Key Issues Paper No. 3

What is resilience?[1]

The Origins of Resilience Research

Resilience has emerged as a key field of study in the social sciences which seeks to explain how those who experience adverse events can continue to function in a healthy manner. Resilience was originally a ship building term which described the properties of timber in withstanding sudden and severe loads without breaking. Early research on groups of disadvantaged children noted that 'although a certain percentage of high-risk children developed various problems, a greater percentage of children became healthy, competent young adults' (Benard, 1991, p. 2). Thus, the metaphor of resilience to describe these children – who resembled pieces of wood which did not snap after being weighted down – was born.

Heavily influenced by psychological thinking, the study of resilience has traditionally focused on individual outcomes, explaining how groups of 'invincibles', 'invulnerables' or 'survivors' are able to adapt to their circumstances and achieve 'better-than-expected' outcomes. From a definitional perspective, resilience has been characterised as 'the positive pole of the ubiquitous [ever present; pervasive] phenomenon of individual difference in people's responses to stress and adversity' (Rutter, 1987), or, as Johnson and Howard (1999) put it, 'the inherent and nurtured capacity of individuals to deal with life stressors in ways that enable them to lead healthy and fulfilling lives'. As such, individuals may be described as 'resilient' when they adapt to extraordinary circumstances to achieve positive and unexpected outcomes in the face of adversity (Fraser, Galinsky, & Richman, 1999, p. 136).

The push to understand how 'resilient individuals' were able to overcome the odds led researchers to try to identify the 'protective factors' that distinguished those with 'better-than-expected' outcomes from those with 'poor' outcomes. Individual traits or characteristics such as hardiness, grit, self-efficacy, intelligence, emotional regulation, and motivation to succeed were touted as cornerstones of individual resilience; however, the focus on the self, rather than the surrounding environment led to the field becoming 'hyper-individualised', whereby the discourse of resilience increasingly shifted the 'responsibility for human wellbeing away from social organisations to the individual' (Johnson & Down, 2013). As van Breda (2018) contends, 'if the individual is responsible for her or his own wellbeing, the state is free to disregard adverse social systems and dynamics, such as poverty, racism, lack of access to resources and poor-quality education'.

Contemporary Resilience Thinking

Faced with the critique that resilience theory valorised personalised and heroic accounts of 'resilience' without considering the social structures that create or perpetuate adversity (Johnson & Down, 2013; van Breda, 2018), contemporary thinking around resilience instead situates our understanding within broader social systems, through engaging with issues of power and social justice (van Breda, 2018). Johnson et al. (2014) argue that contemporary concepts of resilience acknowledge and take account of the dynamic and complex interactions between individuals and the social systems that impact on their lives. However, in doing so, this discourse

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creates a tension between a person's individual agency, that is the power and autonomy that a person exercises over his or her life (the micro-level personal 'choices' individuals make in life), and the macro-level systems that limit and constrain the range of choices that they can make as individuals, due to social and economic inequalities such as racism, sexism, and discrimination.

Finding the right balance between these micro and macro elements is a major challenge for contemporary research, but as van Breda (2018, p. 10) explains, 'focusing on agency without structure can lead to the deeper oppression of people by unjust social systems, while focusing on structure without agency can lead to people's disempowerment and marginalisation. Rather, both agency and structure, and the interactions between them, are necessary for resilience and social development'.

Understanding Refugee Student Resilience

Contemporary resilience thinking about the experiences of young refugees helps to expand our understanding of resilience as a function of both the individual and broader social processes. By questioning the value judgements and unquestioned assumptions that have underpinned psychologised approaches to human resilience, we reject pathologised and deficit views of students from refugee backgrounds, including the attendant low expectations of their abilities, talents and future outcomes. We argue that there is a need to establish a deeper and richer understanding of their experiences and to locate these experiences in the context of broader structural, institutional and historic forces that shape their daily lives. With this framing, educators can consider school policies and practices which treat students from refugee backgrounds with trust, respect and care rather than promote regulation, control, insecurity and fear (Ungar & Liebenberg, 2013).

Refugee Student Resilience Study Overview

The *Refugee Student Resilience Study* aims to investigate how schools transcend the past life experiences of students from refugee backgrounds by creating the social and educational conditions that enhance resilience. It is focusing on the policies, practices, relationships, and events that shape the schooling experiences of students and promote their resilience. The research will collect data from a selection of case study secondary schools in two Australian states, including regional and metropolitan locations. These schools will contribute to the research with contextual data relating to good practices that enhance resilience for students from refugee backgrounds.

Education is recognised as a key protective factor in facilitating successful settlement and positive lifelong outcomes for young people from refugee backgrounds. Young people from refugee backgrounds have often had disrupted experiences of education prior to displacement and while language acquisition remains important in refugee education in Australia, we argue that schools may have a more holistic role to play in supporting students from refugee backgrounds. Schools are sites in which students from refugee backgrounds may access opportunities for academic, social, emotional and cultural learning and development.

For further information please see www.refugeesatschool.edu.au

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