A Transactional, Whole-School Approach to Resilience

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Introduction

When he was young, teachers thought that he was "too stupid to learn anything." He was fired from his first two jobs. His repeated electricity experiments were met with never-ending failure. After 1,000 failed attempts, he finally succeeded at inventing the light bulb.

The story of Thomas Edison and other famous people like Walt Disney, Nelson Mandela, Steve Jobs, Steve Hawking, and Albert Einstein are frequently used as role models for resilience and eventual success in the face of adversity and disadvantage. Resilience in these success stories, however, resides more in the individual himself or herself, construed as individual strengths like stress resistance, determination, grit, persistence, and hardiness. This conceptualization reflects the first generation of resilience research which led to the notion of "invulnerability" in the face of adverse life circumstances (Anthony, 1987; Garmezy & Nuechterlein, 1972). This linear, within-child model, however, did not endure in the face of more recent research, which suggests that like any other aspect of human development, resilience is best understood as the interaction between the individual and his or her environment, with both influencing one another (Luthar, 2006; Masten, 2001). Resilience depends on how individual psychological qualities interact with social systems such as the family, the community, and school as well as broader sociocultural systems (Masten, 2014; Ungar, 2012). The biopsychosocial perspective (Sameroff, 1995) defines resilience in terms of three key processes: biological processes such as predisposition and temperament; psychological processes such as coping skills, self-concept, and resourcefulness; and social processes such as healthy relationships and social support. It varies according to individual characteristics, age, context, and the nature of adversity, making it a unique experience for each individual

(Bonanno, 2012). In this chapter, I explore these transactional processes in the context of educational systems. After briefly discussing the ecological, transactional approach to resilience, I will present a resilience framework for educational systems informed by the research evidence. I conclude with a case study of a recently developed resilience program.

From Individual Invulnerability to Transactional Processes and Ecological Protection

Developmental outcomes are determined by complex patterns of interaction and transaction. Masten's (2014) more recent definition refers to the "capacity of a dynamic system to adapt successfully to disturbances that threaten system function, viability, or development" (p. 10) while Ungar (2008) defines resilience as "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" (p. 225). Developmental systems theory (Lerner et al., 2013) construes resilience as a dynamic attribute of the relationship between an individual and his or her multilevel and relational developmental systems and how the fit between the individual and the features of the ecology reflect either adjustment or maladjustment in the face of threats. Ungar (2012) has developed a specific ecological perspective of resilience, shifting the understanding of resilience to a more socially embedded understanding of wellbeing, with resilience more likely to occur when society provides the services, support, and resources required to make it possible for every child to enjoy positive development.

In contrast to earlier understandings of resilience as a quality of the select, invulnerable few, the ecological perspective provides the opportunity for all children to develop resilience given resilience-enhancing, protective social contexts. Rather than an extraordinary process for some children possessing stress-resistant qualities, resilience is about "ordinary" responses focusing on individual and contextual strengths and assets (Masten, 2001; Ungar, 2012). A broad brush, ecological view avoids the danger of neoliberal approaches that put the onus of responsibility for successful adaptation on the individual in place of social structures and support services (Hart & Heaver, 2015). It is also more likely to yield interpretive models of resilience that can explain how people navigate through negative environments (Ungar, 2012, 2019). An evaluation of preventive resilience programs in fact shows that effective interventions are more likely when based on a developmental, ecological systems approach (O'Dougherty, Masten, & Narayan, 2013).

A Transactional, Whole-School, Resilience Framework

In line with the transactional model of resilience, multiple lines of research have identified various processes at both individual and contextual levels that protect children exposed to adversity. These include personal qualities like self-regulation, social competence, sense of control and self-efficacy, cognitive flexibility, goal-setting, and problem-solving. Protective

contexts are characterized by a stable and supportive relationship with a significant adult, a stable and caring family environment, authoritative parenting, prosocial peer group, safe and prosocial community, and a caring school community (Cicchetti & Garmezy, 1993; Rutter, 1998; Werner & Smith, 1992). Schools are one of the most important and influential social systems in children's lives, having access to practically all children, including those coming from adverse environments. Various school processes have been found to promote resilience in children and young people, including a nurturing safe environment that reduces the stress in children's lives while providing opportunities for caring relationships, social connectedness, and active engagement in learning and social activities (Garmezy, Masten, & Tellegen, 1984; Rutter, 1998; Ungar, 2008, 2018; Werner & Smith, 1992). The identification of these protective processes has led to the development of various school-based interventions that seek to nurture the resilience of children and young people facing adversity. Such interventions focus on the whole school population (universal interventions) or on groups of children or individual children considered to be at risk in their development (targeted interventions). Proportional universal interventions seek to integrate universal interventions with targeted ones, presenting interventions to the whole school or class but with a specific focus on children at risk or experiencing developmental and social difficulties (Hart & Heaver, 2015).

Successful interventions are theory-driven, informed by a developmental, ecological systems approach, culturally relevant, comprehensive across multiple settings; occur at key transitional points; and maximize positive resources (O'Dougherty et al., 2013). In a qualitative review of systemic resilience Ungar (2018) concludes that systemic resilience occurs as a result of a sequence of multisystemic, interdependent interactions through which actors, whether individuals or systems, secure the resources required for sustainability in stressed environments. Resilience enhancing systems are those that are open, dynamic, and complex; promote connectivity; demonstrate experimentation and learning; and include diversity and participation. In a review of international studies of school-based resilience interventions for 12- to 18-year-olds, Hart and Heaver (2013) reported that effectiveness (prevention and reduction in emotional and behavior difficulties) resulted from teaching problem-solving skills, building relationships, and working at multiple system levels (individual, home, school, community). In the case of young people with complex needs, more intense and individualized interventions and continuity in the strategies employed to help children in both school and home contexts were found to predict better child development and academic outcomes.

One of the key components of many school-based interventions is the direct instruction in resilience skills. Rutter (2015) argues that resilience is not a quality that can be taught or measured since it is an interactive process that can only be identified as a response to adversity. He agrees, however, that children may be provided with experiential learning opportunities that provide them with the competencies that make them better prepared to face adversity and to function optimally despite challenges. Having the tools to deal effectively with manageable stressors strengthens the child's resolve and ability to overcome adversity and keep thriving, a process Rutter (2015) calls "steeling." One of the most effective programs that bolsters resilience is the FRIENDS program (Barrett, Lowry-Webster, & Turner, 1999). The program was developed in Australia with the aim of building resilience and social skills to address anxiety and depression through a whole school cognitive-behavioral therapy

approach. It consists of four age-based programs: Fun Friends (4–7 years), Friends for Life (8–11 years), My Friends Youth (12–15 years), and Adult Resilience (16+ years). Each program includes activities that seek to promote social skills, self-esteem, problem-solving, resilience, emotional regulation, and building healthy relationships. Various large-scale studies, making use of randomized control trials, have reported that FRIENDS have been found to reduce anxiety in school children and increase their self-esteem, particularly in late childhood and early adolescence (Barrett et al., 2006; Bernstein et al., 2005; Lowry-Webster, Barrett, & Dadds, 2001; Stallard et al., 2007). In an randomized control trial carried out with 453 students aged 7 to 11 from three U.S. schools, Bernstein et al. (2005) reported significantly decreased anxiety levels in the FRIENDS group when compared with controls, with the best outcomes found among those who received the version of the intervention that also included a parent training component. Various reviews of studies provide evidence for the effectiveness of school-based, universal interventions like FRIENDS in improving self-confidence and social skills and reducing anxiety and depression among school children (Brunwasser, Gillham, & Kim 2009; Dray et al., 2017; Stockings et al., 2016; Werner-Seidler et al., 2017).

Universal social and emotional learning (SEL) programs have also been found to operate as resilience-enhancing interventions with children from more challenging environments (Durlak et al., 2011; Taylor et al., 2017, Weare & Nind, 2011). Taylor et al's (2017) meta-analyses of SEL programs reported that SEL not only helps to prevent internalizing and externalizing problems but also increases positive social attitudes and prosocial behavior as well as academic achievement. Other SEL reviews, such as those by Wilson and Lipsey (2009), Weare and Nind (2011) and Clarke et al. (2015) found that SEL was particularly effective for students at risk. Wilson and Lipsey's review of the effectiveness of both universal and targeted programs on the prevention of aggressive behaviors concluded that the most effective approaches included both universal and targeted aspects to the interventions. Clarke et al. found that interventions aimed at increasing social and emotional skills and reducing problem behaviors such as violence and substance misuse were particularly effective with children and youth who are most at risk of developing such behaviors. Weare and Nind reported that most universal approaches had a positive impact on the mental health of all children but were particularly effective for children most at risk.

The resilience literature, supported by closely related areas such as SEL and interventions to improve school climate indicate that a whole school, systems approach is one of the most effective ways to promote resilience in educational settings. Such an approach would include the following core components.

- *A skills based, universal resilience curriculum*, including building such competences as healthy relationships, problem-solving, decision-making, growth mindset, and self-determination (Elamé, 2013; Hart & Heaver, 2013; Hutchinson & Dorsett, 2012; National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2015; Porcelli, Ungar, Liebenberg, & Trepanier, 2014; Rutter, 2015). Research suggests that universal programs are more likely to be effective if they are integrated into standard curriculum (rather than presented as additions); are focused, skills-based, and experiential with the active participation of students; and

are embedded with other areas of the curriculum and improve classroom climate (Durlak et al., 2011; Rutter, 2015).

- *Targeted interventions:* Universal programs focused on interventions like SEL may not provide equal access to programs and services, particularly for children facing poverty, abuse, and neglect (Boivin & Hertzmanet, 2012). On their own they may not be as effective for students experiencing difficulties as programs with a targeted component (Weare & Nind, 2011). Proportional universal interventions integrate universal interventions with targeted ones, presenting interventions to the whole school or a single class, but with a specific focus on children at risk or experiencing difficulties, at a scale and intensity proportionate to the level of children's disadvantage (Boivin & Hertzman, 2012). Weare and Nind (2011) suggest universal interventions need to be accompanied by parallel targeted interventions for those with additional needs, while Werner et al. (2017) suggest a staged approach, with universal interventions followed by targeted interventions for students at risk.

- *Early intervention*: Resilience building needs to start at a young age when the child's brain and personality are still developing (Diamond & Lee, 2011). Early interventions, particularly during the early school years, are more likely to be effective than interventions begun later (Durlak et al., 2011; Jones, Greenberg & Crowley, 2015). In a longitudinal study of students coming from low income, multiethnic, and mixed rural/urban communities in the United States, Jones, Greenberg, and Crowley (2015) reported statistically significant associations between social-emotional skills in early years education and important positive outcomes in adulthood related to education, employment, criminal activity, substance use, and mental health.

- *Contextual processes:* Resilience-enhancing classrooms and schools are characterized by caring and supportive teacher–student relationships, supportive and inclusive peer networks, equal access to necessary resources, active and meaningful learner engagement, and positive beliefs and high expectations for all learners, particularly those from marginalized and disadvantaged backgrounds (Cicchetti & Garmezy, 1993; Garmezy et al., 1984; Pianta & Stuhlman, 2004; Rutter, 1998; Ungar, 2018; Werner & Smith, 1992).

- *Multiple systems interventions:* Resilience thrives when multiple social systems interact such as classrooms, schools (as a whole), peer groups, families, communities and cultural practices, with one system supporting and reinforcing processes occurring in other systems (Ungar, 2018). In their review of effective resilience interventions, O'Dougherty, Masten, and Narayan (2013) reported that successful programs are framed within a developmental, ecological systems approach; are culturally relevant; and comprehensive across multiple settings. This means that all influential adults in a child's life have a role to play in developing the child's resilience.

  - Parents are one of the most important systems in the promotion of resilience among school children. School-based programs are more likely to be effective when they are supported by complementary home-based interventions (Downey & Williams, 2010; Luthar, 2006; Weare & Nind, 2011). The active participation of parents not only helps to reinforce the resilience-related competencies being learned at school, but also enables the transfer of these competencies to different contexts such as the home, peer group, and community. Empowering parents to address their own well-being and

resilience, is another important component in a whole-school approach to resilience building (Bryan & Henry, 2012; Weare & Nind, 2011). The school may provide opportunities for parents for their own education and resilience, making accessible culturally sensitive information and resources, links to community services and facilities, and parent-led family learning and personal development courses (Cefai & Cavioni, 2014).

- When teachers' own interpersonal needs are addressed, they are more likely to pay attention to the social and emotional needs of their students and to do so effectively (Beltman, Mansfield, & Price, 2011; Day & Gu, 2010; Johnson & Down, 2013). Cefai and Cavioni (2014) suggest an integrated framework of teacher resilience, underlining teachers' psychological resources such as self-efficacy and agency on the one hand and a caring and supportive context such as collegiality and supportive administration on the other, with these two sets of processes complementing and supporting one another.

Interactions between these elements are critical to effective program delivery that bolsters resilience. A case study follows.

Case Study: *RESCUR Surfing the Waves*

RESCUR Surfing the Waves (Cefai et al., 2015) is a resilience program for early years and primary school children developed to support the education and well-being of marginalized and vulnerable children from ethnic, migrant, and low socioeconomic communities and children with special educational needs or disability. The program consists of an evidence-informed curriculum for children aged 4 to 12 making use of a "taught and caught approach," that is, direct instruction in resilience skills with sufficient program intensity and duration and experiential, skills-based learning, within resilience enhancing contexts at classroom, school, and family levels (Durlak et al., 2011; Weare & Nind, 2011).

Approach. RESCUR Surfing the Waves has been designed as a universal program for all students, but with various activities tailored according to the needs of marginalized and vulnerable children. It consists of skills-based activities based on six major themes, delivered regularly by the classroom teacher as part of the curriculum within a spiral approach, building the key competencies from the early years to the infant and the junior years in the primary school, with increasing complexity at each developmental level. The activities address the diversity of learners, and are presented at basic, intermediate and advanced levels to be adapted according to the developmental level of the learners. In line with the program's proportional universalism perspective, each theme addresses the challenges faced by vulnerable and marginalized children, such as bullying, prejudice, discrimination, isolation, language barriers, difficulty in accessing learning, and exclusion.

The Six Themes

The program covers a range of resilience competencies such as self-awareness, problem-solving, growth mindset, optimism, adaptability, self-determination, empathy, collaboration, and

caring relationships (Elamé, 2013; Hart & Heaver, 2013; Hutchinson & Dorsett, 2012; National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2015; Porcelli, Ungar, Liebenberg, & Trepanier, 2014; Rutter, 2015; Ungar, 2012). These concepts are embedded within six broad themes. The first theme aims to develop the learners' *communication skills*, balancing self-expression and standing up for oneself with listening to and understanding others. The second theme seeks to develop social competencies like making friends, seeking and providing support, enhancing cooperative skills, and engaging in empathic, ethical, and responsible behavior. In the third theme, learners develop positive and optimistic thinking and identify and make use of such qualities as hope, happiness, and humor. In the fourth theme, developing self-determination, learners are supported to develop problem-solving skills, as well as a sense of purpose, agency, and self-advocacy. The fifth theme focuses on developing a positive self-concept while making use of strengths in academic and social engagement. The sixth and final theme develops the competency of turning challenges into opportunities for growth, such as how to deal effectively with adversity, discrimination, rejection, loss, family conflict, bullying, and change.

Pedagogy

RESCUR Surfing the Waves makes use of the SAFE (sequenced, active, focused, explicit) approach (Durlak et al., 2011) in skills development. The activities follow a step-by-step structure, are experiential and interactive, are focused on resilience building as part of the curriculum and have clear learning goals. Pedagogically, the curriculum makes use of a multisensory approach, including mindfulness, storytelling, drama, role play, physical activities, and art and crafts, among others. Among all these techniques, story-telling is one of the most important tools, giving learners the opportunity to gain insight into their own and others' behavior (Hankin, Omer, Elias, & Raviv, 2012). The stories for the younger children are based on animals, focused on the adventures of Sherlock the squirrel (representing diversity) and Zelda the hedgehog (representing disability). The late primary school activities make use of resilience fables and real-life stories, such as the stories of Nelson Mandela, Walt Disney, Steve Jobs, and Malala, among others. Each activity includes a take-home activity where the learners and members of their family complete a related home-based task. To enable the transfer of learning, teachers are encouraged to embed the resilience competencies being taught into other academic subjects and the daily life of the classroom, while providing learners with the opportunity to practice their newly learned skills both in the classroom and outside. At the end of each theme teachers and learners (primary school years only) complete a formative checklist evaluating the development of the respective learning goals and outcomes. The checklist also includes qualitative information on the learners' strengths, needs and targets for improvement.

A Systemic, Ecological Approach

RESCUR Surfing the Waves was developed as a whole school, systemic program, with the curriculum being supported by the entire school community, including the active participation of parents and caregivers (Weare & Nind, 2011). Each classroom activity includes a take-home task, while the Learners' Portfolio serves as a home–school channel of communication. Parents and caregivers are also provided with a Parents' Guide, which describes their role in the program and includes activities they can do with their own children at home on each of

the six themes. The program recommends close collaboration between home and school, including training workshops for parents.

Teachers' education and their own resilience are also a key component of RESCUR Surfing the Waves. Before the start of the implementation, classroom teachers are expected to attend a workshop on how to implement the program. Workshops include training in mindfulness, storytelling, and use of puppets (including processing discussions); organization of practical activities; working with parents; creating a resilience-enhancing classroom climate; dealing with sensitive issues; quality adaptation according to context; use of assessment checklists; completing the implementation index; and finally promoting teachers' own well-being and resilience. The Teachers' Guide includes a chapter on how the teachers may organize the classroom as a caring community built on warm and caring relationships, collaboration, inclusion, meaningful engagement, and participation in decision-making. The teaching of resilience competencies itself is set to impact the teachers' overall practice, with resilience becoming embedded within the classroom climate (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). The program addresses the school staff's own social and emotional needs (Beltman, Mansfield, & Price, 2011; Mansfield et al., 2012), and the Teachers' Guide includes a chapter on how teachers can maintain their own resilience through such strategies as mindfulness, connectedness, collegiality, mentoring, education, and support.

Evaluation

Although RESCUR Surfing the Waves is heavily influenced by the existing research on resilience (evidence-informed), evaluations of the program itself are ongoing. A small-scale pre–post study of the early years program (Milković, 2017) evaluated two themes with 173 children aged three to seven years over a three-month period in Croatia. It reported an improvement in children's resilience skills and behaviors for children both with and without risk factors. Another study of the early years program was carried out in five kindergarten centers in Malta over a one-year period (Cefai et al., 2018). A preintervention–post intervention study in 20 classrooms (97 children; no control groups) showed an improvement in resilience skills, prosocial behavior, and learning engagement, but no significant decrease in internalizing and externalizing problem behaviors. In a series of evaluations of the programme in Portuguese schools, making use of semi-randomised control trial as well as a qualitative design, Simoes et al. (2020) reported an increase in students' social and emotional competence and decrease in social, emotional and behaviour difficulties, particularly in young children, as well as a positive impact on teachers' social and emotional competence and resilience. A study on Greek parents' perspectives, Matsopoulos, Govogiannaki and Griva (2020) found that parents of primary school children exposed to the programme reported an increase in their children's social and emotional competence, with benefits also for the family.

Conclusion

A resilience perspective has brought about a paradigm shift in our understanding of children's healthy development and well-being, moving away from a deficit model of human development to strengths-based, positive development of marginalized and vulnerable children. The

field itself has been undergoing a process of transformation in recent decades through a series of "waves" of research and theory development, from the initial notion of individual invulnerability to systems resilience, and from linear models based on resilience factors to the integration of transactional processes within and between multiple systems. Current research points to a comprehensive, multilayered ecosystems approach to resilience, focusing both on microprocesses such as listening to and including children's own voices in the development, implementation, and evaluation of interventions to the consideration of the contextual, cultural, and political influences of broad ecosystems on positive human development. Such an approach is contributing to the creation of more effective resilience-enhancing systems such as schools, families, and communities, as well as broader social, cultural, and political systems, thus serving as a medium for the promotion of equity, social inclusion, and well-being. Programs that foster changes across all these levels are those most likely to have the greatest impact on children's psychosocial outcomes, although evidence for the effectiveness of such programs is still emerging.

Key Messages

1. Resilience is not about invulnerability but about growth and success in the face of vulnerability, a result of the interaction between the individual and his or her environment.
2. Resilience is more about ecology than individuality. In contrast to the earlier understandings of resilience for the select, invulnerable few, the ecological perspective provides the opportunity for all children to develop resilience given resilience-enhancing, protective social contexts. This perspective avoids the danger of putting the onus of responsibility for change on the individual in place of social structures and support services.
3. Resilience building needs to start early in children's development, with interventions occurring across multiple settings, informed by a developmental, ecological systems approach, and it must be culturally relevant.

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