

Developing Children's Capacities to Cope: The Role of School

Shruti Pokhriyal*, Vinita Bhargava**, & Mani Bhasin Kalra***

* Research scholar, University of Delhi;

**Associate Professor, Department of Human Development and Childhood Studies, Lady Irwin College, University of Delhi;

***Associate Professor, Department of Education, Lady Irwin College, University of Delhi

Abstract

Challenges are as much a part of our lives as are moments of comfort and happiness. Undoubtedly, children today come across multiple stressors in their lives. Neither adults nor children are resistant to hardships. However, they do not always fall flat in a stressful situation. Hence, the role of resilience is important to understand. The paper attempts to look at what is 'resilience', its relevance and how schools can assist in promoting resilience in children. Resilience is not something extraordinary; everyone can show resilience in varying degrees in different situations. It has been commonly defined as the phenomenon of bouncing back from challenging and stressful situations. Resilience is not a trait that an individual has or does not have. Rather, it is an interaction between the individual and his or her environment, in times of stress. Thus, the role played by environment in bringing positive outcomes is worthwhile to understand and consequentially make use of. The paper explores how a school can be a context, providing many protective factors that can foster resilience in a child's life. The role of stakeholders including teachers, peers, parents and the school climate has been elaborated in nurturing skills and abilities that are associated with resilience in children.

Keywords: *Resilience, protective factors, coping, schooling, mental health*

Introduction

Difficult life situations are inevitable. People, including children, are not immune to the outcomes of these stressful situations, some of which are normative, while others are unique. However, how individuals deal with situations can help predict their adjustment in life (Scales, Benson, Leffert, Blith, 2000). Resilience comes from the Latin word '*resilire*', which means to jump back. Therefore, it has often been defined as the ability to bounce back from a challenging situation. In physics, it is linked to elasticity, the ability of a substance to come back to shape after being put through stress (McIntosh & Shaw, 2017). It has been described as the "relative resistance to psycho-social risk

experiences" (Rutter, 1999, p.1). Yeager & Dweck (2012) state that resilience can be called as an attributional, emotional or behavioral response to a challenge that is positive for development. Some positive responses could include trying harder, trying a different strategy or an effective conflict resolution. On the contrary, negative or maladaptive responses to a challenge could include aggression, giving up, cheating and more.

What is common in different definitions of resilience is that people were able to show more success than what was expected from them, even after facing adversities with more than an average risk (Brooks, 2006). Resilience cannot be developed by an individual at risk alone, it is

not just a trait in a child; it is an ecological phenomenon. It is an interplay between the individual and her/his environment (Condly, 2006;), which happens when the individual tries to gain access to resources to cope with stress (Brooks, 2006; Condly, 2006; Johnson, 2008; Morrison & Allen, 2007; Ungar, Connelly, Liebenberg, Theron, 2017). It has been considered both, a process and an outcome (Johnson, 2008). Resilience is not an attribute that individuals have or do not have, rather, it is a combination of skills present in varying degrees (Alvord & Grados, 2005). A facilitative environment has been associated with positive development under stress, more often than individual characteristics (Panter, Brick, & Eggerman, 2012). Resilience is not uncommon, though there is a lot of variation in how children respond to risks. Some children show early resilience while others may be late bloomers (Masten, 2009).

Based on the studies of children who did not succumb to challenges, personal traits of resilient children have been described. They include social competence, problem solving or resourcefulness, flexibility, autonomy, sense of purpose (Berliner & Benard, 1995; Benard, 1991; Alvord & Grados, 2005). Social competence involves ability to form and maintain positive bonds with others, both adults and peers; being responsive and being able to elicit positive responses from others; being empathic; caring; having effective communication skills and a sense of humor. Problem solving involves ability for critical thinking, planning, finding alternate solutions to problems, reflective thinking and ability to seek help from others when needed. Both of these skills are evident since early years of life (Benard, 1991). A sense of autonomy includes capability for independent action. It also includes an ability to distance oneself psychologically from distressing behavior and being able to take some charge of the situation. A sense of purpose is being hopeful and having a bright sense of future, a belief that things will

work out. It is related to having a sense of autonomy and a sense of coherence in life. The children in these studies faced different risks including alcoholism in family, abuse, neglect, poverty. Also, these traits were lacking in children who were going through a mental illness or psychosocial problem (Benard, 1991).

Resilience has been linked to preventing mental health problems in adolescents like depression, anxiety (Dray et al., 2014). There is a positive correlation between resilience and life satisfaction. Resilience is not fixed and one can learn and develop it without any extraordinary resources (McIntosh & Shaw, 2017; Masten, 2009).

Risk and protective factors

When we say that resilience can be developed, it brings us to look at the role of important stakeholders in the lives of children who can contribute in fostering resilience (Brooks, 2006). Factors that increase an individual's chance of experiencing negative outcomes are called risk factors. On the other hand, ones which lead us towards positive effects or reduce impact of negative factors are called protective factors (Werner, 1990). Schools are one of the primary contexts for the child and can provide both risk and protective factors. Risk factors at school can include negative peer interactions like bullying, peer rejection, being part of a deviant peer group, low school connectedness, poor academic performance including school failure and school dropout, truancy, poor behavior management. On the other hand, protective factors include positive peer and teacher relationship, providing opportunities to students to be recognized for their achievements, norms against violence, a sense of connectedness to school, positive school climate (Masten, 2009; Resnick et al., 1997). Some of these, along with other factors, have been elaborated in the next section. Masten (2009) states that resilience can be promoted in three major ways. The first is reducing exposure to risk factors. For example, schools can work to

reduce violence in the school premises. The other is to increase assets to counter the risks, for example, the school can provide mid-day meals and co-curricular activities. The third one is about promoting or restoring the function of important systems in the child's life, for example, schools can work to enhance the teacher-student relationship and also the parent-child relationship during a crisis like parent's divorce.

Role of schools

The focus in resilience has shifted from looking only at what is problematic to looking at the strengths (Seligman, Csikszentmihalyi, 2000; Masten, 2009). Schools can employ different strategies to build resilience in the school community. This involves nurturing the protective factors associated with promoting resilience in children and reducing the risk factors.

Building social emotional skills

Emotions influence many aspects of life including how well children learn (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011). Meta-analysis of 213 universal, school-based social-emotional learning (SEL) programmes resulted in a statistically significant improvement in socio-emotional skills, behaviour, attitude and academic performance across kindergarten to high school (Durlak et al., 2011). There was a decline in conduct behaviours & internalising problems, and an increase in prosocial behaviors. The outcomes also included positive attitude towards self and others, improvement in the targeted socioemotional skills such as perspective-taking and better academic performance (Durlak et al., 2011). SEL programs have been effective, both within and outside the school, with children who had/did not have early signs of behavioural and/or emotional difficulties and when the school staff conducted the sessions (Payton et al., 2008).

SEL programs have also been associated with a decline in risky behaviours, including the use of substances in adolescents who were at a high risk of substance use initiation (Griffin, Botvin, Nichols, & Doyle, 2003). Some programme characteristics have been associated with greater success. These include use of well-planned activities, eliciting children's voices, appropriate time for skill development, clearly expressed learning goals and focus on specific social emotional skills than positive development in general. These practices have been named as SAFE (Sequenced, Active, Focused and Explicit) in brief (Durlak et al., 2011; Payton et al., 2008). When these skills are delivered by individuals in the immediate context of the child or by those who can monitor child's progress, the results are more favourable (Brooks, 2006). The use of a separate curriculum for socioemotional also needs has been emphasised.

Fostering teacher-student relationship

Teaching strategies are more than learning tools. Roorda, Koomen, Split, & Oort, (2011) found that teacher-student relationships, which were positive in nature, were linked to increased student engagement and achievement. The results were contrary for negative teacher-student relationships. Bond et al. (2007) found a statistically significant relationship between a combination of school and social connectedness with lowered mental health problems, risky behaviours (substance abuse) and better educational involvement. Review of an eight-year longitudinal study in Australia looked at the concept of resilience in the lives of children (Johnson, 2008). The researcher emphasised the value of 'little' and 'ordinary' things done by teachers for children. These involved knowing children well, meeting with them regularly, hearing them, helping them grasp a concept, encouraging them to deal with challenges and taking action when students needed their help, for example, in the incidents of bullying.

Morrison & Allen (2007) highlighted that a teacher in a classroom has many opportunities to cash on the protective factors. Strategies such as the use of experiential learning methods, appropriately challenging activities and giving a role to each child in the class could help give a sense of purpose, autonomy and self-worth. Intrinsic motivation could be nurtured by encouraging children to build on their interests and by acknowledging children's efforts. Communicating high expectations to student would also help in developing motivation and a positive self-concept in academics.

Enabling positive peer relationships

Peer relationships have been identified as pivotal in the development of resilience in children in different settings (Benard, 1991). They are a source of companionship, love, support, self-esteem (Benard, 1991). They help in distancing children from distress in home and have been found to have a greater impact on the school performance of children from divorced rather than intact families (Wang, Haertel, & Walberg, 1998). They have also been significant in influencing their group member's academic competence and attitude towards school. When peers valued high achievement, children spent more time on school tasks, completed more homework and were regular (Wang et al., 1998). Thus, the children who are at risk of school failure should be given more opportunities to interact with peers who have high achievement motivation and positive attitude towards school (Wang et al., 1998).

Regarding peer relationships, Morrison & Allen (2007) highlight the importance of letting children work in groups and enabling participation by all members. Children may join in to share their strengths and weaknesses, interests, solve problems or brainstorm about classroom rules. These groups would help in engaging students, develop social skills and respect for individual differences, building a positive classroom environment and reducing

peer rejection. On one hand, positive peer relationships can be a source of companionship, but, on the other, negative peer relationship like bullying can also be a source of great distress for children. Thus, schools can design and implement programs that address the problem of bullying. Some of the programme components associated with a decrease in bullying include long duration, intensive programs with firm disciplinary methods, increased playground supervision, anti-bullying policy, meetings and training for parents (Pearce et al., as cited in Beadle & Smith, 2014).

Partnering with parents

Supportive relationships help provide a sense of belongingness, trust, love to children, be it with parents, teachers or peers in times of stress (Ungar, Brown, Liebenberg, Cheung & Levine, 2008). Characteristics of parents that promote resilience include creating a structured family environment, having high expectations from children and letting children participate in family decisions (Wang et al., 1998). Parent involvement helps increase children's commitment to school and children with involved parents are more likely to adjust well in school and enroll for higher education (Learning First Alliance, 2001, Cahill et al., 2014). Researchers have found that those educational interventions that target both parents and students than only students are more effective (Wang et al., 1998).

Ferguson et al. (2008) reviewed thirty-one studies about parent involvement, based in different settings (geographically, culturally, in schools and outside), across different grades. The study described ways of enhancing parent involvement in school. One was creating a welcoming environment, where the belief that all families have the potential to contribute towards their child's education in meaningful ways would play an important role. Another was demystifying misconceptions between parents and teachers for each other, which may be leading to mistrust between them. For example,

parents may have a misconception that schools do not want inputs from them. Yet another way out could be creating a structure and identifying processes to involve parents than occasional or scattered involvement (Ferugson, 2008). Home visits, parent workshops and sending newsletters to parents to reinforce their learning could also be channels to connect with parents (Catalano et al., 2003). What is important is that parents are involved in children's learning rather than the narrow focus on increasing parental contact with school (Goodall, 2013).

Having high expectations

A relationship where the child feels that s/he is capable helps him develop resilient traits of self-esteem, optimism, self-efficacy (Benard, 1995). Having high expectations and providing children necessary support to meet those expectations helps in achieving academic success and lowers rates of problem behaviours like drug abuse, delinquent behavior, teen pregnancy (Rutter as cited in Benard, 1995).

Suggestions for communicating high expectations in schools include positive relationships with adults who communicate a belief that children can achieve, a curriculum which is diverse and appropriately challenging, catering to different learning styles and multiple intelligences. Another step that can be taken is involving children in problem-solving and reflection, showing interest in child's performance, and communicating feedback to the child in a constructive manner (Benard, 1995; Brooks, 2006). Schools with high expectations have been found to help in reducing the number of children with academic failure and increasing those who would join college subsequently (Benard, 1991).

Cefai (2007) selected primary classrooms (grade 2, 3 and 4) in three schools, based on three components of educational resilience (prosocial behavior, problem solving, educational engagement). The researcher focused on understanding classroom processes in these

schools. One important finding was that the teachers believed in each child's potential to succeed, depending on his or her ability, and communicated the same to them. The children here were found to take difficulties as a challenge and win over it with the motivation of the teachers.

Providing opportunities to participate

Expectations also lead to individuals being considered worthy of responsibilities (Benard, 1995; Brooks, 2006). When given opportunity to voice their opinions or participate in decision-making, it is a rewarding feeling and absence of the same can make one feel alienated (Benard, 1991).

What participation has to offer can be only understood when one experiences it through structured or informal activities in school (Learning First Alliance, 2001). This could be through play, group work in the classroom, class meetings organised by children, older students being buddies for the younger ones, and also community service projects (LFA, 2005). Whole school activities like clubs, sports programmes, art, music, drama bring together different students, foster a sense of community and can increase school connectedness (Morrison & Allen, 2007). Clear rules, consistent implementation and rewards for appropriate behaviours have been found to be helpful at the classroom and whole school level (Morrison & Allen (2007). On the contrary, alienation has been linked to risk factors like alcohol use, delinquency, failure in school, depression (Benard, 1991).

Enhancing resilience of school staff

For schools to be effective in helping children they need to help the educators and school staff to function optimally (Brooks, 2006). Teachers, who themselves felt burnt out, perceived themselves as less influential in bringing any change in lives of children, and used more control over students (Pierce & Molly, as cited in Brooks, 2006). Therefore, some ways to build

resilience in the school staff could be to acknowledge and reward them for their efforts, communicating high expectations to them, peer coaching and professional development (Brooks, 2006).

Conclusion

Today, stress is not unknown to children and is rather a buzzword in adolescence and youth. With stressful situations becoming common, children should be ready to cope with them. Resilience is just a trait that a child is born with; it is influenced by the environment and can be

developed. With children spending a significant time of their day in school, it becomes an important space to promote resilience. The paper has looked at how protective factors in a school can be cashed on to benefit students and their families. The role of caring relationships, positive school climate including a need for relevant and engaging curriculum, opportunities for taking up responsibility, and participation have been explored and analysed. In all these efforts, the participation of parents and the larger community has an equally important role.

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