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Perceptions of Resilience in School-Age Children: A Singapore Study

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Abstract

Resilience is a quality that characterizes children who, though exposed to significant stress and adversity in their lives, do not succumb to the school and life failures predicted for them. Recent research (Grotberg, 1995; Hiew & Cormier, 1994) suggests ways that schools and communities can protect children from the threats that confront individuals and families. This paper reports results of an ongoing study on promoting resilience in children in Singapore. Thirty-nine school-age children from a school-age care center were administered a resilience checklist (Child's Perception of Resilience Checklist by the International Resilience Research Project, 1995) and interviewed about their perceptions of resilience. Preliminary findings indicate that children draw from three sources of resilience to help them cope with adversities. The three sources are based upon who and what these children HAVE around them, who these children ARE, and what and how they CAN do certain things for themselves. This study also suggests that an ethnographic approach to data collection can provide meaningful information.

Résumé

La résilience est une qualité qui caractérise les enfants qui, même s'ils sont exposés au stress et à l'adversité dans leur vie, ne succombe pas à des échecs à l'école et dans leur vie. Des recherches récentes (Grotberg, 1995; Hiew & Cormier, 1994) suggèrent des façons avec lesquelles les écoles et les communautés peuvent protéger les enfants des menaces qui les confrontent, eux et leur famille. Ce manuscrit rapporte les résultats d'une étude en cours sur la promotion de la résilience chez des enfants de Singapour. L'administration d'une liste de vérification sur la résilience a été réalisé sur trente-neuf enfants d'âge scolaire d'un service de garde en milieu scolaire (La Liste de Vérification de la Perception des Enfants de leur Résilience a été réalisé par le Projet International de Recherche sur la Résilience, 1995). Des entretiens individuels ont aussi réalisé avec ces enfants afin d'en savoir plus sur leurs perceptions de la résilience. Les résultats préliminaires indiquent que les enfants font appel à trois sources de résilience pour les aider à faire face aux adversités. Les trois sources dépendent de qui et de quoi ces enfants ont autours d'eux, qui ces enfants sont, et quoi et comment ils peuvent se faire certaines choses à eux-mêmes. Cette étude suggère aussi qu'une approche éthologique, pour la collecte des données, peut fournir des informations utiles.

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Resilience is a quality that characterizes children who, though exposed to significant stress and adversity in their lives, do not succumb to the school and life failures predicted for them. Recent research suggests ways that schools and communities can protect children from the threats that confront individuals and families. Over the last five years, research has drawn attention to the concept of resilience in vulnerable children (Gordon & Song, 1994; Grotberg, 1994; Hiew & Cormier, 1994). Though the concept of resilience is not new, defining it is not easy. In addition to a child's genetic make-up and temperament, empirical evidence has identified specific factors such as social, familial, and academic interactions that are critical in the process of developing resilience (Ainsworth, 1989), but there is a lack of understanding regarding the ways in which these factors interact with each other in different contexts. Grotberg (1995) defines resilience as a "universal capacity which allows a person, group or community to prevent, minimize or overcome the damaging effects of adversity" (p. 7).

Parents and children from 22 countries around the world participated in the International Resilience Research Project conducted between September 1993 and August 1996. Data from these families indicated that about one-third of the parents promoted resilience in children up to 12 years of age. Parents play a more significant role in promoting resilience in younger than older children. Resilience develops within a context and it may be true that resilience in younger children is more dependent on adult support. Resilience promotion seems to be related to situations in which helplessness and need are perceived by the child and where supportive help seems feasible. It is less likely to be promoted in situations where there is a perceived threat to authority and where blame and punishment seem more important than understanding or communication.

More specifically, Grotberg (1995) defined three sources of resilience, "I have", "I am", and "I can". "I have" reflects the supports, values, role models, and limits a child has, for example, the child has people around him/her whom he/she trusts and who loves

them, people who show them how to do things correctly and who want them to do things on their own. "I am" includes constructs such as self-esteem, empathy, autonomy, altruism, responsibility, and hope. In the resilience model, "I am" is thought to reflect inner strength. The child here is respectful of him/herself and others and is willing to be responsible for what he/she does. "I can" is considered to reflect interpersonal and problem solving skills. "I can" is thought of in terms of skill mastery, especially in communication, problem solving, and behavioural control. For example, the child can talk to others about things that frighten him/her and can control him/herself when he/she feels like doing something wrong or dangerous.

A resilient child does not need to possess all three resilience domains, but one is usually not enough. For example, a child may feel loved (I have), but if he/she has no inner strength (I am) or social skills (I can), there can be no resilience. A child may be verbal and speak well (I can), but if he/she has no empathy (I am) or does not learn from role models (I have), there is no resilience. Resilience results from a combination of the domains (Grotberg, 1995).

These features of resilience may seem obvious and easy to acquire, but according to Grotberg (1995), many children are not resilient and many parents and other caregivers do not help children become resilient. Only about 38% of the thousands of responses in the International Resilience Research Project indicated resilience. Grotberg believes that many adults impede resilience in children by giving mixed messages, and too many children feel helpless, sad, and unloved. The failure to promote resilience may reflect our lack of knowledge about how to help children feel supported, develop interpersonal skills, and develop inner strength.

In addition to adult influence, resilience may reflect cultural values (Phinney, 1996). The International Resilience Research Study included Taiwan, Japan, Vietnam, and Thailand. Only one study (Cheong, 1996) has been conducted in Singapore. Cheong concluded that in Singapore changes in traditional values of harmony and group orientation to more Western views

of independence and competition may influence resilience in children.

In the studies referred to above, it should be noted that the children were not studied independently of their surroundings. The family, the social group, the school, and the larger community were all involved. The child in context was the basic unit. The universal capacity for resilience is developed from these external factors and these include inner, personal strengths and social interpersonal skills. The early years of development are accepted as a critical time for acquiring many of the basic skills, attitudes, and values that tend to remain over the life span. Werner (1990) suggested that children 11 years of age and younger are the most likely age group to develop many resilience factors.

The present study examined what children do that seems to promote resilience in themselves. Parents and teachers are important supports, but specific actions on the parts of children themselves may be indicative of some interpersonal strengths and skills that facilitate resilience. The following questions were addressed: What concrete actions do children in Singapore themselves take to promote resilience? This local perspective is appropriate to learn what Singapore culture was doing to promote resilience. Do these children draw on the same pool of resilience factors as children elsewhere do to address adversity?

METHOD

Participants

A sample of 39 children in a primary school-age care center in Singapore participated in the study. There were 27 boys and 12 girls aged 10-11 years. Most (33) of the participants were Chinese. All 39 children completed the Child's Perception Checklist developed as part of the International Resilience project (Grotberg, 1995) and 10 children (five girls and five boys) were interviewed. These children attended a regular government primary school in a typical housing estate. These are usually referred to as the "neighbourhood" school serving a lower middle-income area. Such schools represent the average elementary school in Singapore.

Measures

The checklist of nine items was drawn from a longer list of 15 statements that indicate resilience in a child. The Checklist for Children was developed and field tested as part of the International Resilience research design. It required a response of "yes" or "no" to a descriptive statement that indicated resilience in the child. All the children filled in the checklist and their responses were assessed. Ten children were interviewed based on the checklist, but were asked to elaborate and to report on a personal experience or encounter. Each interview lasted about ten minutes. All the interviews were taped.

RESULTS

Children answered the nine questions on the Resilience Checklist as "yes" or "no" and Table 1 provides the frequencies with which boys and girls gave "yes" or "no" answers. All the girls (100%) reported having someone who was very important to them and who loved them and all of them also indicated they would like to do better in what they were doing. More girls than boys reported telling their problems to somebody (88%), were happy with who they were (92%), and knew someone they want to be like (75%). The same percentage of girls and boys (67%) reported being praised for doing things on their own. The girls in the sample had a better and more positive perception of resilience.

A Chi Square analysis calculated for each of the item statements did not show any significant difference between the boys and girls at .05 probability level. In general, girls scored higher than boys on 7 of the 9 items.

The interview data were based upon a small sample and should be interpreted cautiously. Examples of statements that seemed to be more frequent (80%) in girls included "I have a caring family who loves me and who is always there for me", "I can try my best in whatever I can", "I have a problem but I will seek help from my family", "I am quite humorous and I have many friends", "I have a high resistance", "I have all that I want", and "I am a happy person".

Table 1
Checklist for Perceptions of Resilience in Children

Checklist Item		Response	
		Yes	No
1. Is there someone who is very important to you?	boys girls	24 (88%) 12 (100%)	3(12%)
2. Do you know someone you want to be like?	boys girls	15 (55%) 9 (75%)	11(45%) 3(25%)
3. Do you have someone who loves you?	boys girls	23 (85%) 12 (100%)	4(15%)
4. Do you tell your problems to anybody?	boys girls	24 (88%) 11 (92%)	3(12%) 1(8%)
5. Are you praised for doing things on your own?	boys girls	18 (67%) 8 (67%)	9(23%) 4(23%)
6. Are you happy being who you are today?	boys girls	22 (82%) 11 (92%)	5(18%) 1(8%)
7. Are you willing to try new things?	boys girls	24 (88%) 11 (92%)	1(12%) 1(8%)
8. Do you like to achieve in what you do?	boys girls	23 (85%) 12 (100%)	
9. Do you like yourself?	boys girls	23 (85%) 10 (83%)	4(15%) 1(17%)

Statements more typical of boys included "I am a pampered and independent child", "I am forgetful", "I am very sad because I think I will do badly", "I have very little confidence", "I am very hot tempered", "I have no time", and "I am very lonely". Such comments are quite common in middle-income small family units in Singapore where especially, in Chinese families, more stress is put on boys than girls to excel in school and sports. The average size family in a Chinese home is usually typified by a father, mother, and the one or two children. On the whole, mothers were seen as a

key source of love, trust, and help with problems. More than 50% of the children came from supportive homes where the family unit was intact and cohesive. There was usually a maternal or paternal grandparent present and in wealthier homes the presence of the domestic maid was quite evident.

DISCUSSION

Several suggestions can be drawn from this pilot study. The checklist of 15 items used by the International Resilience Research Project for

perceptions of resilience in children needs to be adapted to the cultural setting where it is being used. The Singapore study removed a few inappropriate items from the children's checklist but the whole list can be used for parents' perceptions of their children's resilience. In addition to this checklist, the International Study has referred to another measure describing 15 Situations of Adversity used for parents and target children. This scale is currently being field tested and attempts are made to categorize the features of three sources of resilience (I have, I am, I can) from the data.

Ethnographic methods may be a viable alternative to obtain more accurate data since resilience implies a qualitative evaluation of one's perception of how one adapts to a situation. Children can and do engage in extensive self-assessment based upon their limited accumulation of life experiences. Environmental influences have been critical factors and using personal essays may be an unique qualitative way to focus on the specific risk or protective processes in the lives of these children. These essays that are the outcome of ethnographic methods can provide the children with a maximum amount of personal expression and, at the same time, offer the researcher an intimate window into the children's lives. It can enable us to piece together the salient processes these children use in overcoming adversity. Information gathered from this qualitative, process-oriented methodology may be an important supplement to the data from the checklist.

This analysis reinforces the roles of family and school as protective factors for the developing child. The present sample may be more representative of children who are still in school than it is of those who have dropped out. A comparison between these two groups of children would further buttress the results reported here. However, it lends support to current resiliency research findings that stress family relationships, social support, and personal motivation as important factors. It stresses the important role that family members, teachers, and community play in fostering the child's development. These protective factors are strongly associated with one another and positive relationships in one aspect of interpersonal

functioning often generalized to other realms as well. According to Smokowski (1997), even under the worst conditions, mothers for instance, have an especially profound impact in engendering aspirations, motivations, future optimism, and the importance of academic success in their children.

One important implication of this pilot study is the examination of the kinds of changes or interventions that can be made to help parents, caregivers, and children themselves to promote more resilience, without violating the values and customs of the society. In addition, studies need to give more attention to the preparation of children for facing and overcoming potential adversity in the home, school, or community settings. Educators and researchers can, therefore, focus on improving cognitive, social, and coping skills and, at the same time, provide experiences to develop a sense of responsibility, perseverance, and a positive attitude toward life and school.

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