

TOWARDS AN OPERATIONAL DEFINITION¹ OF THE RESILIENCE APPROACH

A working synthesis of an Oak-sponsored discussion held in 2007²
facilitated by Neil MacDonald

Definition of resilience

No consensus definition of resilience was achieved, though a number of definitions were offered. However some characteristics of a definition emerged:

- Resilience encompasses growth as well as resistance and coping in the face of adversity
- It is a long-term process, or a life path
- It may need adversity to develop. Hence the phrase “in the face of adversity” rather than “in spite of adversity”
- A resilient child copes with adversity better than he or she should
- Resilience should be seen as a process in interaction with the environment, not an inherent quality in the child
- It needs more than positive qualities or resources – actively using the resources is required
- It may be seen in individuals or in the group environment
- It is never absolute, but varies with circumstances, with time, and from person to person

Among the definitions offered and discussed were:

“The promotion of resilience empowers children, families, communities to do well in the face of adversity.” (Fozzard 2007)

“Capacities to cope with, adapt to, and overcome adversities over time and in various situations” (Gilgun 2007)

“Resilience is the variable and never absolute capacity of a person or of a group – to be built and sustained in a life long process, in interaction with the near and wider environment - to cope, to mature and to grow in the face of adversity”. Vanistendael 2007)

“Resilience is the ability to thrive, mature, and increase competence in the face of adverse circumstances. These circumstances may include biological abnormalities or environmental obstacles. Further, the adverse circumstances may be chronic and consistent or severe and infrequent. To thrive, mature, and increase competence a person must draw upon all of his or her resources: biological, psychological, and environmental (Gordon, 1995).”

“Resilience is a universal capacity which allows a person, group or community to prevent, minimize or overcome the damaging effects of adversity.” (Grotberg 1997)

¹ It was stressed that an “operational definition” was simply to provide a means of recognising a resilience-informed approach in the field and to be able to assist and support partners. It was not the only definition possible or even necessarily the best one.

² Note: In publishing this synthesis, Oak does not intend that this paper represents the final word on child resilience. It simply gives a broad understanding of the concept to those wishing to learn more about it. Further reading on the subject is encouraged!

1. Is there a unique resilience approach?

- 1.1 There is something that can be called a distinct resilience approach³ that differs from other approaches, though it shares elements in common with them. Using resilience as an approach does lead to interventions distinct from other approaches.
- 1.2 There is probably no single resilience approach but rather a family of approaches, which overlap considerably.
- 1.3 Not everything which calls itself resilience work is so, and some work which does not use the label could be considered to be resilience work. Hence we need criteria, which should be a checklist rather than a recipe.

2. What are its minimum attributes?

2.1 A focus on strengths in both prevention and recovery

The shared core of resilience, which most clearly differentiates it from other approaches, is the focus on positives and strengths, while not ignoring risk and pathology. Building on strengths and resources should be done in a way which is consistent with well-being⁴, growth and child rights and takes into account the whole child. It looks towards the future while responding to issues arising from the past. In prevention, it tries to identify why certain groups of “at risk” children are resistant to the problem. In care, it asks why certain groups of children recover better. It aims to identify positives in each child, and his or her environment, and to build on them, through positive reinforcement. This should be seen in terms of the long-term trajectory of growth and life paths, and not just as a “bouncing back”. Resilience considered as a life path must apply to both prevention and recovery. In resilience there is a component of resistance and/or repair, plus a component of growth. The resistance bit has perhaps more to do with prevention, the repair bit with cure. For prevention, programmes with a resilience approach should be able to tap into and/or enhance the self-help and mutual help efforts of children and young people. For recovery, programmatically, a distinction should be made between giving support and providing intervention where giving support is considered to be less intrusive. Support is best provided by families and communities, and interventions by external groups and organizations.

2.2 The child in context

Programmes based on resilience look at the child within his or her context, whatever that might be (street, family, institution, etc). The child always has to be seen in connection with others so we are asking the question “what can we build together?” Who the others are will vary from project to project. It may be several

³ By an approach we mean more than a technique: an approach provides a framework for intervention, which includes tools, practices and attitudes

⁴ We recognize that these involve normative judgements, and depend on who decides what is in the interests of children’s well-being and what time scale should be considered (there may be difficulties of weighing children’s short-term coping strategies against long term growth). It is probably inescapable that such judgements are made. It is probably impossible to provide any generic guidance about how to resolve conflicting interests in this area. It will be at the level of projects that these judgements are taken and that the interests need to be reconciled and weighed sensibly.

of the community workers, peers, community networks, and family⁵. It should also be noted that sexual abuse and exploitation have to be thought about in the context of all the child's other assets and adversities

2.3 Work across multiple domains.

We could recognize a programme as being resilience-based if it adopted this focus on strengths and then worked to support and strengthen the development of this resiliency across a number of domains⁶. The precise labels and contents of these domains vary among different practitioners. However they overlap significantly. They relate to the child's own personal strengths, the supports - emotional and practical - that the child's environment provides, and the child's own skills and competences. It was pointed out that some domains are defined broadly, and others more specifically; and that they need to be translated into concrete practice in a given situation.

2.4 **A minimum set of domains.** Work is unlikely to ever target all of these domains, though a resilience programme would need to work across a sufficient number of domains to be able to respond appropriately to the needs of each case. It was not possible to identify precisely what this minimum is, since so much depends on context. For example, in a war situation access to services and protection are absent, but may be compensated by trusting and loving relationships within the family. Or if home is not a happy place, hopefully school may be. Core factors seem to be safe havens, the existence of attachment figures (commitment of at least one adult) over time, self-efficacy and self-esteem. This might suggest a tentative criterion that a resilience programme would need to be one that works in some of the domains to build the child's own personal strengths, the supports that the child has access to, and the child's skills and competences.

2.5 It proved impossible to reach agreement on minimum domains, or even whether the concept was relevant. Some felt the principles outlined in 2.1, 2.3 and 2.8 in this document were sufficient to identify a programme as using a resilience approach. Others felt that some minimum domains were necessary. It may be useful to distinguish between "domains of resilience" and "domains of living"⁷

- Domains of living may vary considerably in different circumstances
- One domain of living may substitute for another under a domain of resilience
- It is important to move away from a Western focus on the individual.

A strong suggestion towards a minimum of cross-culturally viable domains was:

- Attachment to a significant adult/ other (there was strong assent on this)
- Social networks
- Culturally valued social role (this together with the first was suggested as the core of a cross-cultural measure of resilience)
- Competences
- Finding meaning, positive values

⁵ We need to think through the relation between individual resilience, family resilience, and community resilience.

⁶ The research highlights various areas - Gilligan talks of secure base, friendships, education, talents and interests, positive values, social competences; Gilgun, belonging, independence, mastery, generosity; Vanistendael acceptance, networks, self-esteem, humour, competences, meaning

⁷ Domains of living might include: home life, school life, neighbourhood, work, faith community, spare-time activities

It was also suggested that an indicator of a resilience approach was the existence of lasting legacy of assets or strengths following any intervention

2.6 It is important that the domains are not regarded as a formula, but viewed flexibly for the needs of each particular case. For cross-cultural work it would be important to draw on the work such as the International Resilience Project and to be sensitive to different cultures' views of what a problem is, and what a well-adjusted child is – these may be some of the things in the attic of Vanistendael's Casita! In Bahasa Indonesian for example resilience is rendered as “happiness/well-being” (a desired goal). Another concept related to resilience is the notion of well-being or the state of being and doing well in all aspects.

2.7 **An understanding that the outcomes of adversity are “non-deterministic”.** Many life paths are possible and negative outcomes are not inevitable. A parent who was abused as child does not necessarily go on to abuse their own children

2.8 **Applying the idea in practice**

It is important to recognize that “resilience-thinking” is as much about a mind-set, as a set of actions. There is a strong emphasis on the stance of the practitioner and his/her role with child, family and community:

- Fundamental acceptance of the child, not her or his behaviour
- a caring attitude, empathy and showing emotion

Plus there are a set of stances which are common to rights-based and empowerment approaches – which have in common the idea that the relationship is a “two-way street” of mutual discovery:

- Treating the child with respect as an individual, with respect for the child's reality, agency, perspectives
- A belief that people have a right and, with appropriate support, the capacity to make their own choices
- Listening to the child and assisting them to make their own choices; acting as a catalyst not as a specialist who knows the answer. At the same time we must also be careful to avoid opening up the possibility of “blaming the victim” - for not showing / trying to show resilience
- Child participation, with the child involved in assessing their lives, identifying possible actions, implementing the activities and reflecting on outcomes and when appropriate acting as co-decider with adults
- The community is consulted along with children, seeking out and engaging players in the community and lives of children and mobilizing community resources.
- Protective assets in the child's life and environment are identified and self-help and mutual support groups are enhanced
- Being willing to share power and responsibility
- A careful consideration, throughout the process, of ethics, precisely because the project is dealing with people in extreme adversity.

This is an area where perhaps we need to be mindful of the warning not to attribute too much to the approach and the point that resilience is an approach within which all sorts of theories and practices may find a home.

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