES, locality, and the outcome of interest. Sometimes, protective factors can be unexpected – for example, parent engagement is often found to be protective, but one study found that for children in a ‘risky’ family environment, lowered parental engagement was actually protective. There can also be situations where factors have both a negative and a protective effect at the same time. For example, a study focused on teenage mothers found that for some people, a peer network provided support but also normalised risky behaviours, such as drug use. This kind of research shows that it’s important not to assume that all factors will have the same effects for everyone, and careful consideration needs to be made when working to boost them.

**What does this mean for schools?**

As children and young people in the UK continue to face adversity and navigate stressful situations in their daily lives, schools face the challenge of attempting to reduce the impact this has on development, wellbeing and attainment. Resilience research suggests that we can ‘hijack’ children and young people’s environments to create and boost the protective factors around them to help limit these negative effects.

There is a variety of ways schools can develop these protective factors. It might be useful to think about how these can be developed across multiple domains to best support children and young people, particularly those facing multiple risks and sources of adversity. These can also be useful when working with particular children and young people who are facing a difficult situation – what resources do they have that can support them with this, and how can these be boosted?

Some examples of how schools can do this are:

**In the child:**
- Creating a positive environment that makes children and young people feel valued as individuals to support them in developing positive self-perceptions
- Providing interventions that focus on the development of self-regulation skills

**In the family:**
- Working to develop open and trusting relationships between educators and parents, providing opportunities for engagement on a day-to-day basis as well as through events
- Offering parenting classes to build parents’ skills in supporting their child, such as behaviour management and academic support

**In the school:**
- Creating systems of co-production with children and young people, allowing them to make age-appropriate decisions relating to school policies and activities
- Providing clear support systems so that children and young people can seek support where needed

**In the community:**
- Supporting engagement in the wider community (e.g. through field trips, community events)
- Developing links with community partners and engaging them in offering services in the school environment (e.g. substance use, mental health services)
Further reading on resilience and protective factors:
https://youngminds.org.uk/media/1463/the_resilient_classroom-2016.pdf

References


