‘It’s just common sense isn’t it?’ Exploring ways of putting the theory of resilience into action

Planning for accommodated children may often be built around ensuring a secure home. However, it is also important to attend to other domains in children’s lives. The promotion of the long-term emotional well-being of children has to be based on information about the factors associated with better outcomes. The findings from research into factors related to resilience in children provide many useful pointers for such practice. Brigid Daniel, Sally Wassell and Robbie Gilligan describe a pilot project aimed at exploring the feasibility of putting ideas from the concept of resilience into action. Through a series of workshops with child care practitioners the domains of secure base, education, friendship, talents and interests, positive values and social competencies were considered. Ideas for mapping levels of current resilience were discussed, as well as suggestions for practice aimed at its promotion.

The concept of resilience
The goal of providing a setting that offers ‘continuous care and commitment to the child into adulthood’ (Smith, 1998, p 46) is still regarded as a key principle of planning for young people whose home lives have been disrupted. However, in his recent article exploring the potential for resilience as a guiding principle in planning for child placement, Gilligan (1997) suggests that the concept offers a complementary framework for intervention because it recognises that, although it may not always be possible to protect a child from further adversity, boosting their resilience should enhance the likelihood of a better long-term outcome. He defines resilience as referring to:

qualities which cushion a vulnerable child from the worst effects of adversity in whatever form it takes and which may help a child or young person to cope,

survive and even thrive in the face of great hurt and disadvantage. (p 12)

This paper is an account of a pilot project to explore the feasibility of implementing such ideas in practice. The project was a joint endeavour between the Centre for Child Care and Protection Studies, Dundee University, and a city social work department in Scotland.

Structure of the project
The aim was to explore the potential for the development of resilience-based approaches for planning for children and young people currently, or at risk of, being looked after away from home on a long-term basis. In particular it was hoped to develop practice materials for mapping and identifying areas of resilience in young people and to generate suggestions for boosting these qualities.

Six domains where good functioning has been associated with resilience were chosen in advance:

1. secure base;
2. education;
3. friendships;
4. talents and interests;
5. positive values;
6. social competencies.

Five half-day workshops were held over a period of five months. After an introductory workshop the next three focused on each of the domains – two per session – with time for feedback between sessions. The final workshop was devoted to review and feedback. Eleven field social workers took part in the project. Not all participants were able to attend all workshops, but everyone was sent information from each session and asked for feedback. All had at least one young...
person in mind who matched the above profile.

Where possible, participants were encouraged to involve the young people in discussing the project, in order to gain ideas from them and because involvement could itself boost resilience. The direct measure of outcomes for the children was beyond the scope of this project.

Participants were asked to consider which key adults in the child’s life could appropriately be involved in exploring ideas. One reported a foster carer commenting ‘Well, it’s just common sense isn’t it?’, an issue we return to later. The workshops were facilitated by the first two authors and the identified issues and suggestions were the result of a joint effort.

**Secure base**

There is a clear association between the presence of a secure attachment relationship and resilience in the face of adversity (Werner, 1990). The importance of attachment ties has been recognised in child care practice for many years and normally underpins planning (Fahlberg, 1991; Howe, 1995; Daniel et al, 1999).

What children and young people need is a base that is not only stable, but can act as a springboard to the wider social world. Ironically, attention to a child’s current need for security may be deflected by the amount of time that planning for long-term security can take. Resilience theory would suggest an emphasis on building a protective network of support from all the resources available, supplemented by professional support where necessary.

Insecure internal working models of attachment can change in the context of the formation of new, more secure relationships (Feeney and Noller, 1996). The aim in practice is to find long-term carers who will provide such secure relationships. In the meantime, however, there is tremendous potential for what Brooks (1994) describes as ‘charismatic’ adults to have a direct influence on a child’s developing understanding of relationships. Therefore the objective would be to capitalise on the potential offered by any person, lay or professional, who takes an interest in the child (Gilligan, forthcoming).

During the workshop a number of issues were explored including contact with family members, along with absent fathers, siblings and extended family. In order to develop the concept of protective networks, ideas for how to find out who is important to the child now and how to make use of current attachments were discussed.

When considering ways to map current and potential protective networks a more purposeful use of ecomaps, by which the attachment network is mapped out was discussed (Hartman, 1984). Some workers had already used these, usually to stimulate constructive dialogue with the child. The group agreed that a series of ecomaps could be created with the child and with other significant adults specifically to address the following questions:

1. How is this child to develop a sense of healthy identity and belonging, whether or not there is continuing direct contact?
2. Who can support the child in the longer term, especially through transitions and placement change?

Trigger questions could be developed that would explore with the young person:

- Who is important to you in your life now?
- How close is each person to you?
- What does each person offer to you?
- Who do you see?
- Who would you like to see?
- What changes would you like in the way things are now?

Participants indicated that particular attention would need to be paid to any conflicts between what the child wanted by way of contact and what the adults saw as positive or helpful. This work could be augmented by family network meetings to explore ways to enable helpful members of the birth family to remain in touch. Resilience theory would support the benefit of finding even small but significant ways for families to contribute, for
example an aunt could phone once a week, a grandparent could give pocket money, etc.

**Examples from practice**

One participant gave an example of a young person who had no difficulty in doing the ecomap and identifying strong relationships. He noted that his relationship with his grandmother was strong although he rarely saw her. The family tended to assume that he did not care about them, but the ecomap showed that he did, and could be used to help them to appreciate this.

There were examples of the need to overcome the practitioners’ personal feelings about a family of origin. In one case a boy would not develop any kind of meaningful relationship with care workers unless they acknowledged and accepted his family. This illustrates the extent to which, even if living away from home, children bring their family with them and often need staff to fully accept this reality and work with it.

In another case an aunt was able to make appropriate and sensitive plans for an accommodated child to have contact with other extended family members. As a direct result of the workshop one worker arranged for a boy to spend time with a previous foster carer and this will now become a regular arrangement. One boy became very close to the school janitor because he was kept in so often during breaks. She took an interest in him and has kept contact with him since he moved from that school.

**Education**

Good educational attainment is associated with good outcomes and is therefore a protective factor that should be aimed for (Rutter, 1991). School also offers a wide range of other opportunities to boost resilience, including acting as a complementary secure base, providing many opportunities for developing self-esteem and efficacy, and opportunities for constructive contact with peers and supportive adults (Garbarino *et al.*, 1992; Gilligan, 1998).

It is now recognised that being accommodated away from home is likely to have a significant negative impact upon educational achievement and government policy initiatives are aimed at this problem (Parker *et al.*, 1991; Jackson, 1995; Scottish Office, 1999). There may be a temptation for practitioners to wait until the child is settled before attending to school issues. However, when a child is unsettled school could in fact be the main priority for intervention.

In exploring these ideas in the workshop the following was considered:

- school as a place;
- education as a process;
- educators as people.

There were a number of suggestions for mapping the areas for intervention and capitalising on any potential strengths. First, it is necessary to have an up-to-date educational assessment and to identify any particular areas where extra support is needed. Next it is essential to establish the child’s perception of school, for example by asking her or him to complete questions like ‘A teacher is . . .’, ‘A school is . . .’. It is important to know the child’s attitude to learning. Do they understand what school is for, what education is for, why we learn maths for example?

When assessing who has the potential to offer educational support, parents and other family members can be considered, even if children do not live with them. At the very minimum parents should be kept informed about progress.

There can be mutual stereotyping between social work and education. A climate of shared responsibility is needed in which information flows both ways. Expectations in school need to be reasonable, but not too high. Examples were given of cases where expectations were high of behaviour, but low of academic achievement. Within schools there is often a sub-culture among pupils of not working and messing about (Meadows, 1986). Children may need strategies to help them avoid getting into trouble with others. Vygotsky’s concept of ‘scaffolding’ would suggest that academic expectations need to be pitched
just ahead of current achievement by someone with detailed knowledge of the child’s ability (Smith and Cowie, 1991).

The most important issue that was identified was the need for someone to have detailed day-to-day knowledge of and interest in the child’s education. Such a person could be a volunteer, mentor from the community, family member, residential key worker or similar. Their tasks might include:

- educational support;
- ensuring privacy for homework (in one residential unit a homework room had been established);
- having a knowledge of the system, when subject choices are made, what the qualification structure is, etc;
- helping with revision;
- following up after exams and tests;
- visiting the school.

The child may have a special interest where learning could take place ‘on the side’, for example by finding books about a particular hobby or pop group, writing fan letters, working out football scores, adding up pocket money or clothing grants and working out what to spend them on.

Finally there may be many opportunities to model a positive attitude to learning, for example by:

- bringing books and talking about them;
- taking children to bookshops, libraries and places with history, eg castles, child-oriented museums, monuments;
- exploring the use of CD ROMs and the Internet;
- playing cards, darts and board games involving counting;
- letting them help work out mileage claims;
- encouraging them to use the A–Z or road maps when driving somewhere.

There has to be an assumption that all children naturally have an interest in the world, but that in some this interest has been thwarted and disregarded. Starting from the expectation of a natural curiosity should help counteract the potential for low expectations and defeatism.

**Examples from practice**

For some children school may seem like a prison; they may have lost, or never had, any concept of school as a place that can offer opportunities for activities. One boy’s view shifted when he realised he could play in the school football team.

A workshop participant described a boy for whom difficulties arose because he was regarded in school as a management problem. Although one particular member of staff did have a more holistic view of him, she was not in a sufficiently influential position to affect decisions and he was excluded for swearing in class.

Another young person had been settled in placement for a month and this has been attributed to the fact that a school placement in a residential school had been identified. Owing to his academic potential, the importance for this boy was to stress the necessity for well-planned educational input from the beginning.

**Friendships**

The child with no friends is an isolated child who is likely to become an isolated adult. Therefore helping a child to acquire the ability to make and sustain friendships is likely to significantly improve their quality of life. Being able to make friends is only part of the equation; the type of friendships made is another. Less association with delinquent peers and positive peer relationships have been found to be protective (Quinton et al, 1993; Fergusson and Lynskey, 1996).

For younger children friendship is normally based on proximity and it is only during middle school years that it is built on common interests (Smith and Cowie, 1991). It is therefore asking a lot of young people to expect them to sustain friendships with others who do not live near them. The challenge is to contrive
ways of placing children near young people without apparent difficulties. School is the obvious setting for this, although all activities and clubs attended by youth in the community should be considered. Younger children's play with other children frequently takes place in the presence of adults who can intervene as problems occur. Older children whose emotional development is immature may need a similar level of close supervision.

As some troubled children have little concept of what a proper friendship is, it may be helpful to spend some time exploring their concept of friendship. One suggestion was to develop a multiple-choice quiz, as in popular magazines, around:

- What is a friend?
- What do children get from friends?
- What do they want from a friend?
- What have they to offer as a friend?

When mapping who their friends are, the purposeful use of ecomaps would be a useful starting point, asking questions such as:

- Who are your friends?
- Are you happy with the friends you have?
- Do you want the situation to change?

If existing friendships are with other accommodated or troubled children, then finding ways to make the most of these friendships can be found. One unit acknowledged that two boys were a problematic combination, but took them away together on a supervised trip as a way of changing the environment rather than forcing them to separate.

There is a need to assess the level of friendship skills and, if necessary, work to improve them, for example by role play, cartoons depicting alternative ways of reacting to a scenario, modelling by carers, and by taking time to reflect with a child on specific situations.

Examples from practice

The discussion identified this as an area of real problems for many of the children and young people, particularly if living in a residential setting. It was noted that it is difficult for residential units to foster 'normal' friendships owing to the camaraderie that develops among peers in the same situation. For instance, one 13-year-old boy moved to a close-support unit and immediately started to get into lots of trouble with a 15-year-old. Another took his friend from the unit back to his parental home and was reprimanded for this, even though the urge to take pals home is perfectly normal.

A further example was given of a ten-year-old boy whose friendships were all sexualised. One suggestion was to look for activities that would naturally involve adult supervision, thus avoiding singling him out for ‘special’ treatment. Outdoor activities that involve action, concentration and co-operation, such as climbing, sailing and so on, would allow him to be with other children but in a different way.

In one case the family were complaining that the young person went out too much during home visits. Instead of trying to stop this it might be much more productive to build in extra time to accommodate periods spent with friends.

Talents and interests

Self-esteem is one of the fundamental building blocks of resilience. Principally, self-esteem flows from positive attachment experiences (Howe, 1995), but it is also enhanced by participation in valued activities. Some young people have such low self-esteem that it can be very difficult to encourage them to try anything at all; they may have a form of 'learned helplessness' (Zimmerman, 1988). This appears to be linked with levels of self-efficacy which is also known to be associated with resilience (Luthar, 1991). Children with low self-efficacy see themselves as having little control over circumstances and lacking in power to impact upon their environment.

The challenge for practitioners is therefore to find ways of creating opportunities for young people to
experience feelings of success, perhaps by looking for ‘islands of competence’ (Brooks, 1994). Formal tests for mapping levels of self-esteem can also be used to explore areas that need attention (Hoare et al., 1993).

The workshop focused on ways to find out a young person’s interests and how to encourage them, particularly in a context of disruption. It was noted that different foster carers may provide opportunities for different activities, which, while positive in themselves, could also lead to a lack of continuity arising from placement changes.

Experience suggested that some children misinterpret the question ‘What would you like to do?’ as ‘What are you good at?’, and cannot think of anything. In these cases it may be possible to find out from parents or previous carers if there were past glimmers of interest which could be revived; or to link the child with a family member who has a hobby that could be shared. Also family contact could be more specifically combined with interests.

There was also a feeling that young people are sometimes put under undue pressure to ‘stick with’ activities, especially if uniforms or equipment have been purchased. While perseverance is an attribute to be encouraged, it is unfair to ask more of troubled young people than other children achieve. The former especially may need the chance to try out a range of activities, perhaps as a form of ‘taster exercise’.

It was strongly felt that participation in interests should not be conditional on behaviour, and should not be used as a sanction or reward.

Examples from practice
An example was given of a young man who had tried a lot of different activities and been good at many, especially in the artistic sphere. As result of the workshop his social worker ‘reframed’ this as a positive interest in a wide range of activities and will encourage him to use his interest in graphic art to depict what he has tried and enjoyed.

For one boy the school paid for skiing lessons because they noted his enthusiasm. This was so successful that his aunt is now going as well.

One 15-year-old girl wrote to Rangers Football Club and now receives newsletters and information. Her esteem was greatly boosted by seeing that she could act on her own initiative.

A boy in a residential unit said his best week during the holidays was when he attended a football club every day. The aspect that he most appreciated was that the club catered for all children in the community and not specifically for those accommodated. In fact, he objected when staff suggested he take another resident along.

Another example was given of a key worker’s arrangement to play badminton regularly with a young person. The need to keep this arrangement a priority was then stressed at review meetings. The key worker was relieved to see this as a legitimate activity that could have a real positive spin-off in fostering resilience.

Positive values
Holding positive values and being required to act in a helpful, caring and responsible way are associated with resilience (Werner, 1990; Raundalen, 1991; Benson, 1997). Therefore attention to the young person’s capacity for empathy is crucial and situations need to be created that require individuals to care for and be responsible towards other people.

The indicator for mapping this area is the young person’s behaviour towards others. This can be established by direct observation, discussions with teachers, key workers and carers, and conversations with the child. It should be possible to check their ability to take the perspective of others by, for example, creating a number of scenarios with an emotional component and exploring with the young people what the subjects may have felt.

This area needs further development in practice. Although the participants acknowledged its importance, they struggled to find specific case examples. Most felt frustrated by a lack of influence over the day-to-day care environment which is so influential in pro-social development.
The developmental literature gives pointers about the factors that promote positive values (Schaffer, 1996). In summary, the modelling of pro-social behaviour by significant adults is highly influential and the carer is more effective if their messages about such behaviour contain an emotional element; in other words they should not necessarily be given in a cool and detached way. Children need to see that pro-social behaviour is to do with emotions and feelings, specifically the feelings of others.

This would suggest that practitioners need to be able to put over the emotional messages when challenging anti-social behaviour. Participants questioned how this can be equated with the need for professional boundaries and a requirement to be calm, accepting and not overly emotional in work with young people. This led to considerable discussion about striking the delicate balance between the ‘human’ and the ‘professional’ elements of the relationship. Studies of social work intervention show that young people value the personal qualities of their social workers (Triseliotis et al., 1995). Participants suggested that it was these features of the work that were most likely to be swamped by the case management aspects of planning. Fostering resilience may depend on reclaiming and using those human qualities.

It was agreed that the starting point should be an assumption that everyone has the potential to behave pro-socially and that no matter what traumas have been experienced, all young people can learn to control anti-social behaviour. The cognitive-behavioural approach that looks at the links between thoughts, feelings and behaviour could be helpful here (Deblinger and Hope Heflin, 1996).

Raundalen (1991) suggests that children’s empathic behaviour can be enhanced through encouraging interest in the environment and nature, and by giving opportunities for caring for pets.

**Examples from practice**

An example was given of stopping pocket money as a sanction for breakages used in a residential unit. This may not be very constructive compared to, say, helping young people learn how to apologise and to create imaginative forms of reparation, like encouraging them to take bottles to a bottle bank and newspapers to the recycling bin.

**Social competencies**

The capacity for social competence has been shown to be associated with resilience (Werner, 1990; Luthar, 1991). Social skills are usually learnt initially within the context of attachment relationships and are then extended to peers and other adults. Children who have been deprived of secure early attachment relationships are likely to require considerable support in the development of social skills.

In the workshop the cognitive and behavioural aspects of social skills were discussed. In mapping social skills attention needs to be paid to cognitive areas like:

- planning and decision-making;
- understanding cause and effect;
- reflection;
- problem-solving;

and to behavioural areas such as:

- interpersonal competence;
- ability to inhibit ‘instinctive’ response;
- conflict resolution.

Many young people do not have a language for their feelings and so hit out instead. Part of the discussion was about how to help them to inhibit their habitual, unhelpful responses. A vital key to helping young people deal differently with conflict is to anticipate situations and to intervene before problems escalate.

Again it was acknowledged that expectations of troubled young people’s social abilities may not be high. Some may benefit from being given the time to practise social skills, perhaps through role play.
Examples from practice
In one unit the staff have developed a system of signalling to a boy when he is obviously starting to fall out with his peers. The aim is to help him to recognise the warning signals and to eventually inhibit his own behaviour without prompting.

An example was given of a boy who fell out with others because he always claimed to be right. This is not an uncommon kind of attribution, as with the flipside: ‘I am always wrong’. Such a boy could be encouraged to act ‘as if’ he isn’t always right as a way of separating thought and action.

One young boy who was excluded from school was encouraged by his social worker to write to the head teacher and others involved to apologise and ask to be allowed back, which he subsequently was. In this way he learnt a problem-solving skill.

Discussion
The aims of the project were not all met in full. Young people themselves were not heavily involved in making suggestions. In several cases there was so much going on in the young person’s life that the social workers judged it inappropriate to involve them. There was mixed success in developing systems for mapping the areas of resilience, but the indication was that with further work this would be possible. The participants stated that areas of positive values and social competencies were the hardest to implement immediately. However, the emerging suggestions for practice were substantial and participants noted that the very process of taking part in workshops had already changed the way they looked at some of their cases. A series of worksheets have been developed from the work and are currently being piloted.

Some of these issues are covered within the Looking After Children materials (DoH, 1995), but what is offered through this approach is the direct link with the grounding principle of boosting resilience. In addition to the current introduction of LAC materials in the UK, there are considerable policy developments aimed at early intervention, support for parenting and improvement of children’s services. These are linked with the social inclusion strategy which has pinpointed looked after children as vulnerable to social exclusion (Scottish Office, 1999). Specifically, the Quality Protects programme in England and Wales sets out national objectives for children’s services which ‘set clear outcomes for children’ (DoH, 1998). Included is the aim ‘to ensure that children looked after gain maximum life chance benefits from educational opportunities, health care and social care’ (p 12). The concept of resilience could be a helpful guiding principle for developing strategies to meet this objective.

Conclusions
Social workers cannot do it all
There was a danger that discussions would lead to social workers feeling overwhelmed by all that was not being done for the young people. However, a resilience-based approach should not entail the social worker trying to address all of these issues alone; rather the aim is to locate a network of people to address different aspects.

Centrality of residential staff, foster carers and befrienders
There is tremendous potential for residential staff and foster carers to be involved in boosting resilience. On an individual level key workers have the opportunity to engage young people in activities and encourage interest in education. On a broader level the staff group can be instrumental in creating an environment within a unit that encourages pro-social behaviour. The value of mentors has been recognised for some time and their use is to be encouraged wherever appropriate (DoH, 1996; Health Committee, 1998).

Importance of ‘normal’ childhood activities
Social workers are keenly aware of children’s need for security. The bulk of their work on behalf of the child therefore has to be focused on achieving
that end. However, this does not mean that direct work has to focus on attachment issues. Using the resilience approach with young people moves the emphasis away from talking about their feelings towards a focus on what they would like to try and what is important to them. For some children being given the chance to channel their energies into ‘normal’ childhood activities like school may be more productive. Further, the self-esteem that comes from fitting in at school and into clubs can give them the personal strength to look at past relationships.

Legitimisation of common-sense approaches
Discussing the concepts of resilience with social workers generates a mixture of responses that combine a sense that it is all very obvious and ‘common sense’, with a recognition that, where such work is carried out, it is not always recognised as legitimate intervention. In fact, it is apparent that many practitioners are often working on such areas but in a piecemeal way, ‘on the side’, in the car, during snatched visits and so on. Resilience theory has potential as a coherent framework to encompass much of what workers and carers instinctively aim to achieve anyway and could therefore validate practice by offering a sound theoretical basis for purposeful intervention.

Importance of relationships
Development and resilience are rooted in human relationships and interactions. At times it seems that the case management role of social workers has obscured this fact. Of course it is not appropriate for the practitioners to aim to act as primary attachment figures, but this does not mean that their contacts with the child do not have an emotional component and impact which can be exploited.

Importance of looking for strengths, not problems
The very simple process of shifting the focus of attention away from problems towards strengths lies at the heart of a resilience-based approach. One person described how she had written a child care review report around the six domains discussed. This allowed for a much fuller picture of the young person and created a much more positive discussion in the meeting.

Importance of attention to continuity
Participants described many cases where there was a lack of someone with continuity of knowledge, both at the level of tracking the child’s life progress during placement moves, but also at the level of day-to-day monitoring of activities. There was recognition of the need to be much more vigorous in ensuring that someone acts as a ‘keeper of the archives’ and provides continuity on even the smallest matters.

Space and time
Above all, practitioners wanted the space and resources to carry out focused direct work with young people. They felt that the tasks involved in ensuring permanency took considerable time (Smith, 1998), time that would require extension and protection for areas of detailed work on resilience to be developed.

Overall it was felt that the resilience-based approach had much to offer practice. It backs up the need to stick with young people and to continue working with them, even when times are difficult, and legitimates much of the work that professionals are already trying to do.

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