An introduction to resilience in educational settings

All students will experience difficult situations at some point in their educational career, both academic and social. These may include teasing and bullying, conflict with teachers or parents, competition or disagreements with peers, homework, tests and class presentations, and the transition from one school to another. Resilience is the capacity to adapt well when faced with adversity or stress. It helps students stave off the potential negative psychological effects of challenging experiences. It involves more than continuing to persist despite difficulty: resilient students interpret academic or social challenges in a positive way. This may include increasing effort, developing new strategies, or practising conflict resolution.

What is resilience and why is it important for students?

There are several critical abilities associated with resilience, including:

- **emotional regulation**, or the ability to keep calm and express emotions in a way that helps the situation

- **impulse control**, which involves the ability to make a conscious choice to act on a desire (or not), as well as to delay gratification and persevere

- **causal analysis**, or the ability to analyse problems and identify causes

- **empathy**, or the ability to understand the feelings and needs of another person

- **realistic optimism**, or the ability to keep a positive outlook without denying reality

- **self-efficacy**, or the belief in one's ability to solve problems and handle stress

- **opportunity-seeking**, or the ability to take new opportunities and reach out to others

In general, students with higher resilience tend to have more positive outcomes (including greater wellbeing) and exhibit fewer problem behaviours. This is because resilient people display the courage and motivation to face problems and difficulties accurately (rather than denying or exaggerating them) and maintain a positive mindset and the confidence to persevere. Resilience is identified as part of one of the New Zealand's Curriculum's key competencies, 'managing self[1].

Resilience also leads to improved outcomes for students because it is related to students' beliefs that they have the ability to influence their environment. Resilient students are high in autonomy and self-efficacy - they experience feelings of confidence and believe that things will work out. This sense of personal control gives students an advantage in making changes when faced with difficulty and it can moderate the effect of adversity on wellbeing.

Resilience fluctuates at different ages and developmental stages, and across different contexts. Resilience is not a character trait that children are born with, but is a developmental process mostly influenced by children's experiences and relationships. Importantly for teachers and caregivers, this means that resilience can be learned and developed.

Resilient mindsets and coping strategies

Resilience is produced as a consequence of learning a particular way of interpreting problems rather than just as a response to social or academic adversity. People's mindsets - their patterns for interpreting events, including why they happen, who is to blame for the difficulty, and what impact a problem will have - influence their level of resilience. In addition, people's beliefs about the permanence of the problem over time and its pervasiveness across various aspects of their life affect their level of resilience.

The kinds of behaviours or ways of interpreting problems that threaten or undermine resilience include:

- Jumping to conclusions

- Personalising issues

- Making assumptions about what others know or think

- Allowing emotions to dominate reasoning

- Over-generalising

- Magnifying the negative features or minimising the positive features of a situation

- Catastrophising or exaggerating the likelihood or extent of negative outcomes.

However, the key to resilience is the use of positive coping strategies that promote internal wellbeing in times of stress, risk, and adversity. Coping strategies can be problem-focused, where individuals seek to address the source of the issue and implement actions aimed at a solution – for example, a student who has performed poorly on a test or assignment might work with their teacher to identify and address the gaps in their knowledge. Alternatively, coping strategies can be emotion-focused, and involve processing, acknowledging, expressing and understanding the emotions the student is experiencing. The same student who performed poorly on a test might talk to a teacher or peer about their feelings of frustration, disappointment or even shame at receiving the test results, although it is important to be wary of students overly focusing on negative emotional responses, as this can potentially undermine the development of resilience.

Not all coping strategies are equally effective, nor do they all promote the development of resilience. Some coping strategies undermine student resilience, while other positive strategies build resilience. Strategies that are resilience-enhancing include:

- **Positive reinterpretation**: reinterpreting a stressful event in positive terms

- **Humour**: finding aspects to laugh at in order to minimise stress

- **Active coping**: initiating direct action to mitigate the stress

- **Planning**: selecting a series steps to best handle the problem

- **Seeking help and social support**: seeking advice, assistance or information, moral support, empathy or understanding

Negative coping strategies that undermine resilience include:

- **Focusing on, and venting, emotions**: emphasising what is distressing or upsetting and releasing those feelings

- **Mental disengagement**: choosing activities which distract the student from thinking about the stress

- **Behavioral disengagement**: reducing the effort applied to dealing with the stressful event

- **Denial**: denying or acting as though the stressor isn't real

- **Acceptance**: being resigned to the situation

References

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Endnotes

[1] Ministry of Education (2015). The New Zealand Curriculum. Wellington: Learning Media.

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