



RISK AND RESILIENCE REVISITED - TEACHERS' NEEDS IN PROMOTING MENTAL HEALTH

IT IS ALL OF OUR RESPONSIBILITY:

The term 'mental health' can foster a range of reactions such as suspicion, prejudice and fear. Some of this is because 'mental health' is so often understood only as a euphemism for 'mental illness'. Thus the term 'mental health' may be off putting to those working with and for young people such as teachers. This would be a mistake as the issue of the mental health of young people is very much tied into the things that most teachers value most highly – the development of young people.

Young people's mental health is everyone's business. To achieve this will require a philosophical change in how we all approach the mental health and psychological well-being of young people. Young people's mental health is an important part of their overall health and well-being. It should be given thought and attention and, when needed, professional help. This emphasis on mental health promotion is a challenging area as it involves a major change in the way most agencies that work with young people will have to work. It will require a shared understanding and vision of what mental health promotion actually is, and what it can deliver – not just for those involved in mental health, but much more broadly.

Schools have a significant influence on the behaviour and development of all young people (Rutter and Smith 1995; Wells, Barlow & Stewart-Brown, 2001). They remain a crucial social institution for the education of young people in preparation for life. But they need to be more involved in a broader educational role fostering healthy social and emotional development of pupils. A child's state of mind and self-image are increasingly acknowledged as influencing his or her willingness and ability to concentrate and learn. Mental health is, then a vital educational, as well as health issue (ippr, 2001). The importance of school as a setting for promoting the mental health of young people has recently been recognised by the English Department for Education and Skills in their guidelines, *Promoting children's mental health within early years and school settings* www.dfes.gov.uk/mentalhealth/.

There is, therefore, a strong case for the reciprocal relationship between schools and mental health: education plays an important role in promoting mental health and good mental health promotes success in the school setting. It is important

not to see the promotion of mental health for young people as something separate or additional to the work that we already do with young people. In schools for example, mental health promotion is best not seen as something tagged onto everything else that's going on in school or simply dealt with as an aspect of the Personal, Social and Health Education curriculum. Rather, it is best to see mental health promotion as central to the life of the school. It is about the school's commitment to the health of young people - it's about *being* a mentally healthy school, not just doing mental health promotion *in* school. Another important point is that young people are our future. Both the positive and negative things that impact on their mental health now will carry on having an impact throughout their lives. So it is important to consider cumulative effect of the things we are doing to promote or demote mental health development in early life - with very young children and their parents, work in primary school and secondary and beyond. However, we need to acknowledge the fact that many young people are already suffering mental health problems and as well as making things better for the future, it is clearly important to try to make things better for young people now.

THE ROLE OF THE TEACHER:

What is clear is that teachers play a vital role in the emotional well-being of their pupils and they can provide a protective environment and enable a young person to be resilient and to reach their potential. This is not about another added project or something extra, this is about becoming aware of what we do on an everyday basis. It is not about doing something more but about doing it with awareness and, if need be, differently. Very often we assume that dealing with mental health is about a specialist activity – something that a mental health professional deals with. This is not the case, schools and teachers can and do provide environments in which young people's mental health can be promoted and can often even provide supportive and facilitating factors for young people who may already be experiencing difficulties.

There are many ways in which teachers can create a positive environment. You can help children relate to others, build their confidence by giving children a chance to talk about experiences and feelings; offer encouragement and praise; acknowledge positive and negative behaviour; and provide consistent and fair expectations with clear consequences for misbehaviour. You can be a role model, by talking about your own feelings, apologise when you are wrong, don't express anger with violence, and use active problem-solving skills. You can respond sensitively to students needs, value the contribution of students from various backgrounds, use teaching methods that reinforce the development of a sense of personal and social responsibility. Very often it is the very simple things that teachers do, listening to pupils, the manner in which teachers speak to their pupils, the interest shown in pupils that makes the difference.

Our relationships can empower or disempower those around us and teachers can play a vital role in developing empowered pupils or disempowering them. It is clear that teachers play an important role in creating an environment that has:

1. caring and supportive relationships,

2. positive and high expectations, and
3. opportunities for meaningful participation.

All of these create the conditions for empowerment (Benard, 2000)

There is no recipe for fostering resilience and empowerment in the classroom. In order for teachers to provide this environment though, they will need to feel empowered, to find their own resilience. Benard (2000) argues that it is not only what we do to tap the young person's resilience makes all the difference but also how we do it. For example, it is not enough to simply institute best-practice strategies such as mentoring, peer helping, cooperative learning, service learning, authentic assessment, multiple intelligences, community service, or parent involvement, etc. While these are all strategies that research has associated with positive learning and developmental outcomes in students (Hilliard, 1991; Noddings, 1992), their success depends on the quality of the relationships surrounding them and ongoing opportunities for participation.

In a resilience-based framework, it is important to discover what staff believe. How do their beliefs about human potential and development help or hinder achieving identified goals? What advice can they gather from research and best practice? How will they know they have tapped the resilience of a student or system? In short, is there an understandable, planful way for change agents to unlock innate strength and measure results? (Benard, 2000).

This is important because a risk focus and a focus on a medical model of understanding mental health has encouraged teachers and other helping professionals to see children and families only through a deficit lens. This “glass-as-half-empty” perspective blocks our vision to see the whole person and hear the “real story”. Wehmiller (1992) warns,

When we don't know each other's stories, we substitute our own myth about who that person is. When we are operating with only a myth, none of that person's truth will ever be known to us, and we will injure them—mostly without ever meaning to (p. 380).

In order for staff to create the nurturing environment that taps innate resilience they must truly believe in youths' innate capacity for transformation and change (Mills, 1995; Lifton, 1993). This will involve a process of reflecting on one's own beliefs and values about young people and their ability to change. The starting point for creating classrooms and schools and programs that tap students' capacities is the deep belief of all staff that every youth is resilient. This means that every teacher and adult must personally grapple with questions like “What tapped my resilience? What occurred in my life that brought out my strength and capacity? How am I connecting this knowledge to what I do in the classroom or in this program?” (Benard, 1996)

Resilience authors (Benard, 1991; 1996; 1998; Felsman, & Vaillant, 1987; Rutter, M. 1984; Werner, 1996; Werner & Smith, 1992) argue that human beings are genetically hardwired to form relationships (social competence), to problem solve (metacognition), to develop a sense of identity (autonomy), and to plan and hope

(a sense of purpose and future). However, even though some individuals can express these capacities in the absence of a facilitative environment, it is clearly the presence of a nurturing climate that draws them forth and encourages their expression. This finding is perhaps the most important and prescriptive for educators. The research shows that, contrary to much popular belief, teachers and schools actually do have the power to tip the scales from risk to resilience.

Werner and Smith (1989) found that among the most frequently encountered positive role models for children, outside their circle of family members, was a favorite teacher. In his book *On Playing A Poor Hand Well*, Mark Katz makes the case for the role a teacher can play in enabling people to overcome the risks and adversities they may face as a young person. Michael White, a Narrative therapist talks about how positive experiences with people such as a teacher can help people rewrite the stories of their lives.

One of the most wonderful things we see now in adulthood is that these children really remember one or two teachers who made the difference. They mourn some of those teachers more than they do their own family members because what went out of their lives was a person who looked beyond outward experience, their behavior, and their oftentimes unkempt appearance, and saw the promise.

(Emmy Werner, coauthor of *Overcoming the Odds: High-Risk Children from Birth to Adulthood*, 1992)

Many people interviewed in resilience research talk about teachers' "quiet availability," "fundamental positive regard," and "simple sustained kindness," such as a touch on the shoulder, a smile, or a greeting (Higgins, 1994, pp. 324-25). Being interested in, actively listening to, and validating the feelings of struggling young people, as well as getting to know their strengths and gifts, conveys the message, "You matter." At the core of caring relationships are positive and high expectations that not only structure and guide behaviour, but also challenge students to perform beyond what they believe they can do. These expectations reflect a deep belief in the student's innate competence and self-righting capacities. A consistent description of turnaround teachers/mentors is that they see the possibility: "They held visions of us that we could not imagine for ourselves" (Delpit, 1996, p. 199).

Perhaps more significant than what [our teachers] taught is what they believed.... They held visions of us that we could imagine for ourselves. And they held those visions even when they themselves were denied entry into the larger white world. They were determined that, despite all odds, we would achieve.

Resilience research points out over and over that transformational power exists not in programmatic approaches per se, but at the deeper level of relationships, beliefs and expectations, and the willingness to share power. In other words, it is how adults do what they do that counts. As Hillard (1991) advises:

to restructure we must first look deeply at the goals that we set for our children and the beliefs that we have about them. Once we are on the

right track there, then we must turn our attention to the delivery systems, as we have begun to do. Cooperative learning is right. Technology access for all is right. Multiculturalism is right. But none of these approaches or strategies will mean anything if the fundamental belief system does not fit the new structures that are being created (p. 36).

Believing in students' resilience requires foremost that adults believe in their own innate capacity to transform and change. Our walk always speaks louder than our talk. So to teach students about their internal power, adults must first see that they have the power—no matter what external stresses they face—to let go of conditioned thinking and access innate capacities for compassion, intuition, self-efficacy, and hope. Only when this belief is in place are adults truly able to create the connections, point out the competence, and invite the contribution that will engage the innate resilience in students

All adult members of the school community should recognise the powerful influence they have as role models since their attitudes and values are continuously demonstrated to students by their actions.

I am the decisive element in the classroom. It is my personal approach that creates the climate. It is my daily mood that makes the weather. As a teacher I possess the tremendous power to make a child's life miserable or joyous. I can be a tool of torture or an instrument of inspiration. I can humiliate or humor, hurt or heal. In all situations it is my response that decides whether a crisis will be escalated or de-escalated, a child humanized or de-humanized.

(Hiam Ginot, 1975 in Mills, 1995)

Working from their own innate resilience and well-being, teachers will more likely engage those qualities in their students. If they can let go of their tight control, be patient, trust the process, be willing to let go of the spiral of struggle teaching may become more effortless or at least more enjoyable. It is important that teachers realise they are making a difference.

TEACHERS NEEDS:

Teachers do not have to add a whole set of techniques or structures to their already large workload to engage students' healthy states of mind. It is important to remember that the teacher's primary job is to teach, not to become a social worker or psychologist as well. The job of a teacher becomes more difficult if given the additional task of becoming a surrogate parent or counsellor. However we also need to acknowledge that the average young person today does not come from a traditional intact family. Because of this, teachers often fill the role of parental surrogates. This can create an undue amount of stress on the teacher, as well as the young person. We have to acknowledge that this is a difficult job. There are many demands and stresses. This is not an easy process and there is no recipe for success or steps that will provide the answers, there are no magical solutions. Having needs for support and development is not about blame or about saying that teachers' lack.

We need to acknowledge that this is a tough job. It is hard working with such big groups of young people and trying to meet so many competing demands. It does not mean you are a failure if you admit that at times being a teacher is hard, tiring, stressful, demanding. Until we can do that we can't ask the right questions about what kind of support we need – we often don't need more training but rather ongoing possibilities for development. In this way mental health promotion of teachers has to go hand in hand with mental health promotion of students.

There are a variety of ways in which schools can offer support to teachers:

Teacher Support.

Just as teachers can create a nurturing classroom climate, administrators can create a school environment that supports teachers' resilience. They can promote caring relationships among colleagues; demonstrate positive beliefs, expectations, and trust; provide ongoing opportunities and time, in small groups, to reflect, dialogue, and make decisions together (McLaughlin & Talbert, 1993).

Staff Development.

Teachers should reflect personally on their beliefs about resilience, and also, as a staff, exchange experiences--both personal and literary--about overcoming the odds. They can read and discuss the research on resilience, including the studies of successful city schools (Polakow, 1994). Reaching a staff consensus about innate resilience is the first step in creating a classroom or school that fosters resilience.

School-Community Collaborations

Fostering the development of the whole child necessitates school, family, and community collaboration. Schools can develop a list of community agencies and match the needs of families with the services they provide. Schools need to ensure that the support resources within the school are co-ordinated and accessible to teachers e.g. Family Liaison Officers, school nurses, Connexions Personal Advisors.

We live in a reactive society and need to look for long-term, permanent solutions rather than rely on the quick fix solutions. In order to do this we need to reflect on ourselves, the demands we face and what we need in order to deal with them. A vital question then becomes: how do you, as a teacher cope with the sometimes difficult realities you face in your classroom? How do you cope the competing demands on you? What personal resources do you need? What support do you need in order to be effective in developing the emotional well-being of those young people you work with?

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