



Back to the Future: the 3 R's for Effective Schooling and Resilience During the Transition to Secondary School

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1. Introduction

This research set out to explore the factors and mechanisms that contribute to educational resilience during the transition from primary to secondary school (year 6-7). It examined students' perceptions and management of their experiences and the meaning they make of resilience as they negotiated the everyday challenges encountered at school. This paper draws upon literature and findings of this longitudinal Australian research that purposefully selected and tracked sixteen year 6 students, nine female and six males, aged 11-13, at three significant points during Year 6 – 7 (end of Year 6, beginning of Year 7 and end of Year 7). The research used three key methods to generate the student data: multi-task interviews, comprising of open ended questions, a card sorting task and self nominated scenarios (Longaretti, 1999); journal entries; and, open ended questionnaires, which allowed for lengthy, descriptive responses.

Student responses were then collated and analysed using qualitative techniques. These methods provided opportunities to collect and examine young people's stories of their schooling experiences in order to analyse how students' perceived and understood them in relation to educational resilience.

2. A brief overview of the literature

The quest for quality education in Australian schools is a continual mission for educational authorities. In Australia, reform has been particularly active in the Middle Years of Schooling (Years 5-8), a stage commonly identified as 'tricky' and somewhat problematic for educators and adolescent students alike. This is primarily ascribed to the accumulation of developmental challenges facing young people, which can place students at risk of disengagement and underachievement (Barratt, 1998; MYRAD, 2002). This period is regarded as one of the most difficult in students' educational careers, and success in navigating it can affect not only their academic performance, but their general sense of wellbeing and mental health (Hargreaves & Earl, 1993; Galton, Gray & Ruddock, 2003). With this acknowledgement and understanding educational reform, in Australia, has constantly been about meeting the needs of all students and is a serious effort at providing relevant and meaningful education for young people.

2.1 School reform efforts

How to achieve effective education for young people in the Middle Years of Schooling however, is a contentious matter. For instance, critics have argued that emphasis on young people's social emotional developmental 'needs' has been at the expense of academic rigour and that greater emphasis is better placed on performativity – i.e. student outcomes, achievement and school performance (State of Victoria, DEECD, 2007-2009), as it is currently in Victorian schools. Others contest that efforts go towards maintaining learner centred pedagogy and supportive environments associated with developmentally responsive education (Barratt, 1998; Lingard, 2006). Such tensions place increasing pressure on schools and education systems to change.

Whilst different reform strategies, nationally and internationally, suggests our knowledge about young people's characteristics and needs in learning has markedly increased over time, it also suggests that these are not sufficiently translated in practice or manifested in curriculum and pedagogical approaches (Anfara, 2004; Hattam & Prosser, 2008). Despite efforts to 'change' and 'restructure' schools, current research is clear: many students in primary and secondary schools are still disengaged (MYRAD 2002; Luke, Elkins, Weir, Land, Carrington, Dole, Pendergast, et al., 2003) and achieving below their potential. This remains a critical issue for young people and educators in the Middle Years of Schooling (Lingard, Martino, Mills & Bahr, 2002). The need to consider educational provision through an alternative lens thus becomes pressing.

Reporting on a recent Australian study, this paper proposes a resilience framework – a philosophy strengthened by relationships to transform education in the hope of contributing to the education and wellbeing of young people. It suggests that by going back to what is core and central to teaching and learning, i.e. educative relationships, we can move forward; and provide effective curriculum, pedagogy and attain positive sustainable outcomes for students. Using a resilience framework allows for a different perspective on young people and their schooling as it enables inquiry into the notion of 'at risk' in a contextually meaningful way.



2.2 Defining and applying the construct resilience

In contemporary (Western) resilience research, young people described to be 'at risk' endure and overcome critical adversity such as poverty, famine or war (Werner, Bierman & French, 1971; Werner & Smith, 1977; 1982) in their lives. Within the psychological discourse, resilience is typically understood as good outcomes despite serious threats to wellbeing (Luthar 2003), as 'health despite adversity' (Masten, 2001). In the school context, resilience is generally defined as academic success despite adverse environmental conditions (Waxman, Gray & Padron, 2003), that is, academic success in the presence of adversity. Most often, these studies look at academic grades as signs of success. However, for meaningful application this definition is inadequate. Firstly, it does not account for all young people as not all students experience extreme adversity nor are they considered to be at 'high risk'. This is problematic because individuals who are able to cope and adapt without the experience of significant adversity would generally not be included in studies of resilience as traditionally defined. Understanding adversity and resilience in its context thus becomes critical.

Secondly, the conventional definition of resilience places emphasis on a young person's capacities, which has potential to invoke a deficit view of the individual via the misguided notion that resilience resides within the individual. Ungar (2005) suggests that attention must also be given to the provision of resources for young people in wider social systems such as schools and communities; he posits that access to and provision of contextually meaningful resources is also key to young people navigating their way to wellbeing. Following this theory, individual capacity, whilst important is not the only key element for resilience. This is a major consideration for application of resilience in the school context.

Taking a broader perspective my study aimed to reconceptualise resilience—capturing the social meaning of resilience from the perspectives of those it serves within the school setting – the students and teachers. To achieve this it examined the everyday challenges students' encountered at school, and the provision of resources within the school system. Moving beyond the traditional medical and psychological perspective of resilience unlocked opportunities to discover from an educational view the underlying processes of adaptation at work in young people.

3. Key findings of this research

The students held some concerns and made useful suggestions about their schooling and understanding of the mechanisms at play that contributed to their educational resilience during the transition from primary to secondary school.

3.1 Educational resilience: 'Being and doing well' at school

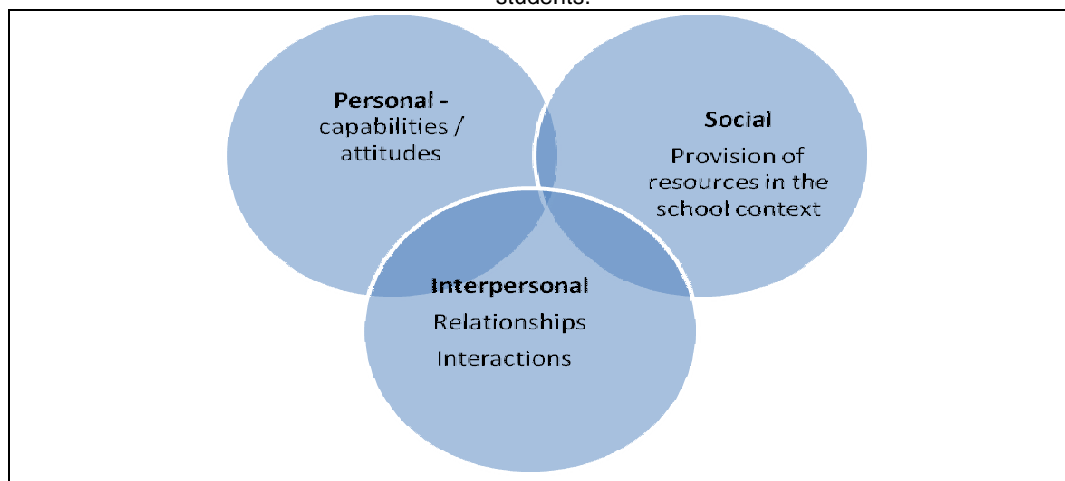
Overall, students' commonly described resilience as being and doing well, which corresponded to their view of success at school. Being well referred to being socially accepted, 'being happy', and 'getting along with others'; doing well generally referred to coping at school and included 'not falling behind in school work' and 'getting good grades'. For two male students, it also meant 'getting into the band' and 'making it on the football team'. For these students, school success and resilience encompassed more than just high grades.

3.2 Key resources for educational resilience

Examination of the student data revealed that resilience involved the interplay of personal, interpersonal and social resources (Figure 1). These categories and resources align with those typically identified in resilience studies as internal and external protective factors (e.g. Werner, 1990); in this study they were considered interconnected, informing and influencing each other. For example, students' interactions with others draw on an individual's capabilities and are influenced by the classroom and school environment. Identifying these resources and understanding how they are utilised by young people at school is imperative for coming to know what moves or impedes students as they negotiate everyday difficulties and, better comprehending the dynamic nature of resilience within the school context. This knowledge creates a springboard for effective school change.



Figure 1: Educational resilience: The interplay of personal, interpersonal and broader social resources as identified by students.



3.3 The 3 R's: Relationships, Relevance and Rigour

Students reported several factors that were important for educational resilience. From these, three core elements, critical for being and doing well emerge from the data. Characterised as *the three R's: Relationships, Rigour and Relevance* these elements link directly to classroom practice and reflect characteristics of effective teaching and learning as espoused in the middle years literature (Barratt, 1998; Cumming, 1998; State of Victoria, PoLT, 2006; Lingard, 2007).

3.4 Relationships

Students believed that their interactions and positive relationships with peers and their teachers were essential to their resilience and success at school. This was a strong recurring theme in the data with students emphasising the importance of their friendships for coping, for their sense of identity and for an overall positive experience at school. For example, Denise in Year 7 viewed friends as being most important at school stating, *"Without friends life is hard. Being with your friends is so important. They are...dependable"*.

Students repeatedly identified social support from friends to be one of the most important resources available to them in managing difficulties and every day challenges of school life. Social support from peers included having friends, engaging in friendships, being accepted (by peers) and mutual support, trust and care. Negotiating relationships is complex and success for students in this domain required the use and integration of personal, interpersonal and social resources as illustrated in Figure 1.

Conversely, the data revealed that students lacked trust in their teachers and reported to mostly never 'go to teachers for help' with school work or social emotional issues in years 6 and 7. Recurrently, students did not esteem teachers to be very supportive in the classroom and viewed 'talking to a teacher' and 'asking for help' as unhelpful. Those students who did report to sometimes talk to teachers about a problem at school would only do so when the issue was 'big' or 'serious', or when all other strategies failed them. Students preferred to, ask a friend for help or try working it out alone. The students' reluctance to ask teachers for help was linked to 'not trusting teachers', 'getting into trouble' and 'teachers telling others'.

These findings have direct implications for teaching and learning as relationships are necessary for school success. Studies of adolescent development and motivation for learning (e.g. Roeser, Eccles & Sameroff, 2000; Patrick, Ryan & Kaplan, 2007) for instance, show that a teacher's social emotional support impacts positively on student engagement, learning strategies, help seeking behaviours and level of achievement. In my study young people's accounts demonstrated that their wellbeing was vested in the quality of their relationships and that these relationships were resources they repeatedly utilised. Furthermore, the findings confirm that when students felt supported emotionally by their teacher they were more likely to listen and engage more fully in their academic work, try harder and seek assistance. For example, as expressed by Aldo in year 7, *"If the teacher cares, then you are not angry at them...you can talk...they can teach you some better things"*.



3.5 Relevance and Rigour

Making meaning from their learning experiences and finding relevance to their lives was important to students and influenced whether or not students related to their teachers and stayed 'engaged'. In this research, students reported their learning to be negatively impacted by the teachers' teaching style and pedagogy which reflected teacher centric approaches with increased amount of teacher talk and whole class instruction. Whilst students reported to feel constant pressure to get things right and perform well, they also described a lack of challenging curriculum which impacted their level of engagement.

The most striking finding related to lesson content and supports more recent educational reform researchers (e.g. Carrington, 2006; Hattam & Prosser, 2008) who argue for the need for purpose and relevance in the curriculum. In year 6 and early Year 7 expectations for the new curriculum were high, however by the end of Year 7 students reported school work to be 'boring', repetitive of year 6 and mostly teacher driven, (i.e. lack of opportunity to negotiate learning). Of the sixteen students, only one reported to be challenged at school in year 7. Elena described 'learning new things' and teachers setting tasks that were 'new and interesting' and 'doing harder work'. As a result Elena reported to feel she was broadening her knowledge and respected her teachers who 'pushed you but not too hard'. Nonetheless, the majority of year 7 students in this study agreed that the amount of homework, rather than the work itself to be the biggest challenge at secondary school.

Overwhelmingly, the student data reveals that students want for a curriculum that: reflects their interests; integrates information technology; reflects student centred teaching and learning strategies; and provides school work that is challenging, i.e. school work that *'makes us learn... a little bit harder than what we already know so you learn it'* (Elena).

4. Conclusion

This research gave voice to young people. Their accounts express and draw attention to the everyday conditions that can be improved to foster positive outcomes at school. These included a need for positive connections, a sense of belonging and meaningful and engaging pedagogy and curriculum. These elements are central to the core mission of schools. Just as resilience researcher Ann Masten (2001) argues that resilience lies in the 'power of ordinary magic' (i.e. the natural functions of human adaptation systems), this paper argues that perhaps the key to school reform lies in the 'ordinary' existing resources within the school system and that by going back to basics, in this case, the three R's – *Relationships, Relevance and Rigour* within a resilience framework, schools can move forward. Listening to and actioning what students and teachers view as important for success and wellbeing is helpful in providing appropriate resources and bringing together the school community for effective change. What's needed is a commitment to building educative relationships, where mutual respect and relational processes are embedded in curriculum and pedagogy, and central to schooling; for this can be the catalyst behind meaningful reform – effecting a positive future for the education of our young people.

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