**Resilience: A Learning Project for a Learning City[[1]](#footnote-1)**

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**Introduction**

Before he was sent to the Nazi concentration camp at Auschwitz, Primo Levi (1959) had not felt that being Jewish was central to his identity and until then he had coped with life, survived low self-esteem and depression. His activities in the resistance demoralized and disoriented him. When he was sent Germany as a prisoner he said: ‘And night came, and it was such a night that one knew that human eyes would not witness it and survive’ (1959, p. 6).

It is difficult to imagine Levi surviving to become one of the most articulate and insightful voices and witnesses to Auschwitz – to tell the tale without being overwhelmed by it. Levi (1959, p. 103) spoke of the prisoners as;

an anonymous mass, continually renewed and always identical, of non-men who march and labour in silence, the divine spark dead within them, already too empty to really suffer. One hesitates to call them living: one hesitates to call their death death, in the face of which they have no fear, as they are too tired to understand.

The degradation of the prisoners was matched by that of the guards who shared a common or ‘uniform inner desolation’ (1959, p. 142) and again, from inside Auschwitz (Levi, 1959, p. 98):

let everybody judge, on the basis of the picture we have outlined and of the examples given above, how much of our ordinary moral world could survive on this side of the barbed wire.

Auschwitz was his ‘university’, his ‘adventure’ and his ‘rite of passage’. The personal autobiography and eye-witness accounts, his fiction are words in praise and evidence of resilience.

**Resilience**

Resilience has a number of many meanings and versions. It is basically the ability to survive, thrive or maintain an equilibrium in the face of adversity, or misfortune or crises (Fleming, & Ledogar, 2008). There are critical comments that could be made about defining equilibrium (or survival or thriving) and about who defines equilibrium (whose equilibrium?). Or whose narrative dominates (Fleming, 2020)? Yet, some are resilient it appears, and others are not! The concept is useful because it brings to mind an approach to people that emphasises the advantages and strengths of a resilient person (Zimmerman, 2013).

We do know that some life experiences and especially early life experiences lead to poorer life outcomes in terms of health, longevity and mental health. These poor outcomes are tracked through research in the Adverse Childhood Experiences projects (Felitti, et al., 1998) and its applications (ACE, 2019; CDC, 2006). There is a rich and varied research field pointing to the finding that there is a connection between crisis, trauma, misfortunes and resulting poor outcomes.

The question being discussed here is: Why do some people have a very predictable and problematic set of outcomes as a result of misfortunes or adverse experiences and others seemingly with similar life experiences have more positive life experiences and healthy outcomes – whether measured in health, relationships, careers, etc.

When I look at my own research I turn to John Bowlby’s Attachment Theory (Bowlby, 1969, 1973; Fleming 2007, 2008, 2018) who looked at attachment between carers and young children and their impact on their attachment style of the growing child. The ideal secure attachment is no guarantee of good developmental outcomes in life - partly because life can throw challenges at anyone. On the other hand, some have less than ideal or have even chaotic attachment experiences and though there is an increased likelihood of negative outcomes, some have (surprisingly) positive and successful outcomes. Resilience is used to describe this positive outcome, achieved in spite of serious challenges.

It is thought that some people are ‘inherently resilient’ (Sroufe, 1997) and there is a danger that resilience will be seen as a trait (Egeland, Carlson & Sroufe 1993). Increased resilience is achieved through the reworking of internal models and can be facilitated, learned and taught. Good experiences with older family members (grandparents), teachers,, youth workers may be vital in the developing resilience. It is important in this regard to say that how the child perceives or construes the effort to increase resilience is also important (Atwool, 2006).

More recently, as a result of an international collaboration, Ungar (2005) has added the surrounding culture of the child as a factor in understanding resilience. Resilience is not an isolated individual characteristic. Although there has been a tendency to focus on individual psychological factors and social influences as separate phenomena in developing resilience, research in this field points to a combination of internal and external factors. Attention is now being focused on the interrelationship between these factors and the possibility that they combine to produce protective and resilient effects in growing children. Attachment theory has much to contribute to an understanding of the processes underpinning resilience.

What does resilience look like? For most authors (Atwool, 2006, p. 322) it involves autonomy, competence, an experience of secure attachment, recognition, having one’s needs heard (the person has a voice that is heard). This leads me to suggest that at a community and social level we can ask whether there is a community and social resilience. Education, adult education with its emphasis on the peoples experience and democracy where all participate and space given for the voice of the citizen and the learner are all good locations for building and supporting resilience (Matas, Arend, & Sroufe, 1978). Resilience is learned. Three broad factors have been associated with resilience:

1. individual characteristics (including temperament, competence, self-efficacy and self-esteem);
2. family support and;
3. a supportive person or agency outside the family, in social care, child care, schools etc.

According to Atwool (2006, p. 320) the path to resilience involves:

Opportunities to engage in relationships with significant adults must be available  
and an understanding of the inter-relationship between attachment and resilience will enhance the ability of staff in these environments to engage in meaningful ways with children and young people. These adults also need to have an understanding of the significance of relationships and the role attachment plays in resilience (Atwool p. 326)

Other research indicates the importance of education and care for the development of resilience (Atwool, 2006, p. 321). Matson and Coatsworth (1998) identify critical developmental tasks as

1. social competence with peers;
2. socially appropriate conduct;
3. academic achievement, and;
4. involvement in activities and work.

They conclude by identifying three crucial protective factors:

1. caring and effective parent-child relationships,
2. good cognitive development and
3. self-regulation of attention, emotion and behavior.

Security of attachment and internal working models influence all of these aspects of development. Arguably, quality of attachment is instrumental in the four central areas associated with resilience, individual characteristics, supportive family, positive connections with adults or agencies in the environment, and culture.

**Resilience in the Learning City**

There are a wide number of ways of naming the predictors of resilience. Ackerman (2021) identifies these, however in making the transition to the Learning City project the six predictors of resilience might be applied not just to individuals but to a community and society. The best predictors of resilience according to Roussouw & Roussouw (2016) are:

Vision

*This includes a sense of identity or even for children an identification with a place, pride, values associated with that place and all the positive things that are often taken for granted, learned and expressed.*

Composure

*This means the ability to not panic in the light of minor or even more major problems and challenges, a sort of security in the face of questions and dilemmas.*

Tenacity

*It takes some determination to ‘keep on going’ and starting from the beginning each day or each Monday or each new academic year;*

Reasoning

*Critical, thinking, aware of the strengths and weakness of science, of not being against scientific knowledge, of asking relentlessly questions about and of powerful people and the ability by leaders to deal with this interrogation, especially when done with respect.*

Collaboration

*This is about team work, forming liasions, working partnerships that do not threaten any independence of the partners; in fact it embraces democracy and the absence of feeling threatened by cooperations that democracy demands*.

Health

*The conference theme: that refers to the ease of access and equal access to quality health care, especially for the young, disadvantaged and those whose lives have reduced their opportunities to live healthy lives.*

For teachers it is important to be informed about the micro moments of how they relate to each and every child with care, that they become friends of their intelligence and imagination, their dreams and ambitions so that this moment with you the teacher delivers the resilience that is key to survival in the face of other fast approaching crises.

It means that all have to keep in mind what we learned during covid, not just in US or Ireland or Greece: that relationships of care are the central experiences of life; that science is key to sorting so many problems; that understanding science is complicated, contested by science and by politics, that vested interests will react in just the same way in the climate crises as they did in the covid years, that fascism and authoritarianism continues to be a threat, that democracy needs to be learned again and again each day, even in a Learning City.

For teachers it is also important to keep in touch with stories, with history, with events, with materials that challenge their students (of all ages) to think and learn and experience through the imagination that there are always more hopeful options for the future and different to those recounted by Primo Levi.

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