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‘Ordinary magic’ needs ordinary magicians: The power and practice of positive relationships for building youth resilience and wellbeing

Abstract

Resilience has been defined as the *“ordinary magic”* of many children and adolescents overcoming daunting social circumstances or traumatic life events. (Masten, 2001). Although certain personal characteristics are protective, children experiencing adversity do not pull themselves up by their own bootstraps. The ‘resilient child’ is invariably embedded in a supportive social milieu somewhere in their lives, preferably early. The ‘magicians’ are those people - and institutions - who believe that every child is valuable, and have high expectations of them, who offer consistent and supportive alliance, warm emotional responses and who model and teach the practice of healthy relationships and relational values.

Children are increasingly exposed to a range of adversities that impact negatively on their mental health and psycho-social functioning. This paper explores the ecology of wellbeing and how positive social connectedness is a critical component not only of resilience itself, but also as a facilitator of other protective factors.

Although families and communities are central players, our focus here is on what schools might do to mediate outcomes for young people and enhance their resilience. This means paying attention to the social dimensions of the learning environment. It includes creating safe, supportive and empowering cultures, using strengths-based approaches, building social capital, increasing connectedness and belonging, teaching intra and interpersonal competencies and giving students opportunities to both demonstrate these and help others. We illustrate some of these aspects of social resilience in a project with young Aboriginal women in Australia.

Keywords:
resilience, wellbeing, relationships, ecological models, belonging, schools, children, Circle Solutions, the ASPIRE principles.

Adversities for children and young people

No life is without challenges, but some individuals live with multiple chronic adversities - poverty, community violence, family conflict, racism, abuse and neglect amongst them. Although singular hardships or trauma can knock anyone back and we all differ in the ability and speed of recovery, it is the continuous, complex and interactive range of family and social distress that embeds high risk for negative outcomes (Ferguson & Horwood, 2003). When exposed to the multiple stressors of poverty, for instance, children are less likely to do well in school, more likely to have challenging behaviours, and in later life have more problems in relationships both at home and at work (Fell & Hewstone, 2015) Children may be more at risk now than ever given the increased levels of family dysfunction and economic

hardship many of them face (Gabarino, 1995; Roffey, 2016). This is evidenced by the increasing numbers of young people across the Western world presenting with mental health concerns. The UK charity Young Minds estimates that three children in every class now have a mental health difficulty (Young Minds, 2015). In the 2016 Mission Australia survey of nearly 22,000 15-19 year olds, mental health came third in their issues of concern, after substance abuse and discrimination. These concerns have doubled since 2011 (Mission Australia, 2016). Youth.gov in the United States uses a wide range of statistical evidence up to 2010 to estimate that one in every four to five youth in the general population meet criteria for a mental disorder associated with severe role impairment and/or distress. This figure is much higher for those who are not white or wealthy. Despite Denmark often being cited as one of the happiest countries in the world, mental health concerns are also rising, especially for young women and those from low socio-economic backgrounds (Due, 2016). The implications for the future health and wellbeing of society are not good.

There are two interrelated ways in which this scenario may be addressed - the first is to reduce the risk factors for the next generation, a measure that will take both political will and economic support - and the second is to enhance protective factors that boost resilience and promote more positive psycho-social outcomes. Both are important, but the remit of this paper focuses on the latter.

Defining and researching resilience

With the increasing influence of positive psychology there has been a shift in focus from studying the impact of adverse circumstances on child development to exploring what enables them to thrive despite these difficulties.

Resilience is not, however, a straightforward concept. Although the general definition is the speed and extent at which someone - or a community - 'bounces back', this assumes that the hardship is an experience or setback rather than a permanent state of affairs. When risks to wellbeing are chronic and on-going, resilience may need to be thought about differently. What do children and young people need so that they can deal with chronic adversity in ways that promote a positive sense of self, good psycho-social functioning and effective problem-solving? Luthar & Zelazo (2003) refer to this as 'positive adaptation'.

Resilience is also a multi-dimensional construct (Luthar, Doernberger, & Zigler, 1993). It is possible to be more resilient in some circumstances and less so in others. Children, for instance, may be resilient in a learning situation and recover quickly from failure - but not so in a social milieu where they have been bullied.

Research findings over several decades, including some seminal longitudinal studies (e.g. Rutter, 1987; Werner, 2013) have been largely consistent across gender and place. Children need similar conditions to survive and thrive wherever they are. It is not only youngsters from disadvantaged backgrounds that need these conditions for healthy development - it is all children. We do not always know which student is struggling in their lives so providing universal intervention in schools is a rational approach.

Although some protective factors are 'within child', (Werner, 2000) many are to be found within the social milieu in which individuals live and learn. The burgeoning research on epigenetics also indicates that even pre-dispositions can be significantly influenced by environmental conditions, specifically those related to stress (Rutten et al., 2013; Champagne, 2010).

Personal factors in resilience

"Resilience is a characteristic that emerges out of the systemic interdependence of children with their families, communities and schools." (Doll, 2013, p. 400).

Although resilience is not an innate feature of some people's personalities (Public Health England, 2014) some predispositions and qualities are seen as protective. The most pertinent of these are a level of intelligence and an easy-going temperament.

Intelligence enables people to have some understanding of what is happening to them and to make positive choices about responding when alternatives are presented. But levels of intelligence (as measured by an IQ score) are also linked to circumstances. Sameroff, Seifer, Barocas, Zax and Greenspan (1987) found that high-risk children were 24 times as likely to have an IQ below 85 as were low-risk children. They compared verbal IQ with number of risk factors experienced and found a significant drop when three or more were present. The more risk factors, the lower the verbal IQ score.

Intelligence itself is not always protective and can in fact mask need. Children may choose not to externalise their distress in negative behaviours and therefore appear to be coping. Internalising the emotional stressors they are experiencing can, however, lead to depression and high levels of anxiety (Luthar et al., 1993).

An innate intelligence and easy nature may facilitate one of the most significant factors in resilience - supportive relationships. An easy-going baby who sleeps easily, is not a fussy eater, soothes quickly, is outgoing and cuddly is more likely to elicit a more responsive parenting style that provides the foundation for secure attachment, confidence and self-esteem (Murphy, 1987).

Milgram and Palti (1993), also discuss how high cognitive functioning and an undemanding temperament may serve as the foundation for developing the competency in social skills that resilient children possess - enabling them to establish and maintain close relationships.

Other traits that support resilience include optimism - having a positive view of the self, the world and the future (Mak, Ng, & Wong, 2011), androgyny (Aube, Norcliffe, Craig, & Koestner, 1995; Lam & McBride-Chang, 2007) and persistence (Benard, 2004). A sense of self-determination (Prilleltensky, Nelson, & Perison, 2001) and internal locus of control is not only protective in itself, but also enables individuals to make most use of social support (Lefcourt, Martin, & Saleh, 1984).

Beyond the individual

Clinical literature on resilience in the past has focused largely on these individual personality traits and coping styles. But as already discussed, the development of personal protective factors is often dependent on responses from others. According to the review by Condly (2006) we are now moving away from an individual model of development to one that says we grow to and through connection with others. Positive connections are those characterised by mutual empathy, respect and empowerment. These produce a sense of worth, energy and a desire for more connection. Isolation or domination are the opposite of such relationships.

We begin by showing how hard-wired human beings are for social interaction.

Neurologically primed for connection

Human beings are fundamentally social animals and this is evident from birth. Social connection is essential for optimal development, not only for survival into adulthood but also our ability to flourish and learn. Unless a human carer responds to their baby's attempts to engage them in social interaction, the synapses between brain cells make fewer connections and both social and emotional development and learning are inhibited (Gerhardt, 2006). A baby's smile at six weeks is a survival mechanism as this fosters and rewards response in adults. Empathetic, supportive attachments and relationships are essential to optimize brain development and maturity (Seigel, 2012).

Magnetic resonance imaging shows we are hard-wired to connect with each other in many ways, confirming what psychologists have long known from observational studies - that we are interdependent beings. Mirror neurons for example, enable human observers to unconsciously simulate the sensori-motor movements of others. Brain imaging evidence shows that when witnessing the emotions or sensations experienced by others, some of our brain regions display mirror activation (Carr, Jacoboni, Dubeau, Mazziotta, & Lenzi, 2003).

The human brain is not only primed for connection but also favours pro-social interactions. Although the hormone oxytocin has a primary function in the reproductive system, researchers are increasingly interested in its influence on social behaviour. Although still under investigation there is evidence not only for its essential role in maternal bonding, (Feldman, Weller, Zagoory-Sharon, & Levine, 2007) but also increasing trust (Kosfield, Heinrichs, Zak, Fischbacher, & Fehr, 2005) increasing positive communication (Ditzen et al., 2009) and reducing stress and anxiety making it more possible to take risks in interactions (Heinrichs, Baumgartner, Kirschbaum, & Ehlert, 2003). There appears to be increasing evidence for a positive feedback loop at play in social interactions (Crockford, Deschner, T., Ziegler, T.E., & Wittig, 2014). Positive interactions raise oxytocin levels, which then foster greater warmth and cooperation between people. Many studies (cited in Gallese, Gersbacher, Heyes, Hickok, & Iacoboni, 2011) have demonstrated correlations between markers of neural mirroring and empathy and also with measures of social competence.

What happens in the environment not only changes behaviour but may also alter the structure of our brains and biology. The way others behave towards us may also serve to enable or inhibit genetic pre-dispositions (Huttenlocher, 2002). The quality of our relationships with others matters even more than we imagined.

Feeling you belong

If our biology so clearly primes us for social connection, it is unsurprising that feeling accepted within your social group is a factor for healthy functioning. Baumeister and Leary (1995) argue that it counts as one of our basic human needs along with sustenance and shelter. Identities are formed in our relationship with others - the groups to whom we are affiliated shapes who we are and who we become.

KidsMatter - the Australian early childhood mental health initiative - says in a resource for families (n.d.) that: "*A sense of belonging has been found to help protect children against mental health problems and improve their learning. Children who feel that they belong are happier, more relaxed and have fewer behavioural problems than others."*

A sense of belonging has multiple domains. It can exist within families, both close and

extended, within friendship groups or within workplace or professional networks. Where cultures put a higher value on interdependence rather than autonomy, belonging to the group can override individual considerations (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). This can of course have negative outcomes at a community or societal level with groups vying for dominance and potentially dehumanising those who are not 'one of us' (Roffey, 2013).

Positive membership of groups, whether they be friendship networks, strong families or healthy communities, can provide social and psychological support, protect and aid in times of need and facilitate access to resources (Duncan et al., 2007). There is evidence that feeling that you belong promotes resilience and mental health (Oliver, Collin, Burns, & Nicholas, 2006; Werner & Smith, 2001) and where connections to positive groups are actively fostered this may inhibit violence and anti-social behaviour (Wilson, 2004; Wolfe, Wekerle, & Scott, 1997).

The ecology of connection and resilience

In matters of human behaviour and development there is very little that is linear. Individuals do not have resilience in isolation from their families, communities and schools but these institutions are also embedded in socio-political-cultural contexts. Ungar (2011) asserts that even when interactional processes are investigated, the tendency is to model change mostly on the basis of individual development. He argues, along with Bronfenbrenner (1979, 2005) and the Prilleltensky's (2006), that we need to conceptualise development and resilience within an ecological inter-dependent framework. As a powerful example of this, Upshur (1990) summarised research showing that the level of social support that a pregnant woman or young mother receives has a far-reaching impact on the wellbeing and development of her infant. The stronger her friendship network the less likely she is to have complications at birth (Nuckolls, C., Cassell, J., & Kaplan, B. (1972), babies are more securely attached and young mothers are more responsive verbally and emotionally to their growing child (Crockenberg, 1981). This sensitive mother-child interaction facilitates cognitive development - leading to higher intelligence and the potential for better educational outcomes. In effect, a strong and supportive friendship network for a mother can make a positive difference to a child's long-term future. Sadly, the opposite is also true - the more isolated and unsupported the mother the more at risk her child will be (Coletta,1979).

Relationships in school

If supportive relationships are so critical to resilience, wellbeing and positive psycho-social functioning it makes sense for such relationships to be a central feature of educational experiences. This includes the following interrelated components:

- Inclusive belonging and school connectedness
- Strengths and solutions based approaches
- High levels of social capital across the whole school based in positive social values, such as kindness, trust, respect, fairness and acknowledgement
- High quality teacher-student interactions
- Positive peer relationships
- Social and emotional learning.

"The well-being of students in the school community is promoted through developing connectedness and social capital. Social capital is a term used to describe the particular features of social relationships within a group or community. This includes such things as the

extent of trust between people; whether they have a shared understanding of how they should behave toward, and care for one another." (Catholic Education Office, Melbourne, 2007).

The pathways to wellbeing identified in the Australian scoping study on student wellbeing (Noble, McGrath, Roffey, & Rowling, 2008) mirror this and include: physical and emotional safety, pro-social values, a supportive and caring school community, a strengths-based approach, and social and emotional learning.

School connectedness: Catalano, Haggerty, Oesterle, Fleming, and Hawkins (2004) define school connectedness as two interrelated components. The first is affective, supportive relationships, and the second is commitment – where students perceive themselves as doing well and have an investment in being there. Schools need to provide a learning environment that is not only safe, caring and supportive, but also one where student strengths are identified so each individual can see themselves as progressing and achieving.

To feel they belong at school students need to believe they matter, that their contributions are valued and others care about them (Osterman, 2000; Solomon, Watson, Battistich, Schaps, & Delucchi, 1996). Students who feel more accepted and connected in school are more likely to experience positive academic emotions, including pride, happiness, hope, satisfaction, calmness and relaxation (Lam, Chen, Zhang, & Liang, 2015) and less likely to feel bored, fatigued, anxious, ashamed or hopeless (Pekrun, Goetz, Titz, & Perry, 2002). Students with higher sense of school belonging have also been found to have better psychological health, including less depression, lower rates of delinquency, stronger peer acceptance, fewer incidences of dropping out of school and less use of illicit drugs (Anderman, 2002; Finn, 1989).

It is the more vulnerable young people who most need to feel that they belong and they matter, but often it is those individuals who are most quickly marginalised and excluded, further embedding the cycle of disadvantage. A review of 'zero tolerance policies' by the American Psychological Association (Skiba et al., 2006), found that schools who quickly exclude students not only perpetrate a 'school to prison pipeline' for disadvantaged youth but that both behavioural standards and academic attainment deteriorate throughout the school. This is attributed to reduced trust and relational quality between students and staff.

Congruent with Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory (2005) relationships in schools are bi-directional and nested. A sense of belonging contributes to positive psychological and social factors while psychological and social factors influence a sense of belonging (Roffey, 2008. Willms, 2003).

Strengths and solutions based approaches: Children living with multiple adversities are often challenging in school. They may be positioned as innately 'bad' or as having a 'disorder'. This medical model of difficulty places problems firmly within the child who is expected to change rather than focusing on environmental factors such as the quality of relationships. The deficit language used can also undermine a positive self-concept and embed negativity. The alternative is a strengths and solutions based approach (Roffey, 2011; Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011). Although based in social work or counselling, this has wider application within education. Rather than focusing on problems, conversations explore internal and external assets and desired outcomes. What is going well and what can we draw on to have more of this? A strengths-based orientation underpins the positive youth development (PYD) programs in the United States that aim to support all young people in developing a sense of competence, usefulness, belonging and empowerment (National

Clearinghouse on Families and Youth, 2007).

Social capital is not found in policy documents but in the micro-moments of interaction: the way people talk to and about each other. It is found in greetings, smiles, asking, offering, listening, acknowledging and including. Baker and Dutton (2007) call these 'high quality connections'. When people experience high quality connections physiological functioning, learning and engagement, attachment and commitment all increase, as well as cooperation, collaboration and individual performance.

Social capital determines school culture. It underpins the quality of the 'emotional' climate, and the extent to which this is calm, supportive, purposeful and promotes resilience (Cohen, 2006, 2013) There is evidence that interventions that add to the levels of social capital can help protect against the adverse effects of psychosocial stressors (Phongsavan, Chey, Bauman, Brooks, & Silove, 2006), as well as promote pro-social behaviour and engagement (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). Schools that are less hierarchical and didactic are more likely to involve all members of the school community in respectful interactions. Onyx and Bullen (2000) identified the following factors for measuring social capital in schools: levels of participation in the community, pro-activity in a social context with a sense of personal and collective efficacy, feelings of trust and safety, tolerance of diversity, and feeling part of a team.

Teacher-student interactions: One of the main findings from the Kauai study was the protective factor of having someone who thinks you are worthwhile (Werner & Smith, 1992). As Bronfenbrenner says (2005 p 262): *"In order to develop, a child needs the enduring, irrational involvement of one or more adults in care and joint activity with the child. Somebody has to be crazy about that kid."* That someone is usually a family member but can be a teacher. Using data from a longitudinal study in Australia, Johnson (2008, p. 385) identified the *"ordinary, everyday, relational, 'little things' that teachers do to nurture and promote student resilience at school."* The 'everyday magic' that this entails is surprisingly simple but can have far-reaching outcomes for student wellbeing. The things that students said mattered were teachers listening, helping when they got stuck with work, being positive and encouraging, being an advocate and sticking up for them, taking an interest in them as people such as remembering birthdays, being able to have fun and share a joke, empathise with their difficulties and simply 'being there' - accessible in times of need. The era of high stakes testing is not only raising levels of anxiety for children it is also impacting on teachers building such relationships with their students (Polesel, Dulfer, & Turnbull, 2012). As a focus on wellbeing in schools determines academic outcomes as well as resilience, this appears to be short-sighted educational policy.

Positive peer relationships: A strong theme in resilience research is having reliable peer alliance (Benard, 1992, Zins, Weissberg, Wang, & Walber, 2004: Rubin, Bukowski, Parker, & Bowker, 2008). Feeling accepted and having positive peer interactions can enhance confidence and make it more likely that individuals will behave in ways that further encourage positive interactions with others (Criss, M. M., Pettit, G. S., Bates, J. E., Dodge, K. A., & Lapp, A.L. (2002). Werner and Smith (1992) found that resilient young people were not necessarily popular, but often had a small group of friends who stuck with them over time. Having at least one mutual friendship in childhood is related to lower levels of loneliness, anxiety, and being bullied (Ladd et al., 1996). Friendships at school can therefore provide a buffer for students experiencing difficulties. Unfortunately, the opposite is often true for vulnerable young people who are more likely to be the targets of victimisation and social rejection (Ladd & Troop-Gordon, 2003). Rather than focusing on reactive measures to

bullying we need to explore and develop the factors that contribute to inclusion, friendship and support between young people (Cross, Monks, Campbell, Spears, & Slee, 2011). Individuals and groups need to know how to interact well with others, what is involved in establishing and maintaining friendships, how to operate in a group and what is involved in resolving conflicts. They also need opportunities to practice these skills in a supportive and safe environment and be motivated to do so. This is the role of social and emotional learning.

Social and emotional learning: Humphrey (2013) makes explicit the links between resilience and social and emotional learning (SEL), but maintains a case for this being a universal intervention, so that all children learn the skills of social and emotional competence, not just those deemed to be 'at risk'. We do not always know which individuals are struggling with adversity, and all young people need to learn empathy and positive communication skills both for themselves and in their relationships with others.

The introduction of SEL programs has been increasing internationally with some positive outcomes for students in many dimensions. There is evidence for its effectiveness in improving not only social-emotional skills but also attitudes, behaviour, and academic performance (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011). Implementation factors are however, critical to effective outcomes. This includes congruence with the context in which these skills are being taught (Roffey, 2010; McCarthy & Roffey, 2013), the skills of the facilitators, including their levels of emotional literacy (Dolev & Lesham, 2017) and the principles that underpin the pedagogy (Roffey, 2014).

The following incorporates many of the above factors in promoting resilience within a school and community context. It builds on the research above to offer a framework of practice for the promotion of the relational factors that have the potential to bring about intergenerational change.

Building resilience and connectedness with Aboriginal young women

The Aboriginal Girls Circle (AGC) is a NAPCAN initiative (the National Association for the Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect). The proximal aim is to enhance connectedness and resilience in indigenous girls in high school, increasing their positive engagement with education. The distal aim is intergenerational change, developing young women as leaders and change agents in their communities. It was developed in regional New South Wales and in discussion with community elders.

This AGC is based in the Circle Solutions framework (Roffey, 2014), underpinned by the ASPIRE principles: Agency, Safety, Positivity, Inclusion, Respect and Equality. The girls are invited as they enter year 7 and can stay until Year 10 with other opportunities to enrol. As well as weekly Circles, students have two overnight camps, one in late February and one in May. They take part in paired, small group and whole Circle activities. In February, these are aimed at fostering positive connection, understanding the ASPIRE principles and exploring issues around resilience. In the May camp they discuss a vision for their future and the sort of community they want to live in. They work towards identifying a project that will positively address a specific issue. Between February and May new cohorts have input on cultural awareness and this is enhanced by occasional 'fire circles' where Elders and families are invited.

The girls meet at least once a week in a Circle session. There are three simple guidelines for these sessions. When you are talking, everyone will listen to you so please listen to others;

you do not have to speak if you choose not to; there are no put-downs, only personal positives.

The younger girls work on their community project, and in Years 9 and 10 this translates into service learning, for which they gain a voluntary service accreditation. They also have activities and games aimed at enhancing social and emotional learning. The process is based in the ASPIRE principles, derived from research on positive relationships (eg Roffey, 2012).

Agency: maximising student voice and the right to make their own decisions. Students devise the guidelines for the camps and choose their community project. The aim is for teachers to walk beside the girls to supporting their endeavours. It involves asking good questions rather than telling them what they should do or how. Projects are achieved in small manageable steps with pairs and small groups taking responsibility for completion.

Safety: Everything is voluntary and no-one has to say anything if they choose not to. This has proved critical for this cohort of young women who have valued the right to stay silent. No-one is singled out and there is no individual competition. Participants are expected to collaborate and support each other. This is congruent with indigenous culture that is collective rather than individualist.

Positivity: Conversations and activities are strengths and solution focused. Positive feelings are actively fostered and activities often presented as games so that participants learn social and emotional skills through playing and creativity (Hromek & Roffey 2009). Having fun together also raises oxytocin levels and promotes connectedness.

Inclusion: Participants in the Circle are regularly mixed up so girls interact outside their usual social groups. Everyone works with everyone else and each has the opportunity to contribute. One message is that the Circle is stronger together. This breaks down barriers and enables participants to know each other in different ways. There are clear guidelines on teacher responses to negative behaviours to maximise inclusion.

Respect: This is encapsulated in active listening. When one person is speaking everyone else pays attention though turns are kept short. There are no put-downs, only personal positives. As girls get to know and work with each other this avoids pre-judging. Respect for culture is also high on the agenda.

Equality: As battles for power damage healthy relationships, no one individual may dominate. Each person has rights and responsibilities within and towards the Circle. The facilitator, usually the teacher, participates in activities with the students.

The pilot was evaluated after four years (Dobia et al., 2014; Dobia & Roffey, 2017) when over 50 girls had taken part. The researchers identified significant improvements in confidence, a sense of connection, relational skills and leadership qualities in some, if not all, of the participants. Several girls had changed their aspirations about their own future. Staff had seen positive changes in behaviour, attendance and engagement. Most of the adults involved not only identified changes in the girls but also in themselves. Community leaders also emphasised the importance of the bi-directional processes at play and recommended wider application of the learning. The program is still continuing with increasing numbers of students opting to join each year and is now being rolled out across other communities.

Conclusion

Many decades of empirical research indicate that, to a great extent, resilient adaptation is not an internal trait but rests on good relationships (Luthar & Zelazo, 2003). It is the environmental factors - the social context - in which children are growing and learning that facilitates their psycho-social functioning. Although the importance of early attachment to parents and carers is undisputed, we have seen here that what happens in the wider context, including within school makes a difference for resilience in many inter-related ways. Learning and mental health are aligned and both of these are affected by the quality of relationships across the whole school.

Dominant western culture is individualist rather than collective and therefore does not easily support notions of interdependence. Psychological knowledge, however is increasingly confirmed by neurological research. It is becoming ever clearer that how we interact with each other has far-reaching outcomes for our wellbeing, not only for individuals and families - but also the health of society. We are in effect each other's environments. The everyday words that we say, the ordinary actions we take, can truly be magical.

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