

**REPORT OF THE  
RESILIENCE KNOWLEDGE EXCHANGE SEMINAR**

**Held on March 26<sup>th</sup> 2009 at the University of Stirling**

This seminar was organised and funded by Scottish Social Networks Forum in partnership with The Rock Trust and University of Stirling. It was attended by a group of twenty invited participants all of whom have experience and a particular interest in the area of resilience in children and young people. The seminar was introduced by Malcolm Hill, Research Professor at the Glasgow School of Social Work and a full list of session leaders and attendees can be found at Appendix A.

This report is based on the valuable contributions from all who attended but particular thanks are due to Cheryl Burgess and Professor Brigid Daniel for writing this report and to Allison Calder who summarised the key issues for practitioners.



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**Scottish Social Networks Forum** was created in response to recommendations in the Homelessness Task Force Final Report to promote and support measures that help individuals build social networks. It develops training materials, best practice guides and opportunities for information exchange and mutual support. The Forum is a project funded by Scottish Government and managed by The Rock Trust.

**The Rock Trust** is a voluntary organisation which supports young people in Edinburgh and the Lothians and provides training and development support for other organisations across Scotland and in Europe. The Rock Trust's aim is to provide opportunities for young people to develop the personal, social and practical skills, as well as the sense of self worth necessary for independent adult life.

**The University of Stirling's Department of Applied Social Sciences** is a large inter-disciplinary unit which combines teaching and research interests. 95 per cent of the Department's research was rated internationally excellent (RAE 2008), with the top 10 per cent of that judged to be 'world leading', and it achieved the highest possible ratings for Sociology and Social Work in the most recent teaching quality exercises.

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## INTRODUCTION

The aim of this seminar was to critically analyse the concept of resilience with particular reference to practice with young people experiencing a transitional stage of their lives. Transitional periods in the lives of children and young people are times of threat but also of opportunity for change (Rayner and Montague, 2000). These periods may therefore be a crucial time to help young people recognise their resilience and build on this for the future.

Resilience is a theoretical concept now referred to broadly within social work policy and practice and drawn upon in work with children and young people across a range of social care, health and educational settings. In some arenas it has become almost an umbrella term for all strengths-based approaches to work with young people and consequently there may now be a need to clarify the thinking and terminology associated with its use. There is some concern that the term may to some extent have lost some of its original meaning, particularly in relation to the psychological processes involved. The concept is increasingly cited as the basis for practice in a range of settings; however, there is a lack of evidence about how the concept can best be operationalised.

Resilience has been defined as ‘a phenomenon or process reflecting relatively positive adaptation despite experiences of adversity or trauma’ (Luthar, 2005). To be considered resilient an individual's level of well-being will be greater than might have been predicted on the basis of the adversity they have experienced. This definition, therefore, is based upon the twin concepts of:

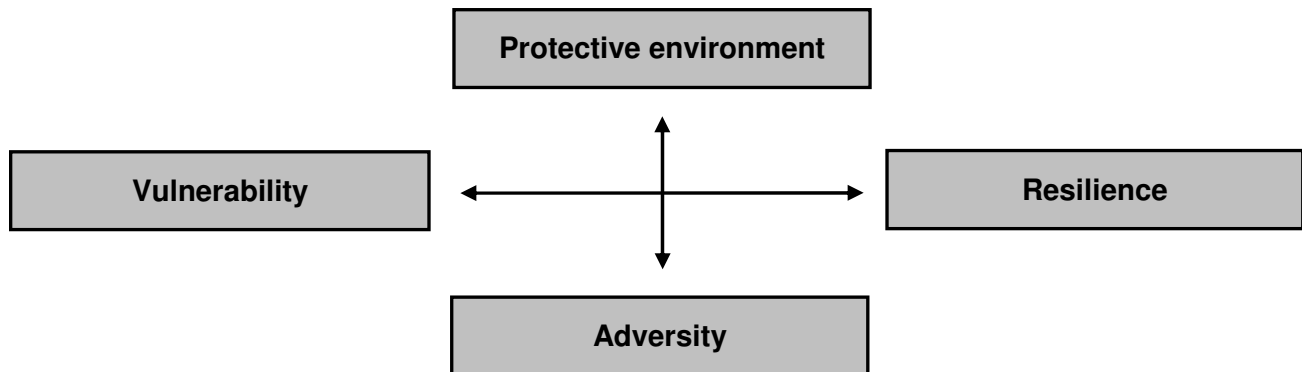
- adversity
- well-being.

In turn, the definition of both these concepts can be problematic – they are both open to a range of interpretations. However, in order to operationalise resilience practitioners need to be clear about the meanings of both **adversity and well-being**. Therefore, the discussion focused firstly on practice experience in relation to these two concepts, before moving on to look at the implications for **intervention and training**. The seminar's four sessions are reflected in the four main sections of this report with the discussions which took place grouped under thematic headings. In writing the report some limited additional sources, mainly research literature and reports, have also been drawn upon.

## 1. WHAT IS ADVERSITY?

*Key questions: how do definitions of adversity vary according to who is defining it, for example researchers, practitioners, policy makers or service users? How can we ensure that definitions are inclusive? What assumptions are made about the adversity that young people in transition may have faced or be facing?*

Adversity is a key component in understanding a resilience approach to work with young people, as illustrated in the resilience matrix below:



*Adapted from Daniel and Wassell and Gilligan (2002) Assessing and Promoting Resilience in Vulnerable Children*

It is considered that young people need to have experienced some degree of adversity in order to be viewed as resilient, however each individual's personal experience of adversity will vary, making it difficult to define and measure; what constitutes adversity is also often approached from a range of perspectives, which adds a further level of complexity.

### **Individual and group adversity**

There is a tendency to label and identify as an homogenous group those children who share some broad characteristics, such as those living in poverty or those with mental-health problems and they are often defined as being 'in adversity' (Department of Health 2000). This is reinforced by policies which are aimed at providing services or resources for such targeted groups. However, it is overly simplistic to define adversity with such a broad-brush approach; within any particular group of people who are labelled in this way there will be a spectrum of experience which will include both adverse and positive factors and influences. Research studies in resilience typically require large numbers of subjects and entail the use of standardised measures. The identified factors associated with resilience are based on statistical analyses of associations and correlations. In relation to individuals, there is now a plethora of scales and tests to assess adversity such as the PERI Life Events Scale (1978) and the Daily Life Experience Survey (2004). However, situations which may be experienced as adverse or negative by some people may be perceived as relatively positive or less challenging for others. This may be because of the individual person's psychological make-up or because the effects of adversity have been buffered by strong support systems, which may have been the ameliorating factors that have helped them to be resilient. For example,

living in homeless accommodation could be described as living in adverse conditions and that may well be the experience of one young person; however, it could just as reasonably be seen as a positive improvement for another who may have experienced abuse while living in the family home.

*'I often find that it's my idea of adversity that I'm putting on to the young person because they live in poverty or use a lot of substances or have suffered neglect in the past – for me that's the adversity. But for them, living in that situation, that's not how they see it. They may see something else as an adversity like not being able to get to school because of a parent's drinking and the adversity being missing out on the social life there'.*

Adversity is a relative and nuanced concept which requires detailed teasing out for each individual.

### **Individual or structural causes of adversity**

In addressing adversity, striking a balance between focusing on individual experiences of adversity or focusing on tackling structural and political influences had been a dilemma for social workers, in particular, over a number of years; this was a wider issue than in relation to resilience alone (Scottish Executive, 2006). It was generally considered that care was required in addressing this when offering direct support and understanding to young people and that young people should have the opportunity to consider the extent to which these adverse circumstances might be shared by others and be caused, at least in part, by wider influences..

*'We work with many people who face adversity because of oppressive attitudes and structural discrimination; it's much easier to work with the individual and try to change their circumstances than try to change society'.*

*'We need to make sure to include the structural aspects of adversity. In the services we work in there is a tremendous tendency for young people to blame themselves for adversity and the individual interpretation of resilience is a seductive one which underplays the structural forces behind adversity'.*

Linked with this, it was felt that workers need to be clear about what exactly it is that they are encouraging young people to overcome in relation to the adversities they have experienced. Young people's lives may have been characterised by difficulties and challenges and it is important that their experiences are not negated or framed as wholly negative. In the same way, there is a danger that displaying a lack of resilience can also be used as 'a stick to beat people with' by inferring that they are inadequate in some way if they do not show it (Garbarino, 2003).

A significant critique of resilience is that it places too much responsibility on the individual and results in an underestimation of the extent to which adversity is caused by societal factors with a resulting need to address structural change. The concept itself, however, can be applied at all ecological levels, including that of the community.

It is often at times of transition that young people who have experienced adversity are able to display an ability to problem solve or at least be encouraged to learn this skill (Newman, 2004). Young people may often have what appears like an overwhelming number of difficulties to overcome and workers may feel that they do not have time to really get to

know them and gain insight into the effects of past or current adversities before having to address pressing issues. The need for practical action such as finding accommodation and sorting out benefits is often a priority but relationships can be built through these processes.

### **The spectrum of adversity**

In social work and social care settings the main focus is on young people who have experienced or are currently experiencing what might be thought of as extreme adversities such as homelessness, neglect and abuse. Practitioners in the universal services of health and education are faced with the needs of all children, and indeed current policies focus on the role of such professionals with prevention, early intervention and support for all children, notably through the 'Getting it Right for Every Child' (GIRFEC) agenda (Scottish Executive, 2005). This raises questions about whether adversity can be considered to fall along a spectrum of potential to cause harm. The research suggests that an accumulation of stressors is especially damaging; however, 'Children may often be able to overcome and even learn from single or moderate risks, but when risk factors accumulate, children's capacity to survive rapidly diminishes' (Newman and Blackburn, 2002: p 7).

Adversity was seen to be a personalised set of circumstances and, to a degree, subjective. All people at some point encounter some level of adversity. Rutter questions the notion of resilience as a fixed characteristic:

'...children's resistance to stress is relative, rather than absolute; the origins of stress resistance are both environmental and constitutional; and the degree of resistance is not a fixed individual characteristic. Rather resistance varies over time and according to circumstances' (Rutter, 2000 p. 651).

The experience in practice is that society and services appear to impose a hierarchy of adversity such that people who have experienced some forms of adversity are considered more deserving of help than others; as a consequence those who feel unable to cope with a less extreme type of adversity often feel that they are inadequate and less deserving of help. This could be illustrated by the practice in one local authority service where the number of difficulties a service user can 'tick' offers entitlement to differing periods of support.

*'Some funding streams are based around definitions of adversity and straight away young people are labelled as being in adversity – it's like reinforcing that they're damaged goods. So it's maybe better to start with the well-being, not the adversity, and where the young person thinks they are and what adversity means to them'.*

On the other hand, there are current concerns that over protection of young people in the general population prevent them developing the problem-solving characteristics associated with resilience (Newman, 2004). There is a discourse which is concerned about the 'over-protection' of young people, describing them as 'cotton wool kids' and which advocates the 'school of hard knocks' in order to build resilience. The current culture of over-protection for some children and young people at one end of the spectrum was not equipping them for the realities of life 'in the real world'; for example, the practice in schools of every child having to be a winner, whether of awards or races.

*'There's the other extreme which you find working in some schools, where teachers are saying they've got an issue with resilience because our kids cannot cope with the slightest*

*adversity. If they're not picked for this or that they're on the floor – they're so over-protected. So adversity is relative and different for every young person'.*

At the other end of the spectrum, young people are experiencing sometimes extreme adversity but are not being given the supports required to learn from them. The aspiration would be for all children to be able to experience a level of autonomy and risk-taking and receive appropriate support that is not over-protective, but that no child should be exposed to multiple and corrosive adversity. This clearly presents different challenges for practitioners, depending on which end of the spectrum young people are located.

### **Who defines adversity?**

Adversity would seem to be defined variously by those involved in the social care of young people including policy makers, researchers and practitioners. This seems to be so in relation to both general and over-arching definitions and when looking at individual young people's circumstances. Adversities are also in some circumstances defined rather by default and described in relation to deficits in care. Adversities are not clearly outlined in policy and practice frameworks in the way that children and young people's needs now are, for example by way of the GIRFEC Well-being Indicators in Scotland (Scottish Executive, 2005). The experience for practitioners is that the way that adversity is defined is sometimes constrained by organisational remits and boundaries and may also be influenced by the perceptions of individual workers or researchers. However, in presuming to define adversity on behalf of young people we may be making major and possibly erroneous assumptions.

*'As a worker you need to work with a young person at their pace and work on things from where they are and what their priorities are, which will improve their resilience more in the long run, than try to get them a service which means nothing to them or is influenced by service or organisational constraints or demands'.*

If the lived experience of young people is devalued or disregarded by those who are trying to support them there will not be a shared understanding of the young person's experiences and possibly a mismatch of support aims.

*'The example of young carers is an interesting one as there can be quite different views across policy makers, practitioners and young people about whether caring for a parent is an adversity or an opportunity which young people can get a sense of satisfaction and well-being from'.*

Young people may identify quite different adversities than those which the worker has identified. For example, the loss of social networks resulting from non-attendance at school may be a more significant adversity in the view of the young person than loss of educational opportunity. In some situations, adults may be unaware that a child is suffering adversity such as a family bereavement but the young person may take the initiative himself to join a school-based support group to help cope with this.

It might be more constructive to start discussions with young people by identifying well-being factors rather than those relating to adversity, particularly if perceptions of these are likely to differ between young person and worker. Otherwise there may be a danger that barriers to communication are created and a negative agenda set from the beginning. There is also a need to reframe adverse experiences where possible so that positive use can be made of them in order to enhance the young person's future coping skills.

## 2. WHAT IS WELL-BEING?

*Key questions: What factors combine to give a feeling of well-being? Who defines it – is it about coping or thriving? How can it be measured?*

### Models and definitions

Social, health and educational disciplines have different ways of defining and measuring well-being and, however these are framed, none are straightforward. A range of models may be useful in the assessment of young people's well-being including Maslow's 'Hierarchy of Needs' (Maslow, 1943) and the 'Developmental Assets Profile' (Search Institute 2008).

The use of the framework 'Developmental Assets: A profile of your Youth (Scotland)' as an assessment and progress measurement tool was described by staff from one residential setting; its components were found to be practical and generally meaningful to young people. Staff are able to operationalise the components by replacing some of the asset-building young people have missed and which, in turn, help them achieve a greater sense of well-being. It is noted how few of the 42 'assets' many young people appear to have at the initial assessment stage.

The Action for Children definition of well-being as outlined in their report 'Growing Strong' (NCH, 2007) could be considered useful; it uses the following definition for emotional well-being: 'The ability to develop psychologically, socially, emotionally, intellectually and spiritually. Secondly, this ability was "functional" in that it allowed individuals to recognise, understand, manage and express emotions. Finally, such activity was purposeful, in that it was directed at satisfying both personal and social goals.' (Love et al, 2005: 6). In Scotland there is also the GIRFEC framework and well-being indicators (SHANARRI) as a cross-agency guide but there is a need to develop these further to inform effective ways of using them in practice to identify and measure levels of well-being in individual children and young people.

Other well-being factors might include those relating to health, both physical and mental, to notions of happiness and contentment and to a young person's ability to achieve independence. The importance of the fundamental building blocks of well-being and of the ability of young people to articulate their feelings and emotions to others, now often described as 'emotional intelligence' (Goleman, 1998) or emotional literacy (Sharp, 2001), is also generally acknowledged.

*'What is striking is how poor many young people's vocabulary is – it's very difficult for many young people to articulate their emotions. So assessment is key. In our work we go back a step to assess young people's capacity to identify their emotions and we do a lot of work with young people to help them get a vocabulary'.*

## Building blocks of well-being

The likelihood of attaining a sense of well-being is considered greater if some basic components are in place to aid its development. Feeling safe can be seen as a fundamental one (Maslow, 1943) and one which some young people have not truly experienced at any point in their lives. A feeling of self-efficacy is considered to have an important impact on well-being.

*'As you work with young people and they make some progress, their level of self-efficacy improves. I think that's a good measure of well-being as it just has such an impact on them and helps them believe that what they're saying, like at a looked After Children Review or some other meeting, will actually make a difference. I think that's absolutely huge'.*

Self-esteem, on the other hand, is a more complex characteristic which is sometimes critiqued and not always considered positive; it could sometimes be based on an overestimation of the young person's abilities if encouraged indiscriminately. Seligman (1996) has suggested that a simplistic focus on self-esteem without it being linked to real achievement is unhelpful to young people, and Masten and Coatsworth (1998) proffer the view that if you try to boost social competence by only boosting self-esteem you can have young people who misbehave but 'think highly of themselves.'

Empathy is considered to be an important component of well-being and indeed research suggests that resilience is associated with the capacity to be kind and helpful to others (Werner, 1993). This is best nurtured from an early age and if encouraged can give young people a strong basis for social relationships throughout life.

*'Groupwork can give young people the chance to practice skills such as empathy. It's not so much the group activity but a chance to work through how things could be done differently by analysing things afterwards. For example, working with young parents to look at their child's point of view and develop empathy for them'.*

The development of a sense of empathy for others at a later stage, where this has not previously been present, might require some 'unpicking' of a young person's past experiences; this could potentially be very challenging for the young person and could make the young person quite vulnerable during the process.

An example of encouraging empathy was illustrated by the experience of one agency's Young Parents' Groups. Young parents in these groups often found it hard to analyse what they wanted for their own lives but could articulate the things that they wanted for their children, namely better childhood experiences than they had. This insight has had a significant influence on the ways in which they relate to their children and to their peers for example, in offering one another support through discussion of their experiences of being a parent and of wider problems and issues.

On the basis of a comprehensive review of the research evidence on resilience Luthar stresses the key importance of secure attachment relationships (Luthar, 2005). Therefore, the

provision of a secure base and the feasibility of creating dependable relationships for young people is a key area for practice.

*‘Young people need a secure base or safe platform to go and explore their feelings about what’s happened to them. For a lot of young people the staff in a residential unit can be the secure base, if there isn’t a family one. Residential workers sometimes forget that they are the secure base for some young people’.*

Clearly relationship-building in social work, health and educational settings is important, particularly when young people are in a transitional stage of their lives, such as leaving local authority care. Regrets are often expressed that professionals are encouraged to keep their distance and that ‘health and safety’ and child protection concerns are sometimes a barrier to relationship-building.

### **Articulating well-being**

Young people clearly vary considerably in their ability to express their emotions and articulate how they feel about their lives. It was felt that some young people have a very limited vocabulary with which to describe their feelings whereas examples were also given of others, in this case older primary-school age children, who are very comfortable about discussing what makes them happy. There are a range of emotional literacy based tools available to assist young people to relay their feelings to others.

The PATHS Curriculum programme, and the Turtle Story tool which is a component of this, promotes social skills and emotional literacy for children and includes work on self-control, social competence and positive peer relationships.

Many children seem to be caught up in the material-dependent definition of happiness and well-being that some societies currently promote and this was regretted; it was notable that the UK had been placed at the bottom of the league table for rich nations in relation to child well-being (UNICEF, 2007). It was felt that well-being levels were generally low in many sections of society and that it was in any case unrealistic for anyone to experience a sense of well-being all the time. However, the last ten years had seen more explicit standards outlining what children and young people need in order to live more fulfilling lives and the development of practice tools to help bring this about. Inadequate resources are however still a significant barrier to achieving effective supports for young people, especially at key stages of transition such as the period after leaving local authority care.

*‘Funders often don’t allow for young people moving forward and backward, coming back to a service or to a residential unit. Funders want to see things moving forward in a neat straight line. People we work with as a service are always meant to be heading towards a score of ten but with well-being as an outcome it will vary and also take a long time – not just the six months we are allotted to work with them’.*

Thus while initiatives such as the Pathways system for reviewing the needs of young people leaving such care may be useful in theory their benefits will not be maximised without the funds to enable the practical aspects this identifies to be put in place.

### **Who defines well-being?**

There are differing perceptions of what constitutes well-being and, as with adversity, it may be that the young person's own views of what well-being means to him or her would be the most appropriate place to start a discussion on the subject. Having said this, it would be valid for workers to give their view if they felt that the young person was not expressing the whole picture or setting their expectations very low. There is a danger in imposing individual experiences of well-being on others, for example, a young person may come across as genuinely happy even if their experience of abuse makes this difficult for workers to accept or, similarly, if they appear to be very socially isolated. Seeking out indications of unhappiness because we feel they must be there may not be beneficial to young people.

In many ways, society also dictates what constitutes a well-being norm. Newman (2004) cites the example of street-wise young people who have learned to survive and cope by adopting a life of petty crime, who have developed a form of resilience and possibly a sense of well-being stemming from their life-style (Rew et al, 2001). However, the implications of this life-style are not acceptable to wider society and arguably may not lead to long-term sustainable well-being for the young people involved, as they face the consequences of breaking society's rules.

Different levels of functioning and expectations of well-being are sometimes set for children and young people according to their previous experiences. For example, aspirations for children who have suffered significant abuse or neglect may be more about their ability to cope or function reasonably well than an expectation that they will thrive (Kinard, 1998). Similarly, a young person who has moved from a damaging family or care situation and is able to survive in their own tenancy may seem to be meeting a 'well-being indicator' defined as having their own home.

*'If you take the young person feeling isolated in their new tenancy, those who survive you would define as resilient but it wouldn't necessarily be that they are displaying well-being. Are they just okay? Are they just coping or thriving?'*

He or she may not be experiencing feelings of well-being, but of isolation and fear of 'failure'; this begs the question whether being less miserable than before really equates to well-being. Thus a young person may be demonstrating apparent resilience in coping with the demands of a new situation but not necessarily be experiencing a sense of well-being (Luthar, 1991). On the other hand, it has been suggested that children who are deaf may develop a resilience factor which helps them to find comfort in solitude and that this does equate to a feeling of well-being (Rogers et al, 2003). The extent to which well-being can be measured is clearly an equally complex issue.

### 3. INTERVENTIONS

*Key questions: How do we ensure that resilience-based interventions are effective for young people in the longer-term? How do we help young people develop strong relationships but avoid dependency, especially on professional staff? How can we ensure that work on the ‘softer’, hard-to-measure life skills continue, especially in a time of reduced funding?*

#### **Strengthening relationships**

Assisting and encouraging young people to build positive and supportive relationships with others is clearly a desirable component of resilience-promoting interventions, particularly if these have not featured in their earlier lives; however, there is considered to be a dilemma if this means fostering a dependence on professional staff with whom it would not be possible for young people to have on-going contact. Some suggest that one way to address this might be to move to a social pedagogy model which is currently being explored in England. This might enable young people to develop more consistent relationships with staff who oversee their care, although current practitioners from a range of professional backgrounds already have extensive skills in relationship-building. Most people have at least one or two consistent figures in their lives to whom they can return for support, however some young people have little choice about moving on from staff with whom they have formed a good relationship. Either young people should be enabled to return to a significant worker for support on an on-going basis if required or the role of workers must be to model the forming of attachments and the ability to move on from these attachments in a positive way. There may need to be a form of ‘managed dependency’ which assumes that people will need to be dependent upon services and rather than seeing that as a failure, with plans for people to move on in a way that is clear about the nature of the support (Tanner and Turney, 2003) The difficulty is in workers knowing whether this has been successfully achieved when contact with young people is not maintained.

Ideally local communities are the place for young people to develop sustainable relationships but sometimes a pervasive attitude of mistrust is a barrier to this taking place; the judgmental stance adopted by some local politicians and by the media often exacerbates this.

*‘My interest in relation to resilience is defined by the security and opportunities that a community can provide - such as in relation to youth work, the local youth club, the youth worker who is there every week. We need to look at what we can do in communities, what do young people who are in transition need in their communities? It’s unbelievable what’s missing in communities that used to be there – there’s nothing going on for young people and what would provide them with social experiences and opportunities’.*

Even some social care policies, such as the Youth Crime Action Plan in England (Home Office, 2008) identifies young people as ‘victims’ of their circumstances until the age of sixteen and as suddenly responsible for their circumstances and actions on attaining that age. When asked, young people often say that they aspire to a home, a job, good friendships and a feeling of belonging. The local community is an obvious setting for the development of facilities within which to address many aspects of resilience-focused work.

The Prince's Trust Youth Cafe offers a model which can provide a range of experiences for young people who work there or who are involved with it in some capacity; these experiences include work experience, the forging of a sense of responsibility, enhancing feelings of value and belonging and relationship building with peers and adults.

Schemes which encourage young people to become volunteers within their community have also proven to be useful in developing aspects of resilience; young people gain self-confidence from being given responsibility for others and are able to build relationships with people across all walks of life.

The role of young people as 'campaigners for change' in issues which affect them can be a constructive way of encouraging them to join with others, build relationships and help them to overcome feelings of powerlessness and individual responsibility for their difficulties. Quarriers has involved young people in this way in campaigning about housing issues for young people.

All these models are valuable in building young people's social capital and helping them to develop a longer-lasting and 'quiet', rather than superficial type of confidence.

A key aspect of building resilience is to acknowledge the important part played by a range of people on a day-to-day basis in young people's lives; the maximisation of social networks and encouragement of differing types of contact with others can help to provide a safety net against isolation.

### **Role modelling: individual and organisational**

In general, young people appear to be spending less time with adults than was previously the case (UNICEF, 2007) and in some instances this can be detrimental to the building of positive role models for, and inter-generational relationships with young people.

*'We need, as a society, to value the volunteers and people who come every week to run the youth club, scout group or whatever; their input to the community is so important'.*

The role of volunteers, particularly befrienders and mentors, to young people must not be underestimated; when asked, young people appreciate the fact that volunteer befrienders spent time with them because they want to and not because they are being paid to do so. The informality of the relationship and the opportunity to take part in different activities and develop skills and talents are seen as important to young people.

In parallel with this, agencies and organisations working with young people can also provide an effective role-model by listening to and involving young people in setting their policies.

Some voluntary agencies involve young people in activities such as staff interviews and training. In some instances, young people are also involved in policy development meetings; this is increasingly the practice in a number of voluntary agencies and within at least one local authority Child Protection Committee policy arena.

Participation in these activities is valuable in allowing young people to build a range of transferable skills while also enhancing their self-efficacy and self-confidence. It also allows for meaningful service user involvement to take place, rather than the sometimes hollow promise of ‘listening to young people’ by including them in research and consultation which may not bring tangible results.

Work which helps children to develop the social and emotional skills to cope with adversity and have the language to discuss any difficulties they were experiencing is taking place in universal settings, such as in school. Some teachers appear to believe that such skills are an innate characteristic of children but it has become clear that they require modelling and encouraging in children from a very early stage of their lives. Parents often need help with this skill-development also and addressing it through Adult Education classes has proved to be a useful route.

The City of Edinburgh Council’s Growing Confidence Project promotes positive mental health and emotional wellbeing for children and young people, parents, carers and staff; it brings practitioners across Edinburgh together to work in partnership to develop and deliver programmes and training in this area of work. It is working with 10 primary schools across the city, in Early Years and community settings in order to promote inter-agency work.

### **Evidencing and promoting resilience-based work**

While it is possible to describe a number of interventions which provide opportunities to enable young people to develop self-efficacy and self-esteem, it is more challenging to articulate when the process of **promoting** such characteristics become the point at which such ‘outcomes’ have been **achieved** and even more so to measure the **extent** to which they have been achieved. Successful ‘outcomes’ of this type are difficult to measure, particularly in the short-term. Explaining to policy makers and funders that interventions which help build social networks and life skills can lead to the enhancement of young people’s inner strengths and may prevent young people going through a revolving door of dependence on services is one thing but it is hard to prove in tangible, measurable terms.

A major issue in evidencing the effectiveness of resilience-based work is that most of its benefits are unlikely to become clear within a short time period. The work has to be undertaken at a young person’s pace and may only bear fruit at a later stage of his or her life. While it is possible to argue that interventions based on resilience-promoting principles are

grounded in well-founded principles, the long term nature of the work does not sit well with the current political drive for short-term results.

Researchers and practitioners need to try to hold firm and keep reinforcing the point that there are no quick fixes. There are similar arguments to be made for other types of case-work, arguments that have been well-rehearsed over the years, within social work at least. There are grounds for some optimism that the case for sustainable ways of working is gaining ground in Scotland, amongst policy-makers and, to some extent, possibly politicians too. It is acknowledged, however, that it is particularly difficult for voluntary agencies to make the case for this type of longer-term work when short-term funding is often linked to 'results' and 'hard' outcomes which must be visible within a limited time period.

It is possible for practitioners and researchers to influence policy and the inclusion of the resilience framework within the GIRFEC guidance is testament to this. The onus is on those who use resilience theory in work and research with young people to clarify its operation and disseminate evidence about HOW this works in practice.

*'Practitioners and researchers need to have confidence in resilience theory and be able to articulate exactly what it means. If we promote its use across agencies we will get more professional respect and understanding of it will increase'.*

There are a number of fora developing for the exchange of knowledge about research and practice. In addition to innovative work taking place in voluntary agencies there is much ground-breaking and routine work occurring in local authorities, much of which is not written-up and disseminated. We could learn as much from what goes right as from the enquiry reports about what has gone wrong, when a tragedy takes place. In essence, there needs to be clarity about the aims of interventions and a more confident attitude adopted in arguing for their validity.

#### 4. TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT

*Key questions: What form should training in resilience work take and who needs training in it? What does a resilience framework offer work with young people? How should the work be developed from here?*

##### **Training**

Resilience theory is now a core component in much social work education, although training could be improved in both group work skills and relationship-building with children in order to operationalise its use. Students and practitioners should from now on be encouraged to make use of resilience theory as part of their assessment of children and young people, given its place in the GIRFEC documentation and Integrated Assessment Framework. However, it will only be useful if assessment leads to interventions to address the needs this identifies.

The current focus on cross-agency understanding and collaboration indicates a need for shared training in resilience-based work across these agencies (social work, education, health and voluntary agencies). ‘Common Core’ (HM Government, 2005) or shared training modules in child development work across professions is taking place in parts of England and there is discussion about this happening in Scotland. The need for a common language across professions, which defines key terms in a common way, is deemed essential.

It was suggested that resilience and other major theories could usefully be relayed to a wider range of people who work with children, for example housing workers and volunteer befrienders; some Children’s Panel members and foster carers have been included in GIRFEC training and this does include some input on resilience.

In one area, classroom assistants are undertaking training in resilience, in addition to other theories, and return for a second stage of training to discuss within the group how use of such theories have worked in practice; many find that they can see a significant improvement in children’s behaviour.

Scottish Social Networks is involving a wide range of people who work with and have contact with a young person in training to help them develop social supports and networks; this is seen as a crucial component of enhancing the young person’s resilience in a sustainable way.

It may be important for managers to be included in training so that practitioners’ enthusiasm for using resilience-based interventions can be understood and included in work planning.

With a new emphasis on multi-agency work there needs to be clarity about which role and aspect of the work with young people each professional is responsible for, whether this is resilience-based or not. This would be a valuable issue to cover in training, as would training

which clarifies whether the worker's role is to provide support to the young person themselves or help him or her to develop informal and preferably sustainable supports.

*'The Social Networks Service is trying to train qualified and unqualified staff and volunteers who have contact with young people, for example housing workers, using a resilience perspective, as another way of helping them understand what's going on with a young person'.*

In some instances there can be too many professionals involved with families which can result in a lack of clarity about who is responsible for a particular area of work. In some cases, there might not be a need for professional staff to be involved with a young person at all and resilience-building work could more appropriately be undertaken by people in the young person's informal support systems. Indeed, in some situations a young person might find it easier to talk through a traumatic occurrence with someone they previously knew.

### **Accessibility to young people and families**

Resilience as a theory is considered by some to be simple to understand and to convey to others. In some respects it can be regarded as a very common-sense approach and can be broken down into easily understood component parts (Daniel and Wassell, 2002). On the other hand there is complexity in differentiating process from outcomes and explaining this difference, however, we should not underestimate people's ability to grasp ideas and the theory has the advantage of starting from a positive base.

*'Explaining resilience to young people and giving them the information, the knowledge, is a good way of getting involved with young people in a positive way and building work with them. The Resilience Framework is relatively simple to grasp and can be tackled straight on. And young people often know more than we think we can discuss with them'.*

It would be instructive to find out what resilience means to young people themselves. Experience from the Daniel, Vincent et al study (2008) showed that some young people and their parents were able to articulate very clearly which aspects of the resilience domains they needed help with. It is in any case both empowering and motivating to share knowledge and expectations with service users.

### **What else does resilience as a theory contribute?**

What does resilience as a concept add to practice, given that its components could be considered equally valid in any strengths-based work with young people? Using resilience theory as a way of guiding practice was considered useful in clarifying a worker's thinking about the component parts required to help a young person develop in a positive manner; it focuses on what can be done to make a difference for that young person in a practical way. Its structure offers prompts for asking different kinds of questions about how a young person operates; this can be challenging in that it may give the worker a new and possibly deeper range of aspects of a young person's life to consider. It also prompts the key question 'what does this young person need?' Not as defined by the agency by which the worker is employed but starting with the individual young person's needs.

The Resilience Matrix has been used to good effect as an assessment tool within a school setting; the head teacher supported its use which has resulted in work being undertaken with young people which has led to a reduction in the number of exclusions.

Resilience is a theoretical tool which offers a framework for individual development and at the same time prompts questions about how a young person manages and copes with the situations he or she may face in their lives; it is also attractive to practitioners due to its strengths-based emphasis. It is not a concept that offers all the answers and may best be used as part of a spectrum of approaches; it could be combined with other theory-based practice such as attachment work and social skills training.

### **Developing evaluation**

There is clearly a need to continue to develop evaluation methods and skills and find a range of ways of evidencing that the use of resilience theory, and practice based on it, does make a difference to young people and should continue to be a valid intervention. There must be wider recognition amongst policy makers and politicians that there are a number of ways to look at outcomes and measure effectiveness; Evaluation Support Scotland (see link to website in references section) was noted as a useful resource for evaluation methods. The systems we have in place do not generally support longer-term work with children and young people; however, these barriers have been around for many years and we need to continue to argue for and evidence the effectiveness of services which address young people's needs in a sustainable way. Research can play its part in offering evidence that interventions which work within a resilience framework can at least start to make a difference for young people.

## CONCLUSION

Key points from the seminar are:

- it had been valuable to have an opportunity for the exchange of knowledge and experience about resilience-based work and this demonstrates that there is a range of views about what this work entails, across the academic and practice community;
- resilience-based work is commonly regarded as having a positive approach, due in part to research –based evidence to underpin its use ;
- it is recognised that resilience is part of a spectrum of theories, including attachment theory and emotional literacy, and is not necessarily a stand-alone approach;
- resilience work shows the importance of building on the natural helping processes in order to assist young people in achieving sustainable outcomes;
- it is beneficial to work from young people and their families' own understanding of what is important to them at that time; if professionals have a different view this can also be communicated to them.

## **Summary of key issues for practitioners**

### **Questions to ask ourselves when working with young people**

#### **Adversity:**

What does adversity mean to the young people we work with? How would they define adversity? Do we assess support needs against an agreed list? What if the adversity the young person is experiencing is not on the list – can we help?

Is the adversity the young person is experiencing societal/structural? Are they experiencing adversity because of decisions which have been made by others...housing....poverty....etc? It is important that a young person understands when something is bigger than them and can see they are not to blame, however 'I can't do anything about it' is a dangerous trap to fall into. How do we get the balance right?

Is it more constructive to start discussions with young people by identifying well-being factors rather than those relating to adversity?

#### **Wellbeing:**

How do we assess wellbeing? What language do we use? What do we do if the young person we support finds it difficult to express emotion? How can we support them to express themselves?

Does wellbeing have to be articulated? Can it be demonstrated? Can we assess self efficacy or empathy and assume wellbeing?

#### **Resilience:**

What is resilience, coping or thriving? Can we support young people to cope and encourage them to thrive?

Does the young person have a secure base from which to explore the world and come back to? Are they reassured if they fail, and encouraged to learn for next time? Are we as workers a secure base? How do we allow young people to experience risk? How do we encourage and support them to experience personal adversity which they can overcome and use to build confidence and resilience?

#### **Interventions:**

How do we move young people on? How do we support young people to make sustainable relationships away from us and find a new secure base? Where do we find positive role models for young people? When and how do we support the young person to make these connections, to build and maximise their social networks? Where are these connections to be found, in their community?

How do we evaluate resilience based work which may not reap success for a young person for a number of years, or until adversity strikes again?

**Training and Development:**

How do we feel about talking about resilience and resilience theory? Do we use it with other practitioners when assessing needs of young people? Are we confident in making the links between the theory and the interventions?

How comfortable are we in involving the young people in this process? They are the experts in themselves.

**Conclusion:**

Resilience-based work is useful in prompting wider ways of looking at a young person's situation, with them, and in focusing on practical ways of problem-solving and helping them to develop supportive social networks.

Brigid Daniel  
Professor of Social Work, Department of Applied Sociology, University of Stirling

Cheryl Burgess  
Researcher, University of Stirling

Malcolm Hill  
Research Professor, University of Strathclyde, Glasgow School of Social Work  
Associate Director, CRFR Centre for Research on Families and Relationships

Ella Simpson  
Chief Executive, The Rock Trust

Allison Calder  
Youth Development Manager, The Rock Trust

Stuart Mair  
Manager, Canongate Youth Centre

Romy Langeland  
Chairman, The Rock Trust  
Honorary Professor (Child Welfare and Protection) University of Stirling

Julie Hunter  
Cosla Secondee, Housing Access & Support Division, Scottish Government

Patricia Santelices  
Project Manager, Growing Confidence Project, City of Edinburgh Council

Margaret Dougall  
Practitioner, Quarries

Dr Sharon Vincent  
Research Fellow: Child Protection, CLiCP

Eddie Brown  
Practitioner, Glasgow Social Work

Clare Smith  
Practitioner, Glasgow Social Work

Julie Connelly  
Practitioner, Children 1<sup>st</sup>

Graham Bell  
Chief Executive, Kibble

Phil Robinson  
Chief Executive, Quarriers

Lesley Stenhouse  
Co-ordinator, Scottish Social Networks Forum

Margo Fyfe  
CAMHS Nurse Advisor, Scottish Government

Cathy McNaughton  
CEO, Multi-Cultural Family Base

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