

Empowering children's identity through a resilience framework¹

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Abstract

Recent developments in school psychology demonstrate a different approach to mental health and prevention related not to the absence of problems or disorders, but rather to the development of social and emotional skills that contribute to positive adaptation and the positive adaptation and the mental well-being person. Concurrently, the increasing need for early identification and addressing of the learning difficulties and psychosocial adaptation of children to school and family make it imperative to have a different approach towards mental health issues than it has been so far. A key role in this approach is the concept of resilience, which refers to the process of positive adaptation of individuals despite the difficult situations they face. The post-truth world necessitates citizenry that can think critically and do so with strong resilience. In this paper, we will be discussing the concept and means of attaining resilience. Resilience in part refers to a dynamic process that indicates the person's ability to maintain and / or regain mental health within a context of challenges or adverse conditions using its available supportive systems, something of critical importance. It includes a developmental pathway that incorporates new, positive and negative elements from everyday life of the individual, and it is a process of healthy development in a system of feedback with the environment that promotes personal, academic and social competence. At the same time throughout the world, young people are exposed to stressful and / or traumatic situations every day, even threatening to build up their own identities, and are identified as risk factors. However, a number of personal protective agents available to individuals can affect the quality of their psychosocial adaptation to difficult, stressful conditions and dangers. Intervention programs that strengthen personal protective agents are implemented in schools and can "shield" the identity of young people

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Resilience and a post-truth world

Recent developments in school psychology highlight the need for a different approach to mental health and prevention related not to the absence of problems or disorders, but rather to the development of social and emotional skills that contribute to positive adaptation and a child's mental well-being (Tolland & Carrigan, 2011). The increasing need for a timely recognition and confrontation of psychosocial adaptation difficulties of students, initially within their schools and families, but also within their broader social environment, renders crucial the development of a different approach regarding issues of psychological health (Masten, 2003). This different approach brings forth the concept of resilience.

The term 'resilience' refers to a dynamic process (Masten, 2014; Yates, Tyrell & Masten, 2014). It includes a developmental process, which incorporates the new, positive and negative experiences from a person's daily life (Luthar & Zelazo, 2003; Rutter, 2012), and it is linked to achieving positive results, despite the challenges, threats and changes (Brooks, 2006; Masten, 2001). It also includes personal judgment (Luthar, Cicchetti & Becker, 2000; Masten, 2001), assessments and evaluations (Everly & Lating, 2013), and the possession of abilities and skills (Alvord & Grados, 2005). The concept of resilience describes the interconnectedness between risk and protective factors, both internal and external, which are enabled in order to face the difficult situations one confronts. It primarily has focused on the healthy growth and positive results in all stages of a person's development, and in all environments (Masten, 2001).

The first studies of resilience had focused on the factors or characteristics that help people surpass difficult situations (Garmezy, 1991. Rutter, 1987). As knowledge regarding this concept grew, it became obvious that although some specific environmental factors might be necessary, they themselves could not suffice in order to fully understand the concept of resilience. The dynamic processes that intervene among people and their environment, but also among them and the end results, are the ones that offer the most information about a person's resilience (Tusaie & Dyer, 2004). Moreover, in the age of post truth and "fake news", a new dimension is added in psychological resilience, and that is the ability of the individual to discern real from fake and how to deal with it.

The puzzle of identity

The multiple factors that help improve resilience could be depicted in the shape of a puzzle. Emphasis should be given on the interconnectedness of all factors and their close relationship that works towards the achievement of a person's resilience (Figure 1). The puzzle of identity consists of four pieces: an individual's personal characteristics, his/her family environment, school environment, and social environment. Those pieces are inseparably connected and together construct a person's image, and are those that define peoples' personalities and their developmental stages.

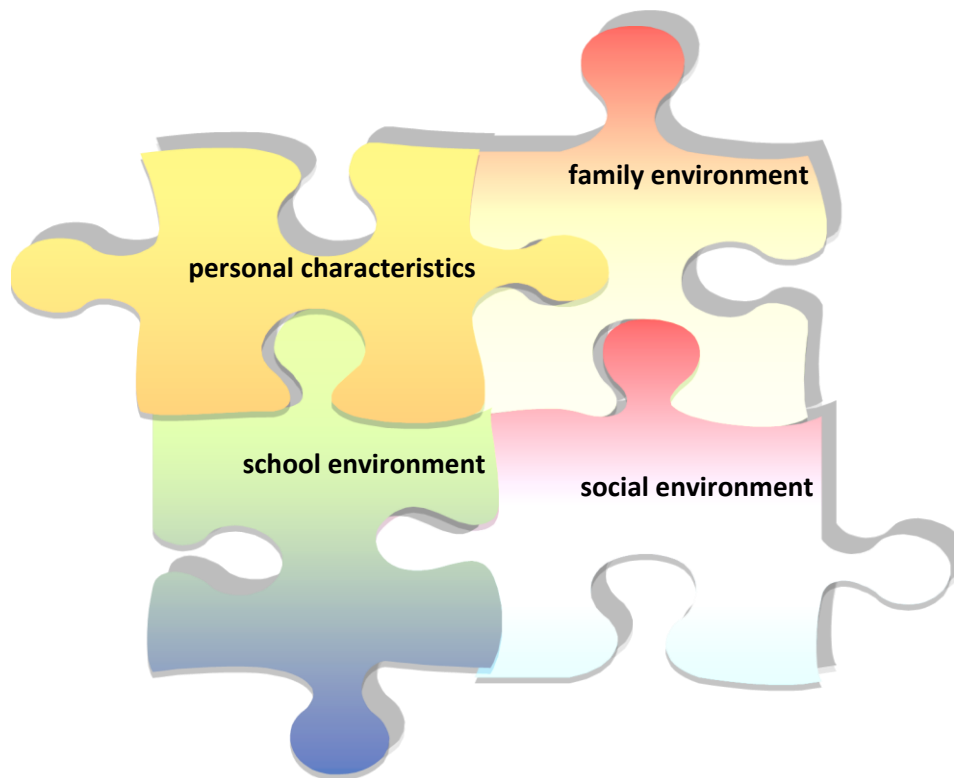


Figure 1. The identity “puzzle” (Papakonstantinou, 2018)

According to the systemic approach, which gives emphasis to the complicated interconnectedness among family, school, and society, resilience can be perceived as the process which improves the educational and psychological prosperity of children and teenagers through the interaction of their personal characteristics and the

support of their family, society and school, in order to surpass difficulties and manage to succeed (Doll & Lyon, 1998).

Risk and protective factors

Studies on resilience have indicated that a number of personal and environmental factors can positively affect the quality of a person's psychosocial adjustment to difficult and anxiety-filled conditions and risk factors (Miller & Daniel, 2007; Yates, Egelang & Sroufe, 2003).

Risk factors refer to internal or external threats that increase a person's susceptibility or sensitivity to negative results (Engle, Castle & Menon, 1996). According to Rutter (1985), risk factors are all stressful events of life, as, for instance, poverty, family issues, experiencing any form of violence, sentimental loss, sickness, unemployment, wars, disasters, or generally any other factor that can increase the probability of a problem being created, or those that maintain existing ones. However, research indicates that simple exposure to risk factors, even to a large number of them, does not necessarily lead to risky behaviours, granted most people can quite successfully face them (Bonanno, Galea, Bucchiarelli & Vlahov, 2007). There are many contemporary studies that examine the importance of protective factors, as well as actions and strategies that are most successful in promoting a positive psychological adaptation and development, thus shifting the focus away from the risk factors (Masten, 2001; Rutter, 2012; Zolkoski & Bullock, 2012).

Protective factors are the internal characteristics of people, or their environmental conditions, which work as dynamic mechanisms that help children and young people resist or offset the risk factors to which they are exposed (Rutter, 2012). The internal characteristics can be cognitive factors (i.e. intelligence, self-efficacy), emotional factors (i.e. interacting with significant others, self-image), behavioural factors (i.e. confronting skills, positive social behaviour). Other internal characteristics like persistence, decisiveness, self-efficacy, creativity and self-knowledge have also been related positively to resilience (Affi & Macmillan, 2011; Waaktaar, Christie, Borge & Turgersen, 2004). Environmental factors can include characteristics of the family (i.e. interaction among its members and their level of support), of school (i.e. the school climate), of a neighborhood (i.e. activities and peer groups) or of society in general (Gorman-Smith & Tolan, 2003). Lastly, some of the most frequently studied external factors have been the positive evaluation by parents and the level of meaningful interaction with them (Vanderbilt-Adriance & Shaw, 2008), the good interpersonal relationships (Davies, Thind, Chandler & Tucker, 2011), and the support of school teachers (Brooks, 2006).

The risk and protective factors are not always the same. They change based on the context of a given situation and lead to different results each time (Walsh, 2003). It is also highly likely that personal protective factors/resources, like confidence or self-efficacy, can induce similar results with other environmental protective factors, such as a positive school experience and social support. Also, the presence of particular personal protective factors can determine the appearance of other environmental protective factors within a short time frame (Werner, 2000). This is considered especially important on occasions where interventions for the strengthening of external protective factors are not possible, thus shifting the focus to personal factors, in order to improve resilience. By doing so, the degree of people's resilience is improved, their protective factors are strengthened and the general result is reinforcing the entire ecosystemic approach (Benzies & Mychasiuk, 2009). The end goal is to balance the risk with the protective factors – you cannot literally remove all the risk factors, but you can equip the children with means of protecting themselves.

From the above we might conclude that resilience can be considered the outcome of emotional prosperity when faced with difficulties, but also a process of adaptation. We could also specify two distinct factors within the process: a) the internal ones, or personal, which create either resilience or vulnerability, and b) the external ones, which can either create adversity or provide support and protection (Hatzichristou, 2011).

Factors are determined as risky or protective based on the nature of the relationship between the support provided and the outcome. For instance, a school that provides strong support to its students could be defined as an external protective factor, however, a school with less support could be considered an external risk factor (Ringeisen, Henderson & Hoagwood, 2003).

Rutter (1987) claimed that vulnerability and protection are two different sides of the same view. Resilience represents the interplay between the risk and protective factors. Young people that demonstrate positive results, despite the high risk factors, are considered resilient (Stewart, Reid & Mangham, 1997). The concept of resilience seems to have an increased international scientific interest regarding the interplay among the internal and external protective factors and the internal and external difficulties that each person faces (Luthar et al., 2000; Masten, 2001; Masten & Powell, 2003; Naglieri & LeBuffe, 2005).

The Youth Resilience Framework (Rew & Horner, 2003) presents briefly but comprehensively the interplay between protective and risk factors. Their theoretical framework led to the conclusion that any change in the equilibrium of those two factors can produce negative or positive changes in peoples' lives. Dyer and McGuinness (1996) have already emphasized the shifting equilibrium between vulnerability and resilience. The resulting balance among the two is determined in

great part by the way each person assesses his own abilities in managing each risk factor.

The results of the above mentioned researches are depicted by the following figure 2 and are demonstrated through an equilibrium scale which holds on the one side the risk factors and the other side the protective factors.

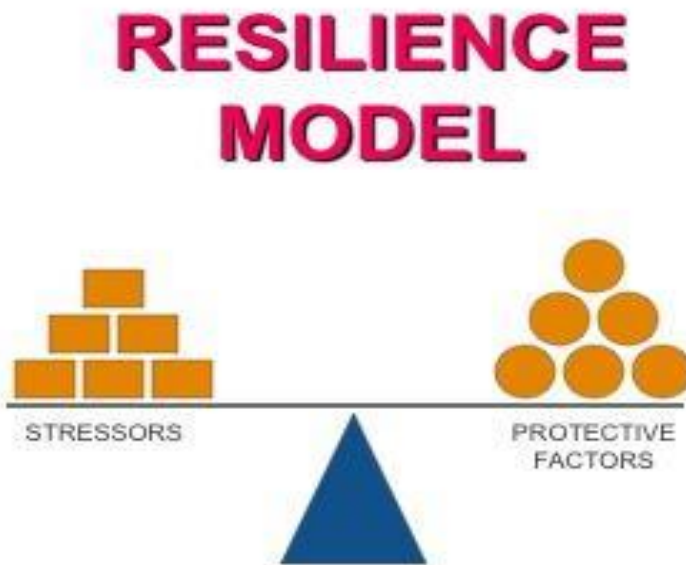


Figure 2. The stressor - protective balance

Maintaining this balance in the children's and teenagers' lives has remained a crucial research topic. Undoubtedly they face many risk factors daily, but we could also search for factors that will help balance the adversity. And since the environmental influences cannot be completely regulated, it is preferred we focus our efforts on reinforcing the personal protective factors that will strengthen their resilience and empower them in a post truth world.

The role of schools

The school environment consists one of the main factors that can assist youth's proper psychosocial development. On the other hand, schools have played a vital role in maintaining students' resilience, granted they interact with them and their problems regarding school achievement and their psychological health on a daily basis (Theron & Donald, 2012). At the same time, they are presented with the

opportunity of reaching a wide range of young students, whom it would otherwise be difficult to gather, and conducting organized efforts in preventing and intervening in issues with the purpose of maintaining psychological health. Furthermore, they can utilize educational practices that will improve or maintain students' achievements, especially those who are more vulnerable (Doll, Jones, Osborn, Dooley & Turner, 2011).

Succeeding in school is one of the most crucial developmental goal that students try to accomplish, while preparing themselves to enter adult life (Miller & Daniel, 2007). The theory of resilience specifies which types of schools can be considered successful in terms of maintaining their pupils' resilience. They are the schools that minimize the risk factors and adversity of their students to the least possible amount, while maximizing their available protective factors through suitable educational interventions, and also take quick action when their pupils show early signs of emotional or social distress (Esquivel, Doll & Oades-Sese, 2011).

Based on results indicating that participation in creative activities and educational success comprise two main protective factors against risk (Margalit, 2003), the importance of schools has been stressed due to the fact that they play a crucial role in forming a proper cognitive, linguistic, emotional, social and ethical development of children, through supporting students with practical interventions (Bower, Carroll & Ashman, 2012). In a study conducted by Bosworth & Earthman (2002), school principals claimed that resilience can be considered the most appropriate framework for planning school projects. Even in the case of vulnerable groups' social integration and psychological support where the success of the programme was partial, resilience framework could lead to more active participation in similar future programmes (Dimakos & Papakonstantinou, 2012, 2018). According to Olsson, Bond, Burns, Vella-Brodrick & Sawyer (2003) interventions should also focus on the development of personal skills and coping resources, before young pupils have to face actual adversity in their lives.

In conclusion, the co-operation of families and schools is sine qua non in making today's children more resilient citizens of tomorrow.

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