

**International Dialogue on Resilience:
Promising Practices for School Systems**

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Dialogue Proceedings

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by Eva Oberle
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Executive Summary

In November/December 2009, the Canadian Council on Learning (CCL) and the Robert Bosch Foundation brought together an international group of experts in the field of resilience to discuss approaches to promoting and enhancing resilience in German and Canadian children and youth. The participating researchers, practitioners and policy-makers were from Canada and Germany, along with a selected group of experts from Australia and the United States. The aim of the international dialogue was to discuss practical approaches to promoting resilience in children and youth as learners, drawing on a wide spectrum of international expertise in education and thus, learning from each other's experiences.

Objectives of the Meeting:

- To discuss practical and holistic approaches to fostering resilience in children and youth;
- To identify effective strategies for schools and educators to enhance resilience;
- To identify opportunities for supportive partnerships in resilience initiatives;
- To bridge the gap between research and practice in the field of resilience;
- To identify current barriers for resilience initiatives, and possible solutions for overcoming those barriers;
- To define criteria of success in resilience initiatives, and establish ground rules of evaluating programs through research; and
- To learn how other fellow practitioners and policy-makers have established and maintained resilience-enhancing programs successfully.

Presentations provided by researchers and practitioners during the dialogue unanimously emphasized the significant role of schools, teachers, communities and families in fostering resilience in children and youth at risk. Besides the significant role of each individual system, the importance lies in collaboration and constructive communication between those systems. For instance, parents need to be included in a positive and meaningful way in their children's school life, instead of only being

contacted when their children are failing or misbehaving in the classroom. All participants shared the belief that resilience initiatives require an overall positive and strengths-based approach to education, fostering positive youth development in a culturally sensitive way. Resilience approaches need to be embodied in a set of values, reflecting an approach to education, rather than in a specific program that is implemented in schools as an additive component to the curriculum. Promoting resilience through health and competence in children and youth requires healthy practitioners. Teachers need to be provided with the necessary resources during their own professional development in order to be capable of practicing according to the philosophy of positive youth development. Greg Enion, Superintendent of Instruction and School Services for the Regina Public School Division, has introduced smaller groups in his Division's professional development sessions to allow for more input from teachers in the school process.

There was consensus that resilience initiatives need to reach *all* children, instead of focusing on particular subgroups of the population. Research presented by Manfred Prenzel, Dean of the TUM School of Education, clarified that despite the tendency for students from higher socio-economic backgrounds to perform better on large-scale assessments in Germany there is a significant group of students from middle-call and high socio-economic background that is significantly underperforming. Resilience therefore needs to be fostered in all children and youth in ways appropriate for the individual.

All experts agreed that some practitioners already embed their practice into resilience fostering approaches both in Canada and in Germany. To provide an example, Greg Enion shared his successful experiences with teaching within a "Circle of Courage" philosophy—a model that integrates Western educational thought with the wisdom of indigenous cultures and emerging research on positive youth development by fostering the four pillars of *Belonging, Independence, Generosity* and *Mastery*.

The main barriers that were identified in moving toward an education system that prioritizes resilience—both, in Germany and Canada—were the lack of resources for

schools, too much demand on teachers who have too little training in a strengths-based approach, missing communication and partnership between schools, families and communities, and the difficulty of translating the highly complex, sometimes even contradictory definitions of resilience into practice.

Key Messages of the Dialogue:

1. Concerning the individual:

- All children and youth have potential; the key is to create opportunities for students to discover their potential and experience success;
- There are many ways to competence; competences are not bound to the 'Three R's': reading, 'riting, and 'rithmetic;
- Children and youth do not only live in the school environment, therefore, the need to measure competences beyond the school; and
- Obtain the students' perspective of their own learning experiences.

2. Concerning schools, practitioners and public policy:

- Resilience needs to be enhanced from within a healthy, positive and strengths-based education system;
- Teachers need to be given the necessary resources to teach with a positive developmental approach;
- Practitioners need to work closely with families and communities; and
- Public policy has to be child- and family-centered.

3. Concerning programs:

- Programs to enhance resilience need to be holistic and culturally sensitive, addressing multiple levels that contribute to child well-being and positive youth development.

4. Concerning research:

- Resilience initiatives need to be evaluated with appropriate and psychometrically and methodologically sound methods; and
- Knowledge translation is necessary to translate the complex construct of resilience into practice.

International Dialogue on Resilience: Promising Practices for School Systems

1. Background

Traditionally, classical western education systems have focused on measuring student success on competences in solely academic areas such as reading, writing and math, with little opportunity to define competence outside those traditionally valued areas. Furthermore, a deficit- and risk-driven model in both research and practice was usually applied to identify and explain factors that predict children's and youth's failure in the education system, namely academic underperformance and early school drop out, and related issues such as drug abuse and involvement in criminal activities. With the aim to shift the focus from risk to opportunity, a series of provincial and territorial meetings in Canada led to The Learning Partnership's *National Dialogue on Resilience in Youth* (November, 2008) which concluded with the key findings that:

- a) A strengths- and assets-based approach to child and youth development is of protective value[†];
- b) Optimal development during the early childhood years is the key to fostering health and resilience in children;
- c) Positive relationships with caring and nurturing adults are the most important factor in promoting resilience; and
- d) In order to foster resilience on multiple levels, partnerships need to be formed between the education system and social and community services.

Based on those key findings, an international group of experts in the field of resilience and education came together in November/December 2009 with the purpose to discuss practical approaches to promoting resilience in learners, drawing on international experiences of researchers, practitioners, and policy-makers. Whereas the topic of resilience has been openly discussed in the Canadian educational context for approximately two years now, resulting in a number of programs and initiatives that are currently implemented across the country, the concept is more novel to German educators. However, even though resilience per se is currently not officially formulated in

[†] The strengths- and assets-based approach offers a level of protection against the disappointment of failures by ensuring children and youth learn to bounce back.

German educational policies, some strengths-based initiatives have already been taken by dedicated practitioners whose philosophy of education is strengths- and assets-oriented. In the field of early learning, resilience is a more well-known notion.

2. What does the research tell us?

Resilience research examines *why* and *how* some individuals when exposed to risk and adversity in life develop in a healthy and positive way by 'beating the odds'. The core of resilience research is the focus on individuals' strengths and assets (as opposed to deficits) when understanding human development. Tuppett Yates, Assistant Professor at the University of California, Riverside, emphasized that there is no such 'resilient child.' Instead, resilience is a dynamic process that is determined by multiple factors.

Resilience is anchored in the developmental history of an individual, viewed as an inherent capacity within individuals that is enabled as a function of nurture. Paul Cappon emphasized the importance of internal and external protective factors contributing to healthy and adaptive development in children and youth at risk. This has been identified on multiple levels:

- a) Within the child (e.g., intelligence, self-regulation skills, positive outlook on life, ability to form close and positive relationships);
- b) Within the family context (e.g., close relationships with parenting adults, socio-economic advantages, parents who are involved in child's education); and
- c) Within the community (e.g., attending effective schools, friendships with pro-social peers, communities with opportunities and support for children and families).

The key protective factor that seems to enhance resilience in a significant way is the ability to form close relationships with caring adults. Besides parents, caring adults can also be teachers, extended family members, or other adults in a child's life. There is wide consensus that early childhood, in particular, is a sensitive developmental period that affects children's healthy cognitive, social, and emotional development in life. The early years are a critical time of children's cognitive and brain development, and they are pivotal for secure attachment which results in the ability to engage in positive relationships. Researchers recommend starting resilience programs as early as possible (if possible, prevention instead of intervention), with initiatives being:

- a) Appropriate for a given developmental stage,
- b) Strengths- and assets-based,
- c) Appropriate for the context and the culture in which they are being implemented, and
- d) Evidence-based as evaluated by systematic research.

Embracing the complex multi-leveled construct of resilience, programs should strive to be holistic, connecting communities, families and the education system with each other.

3. Status quo: Words from the practice

The school system is of invaluable importance when it comes to promoting resilience in individuals. Especially for children and youth who are considered to be at risk, positive and close relationships with teachers and peers in school are significant for their healthy development. As reported by Greg Enion, one of the challenges that the Canadian education system currently faces are lower academic achievement and higher school drop out rates for students from a Métis or First Nations background. In Germany and Canada, children and youth from a socio-economically disadvantaged background tend to perform significantly worse on academic skills assessments than students from a higher socio-economic background. However, socio-economic advantages do not automatically lead to better academic performance. Manfred Prenzel showed that there is also a subgroup of middle- and upper class students that is academically underperforming. This is not to say that underperforming students lack general competence; however, the traditional school system often does not value competences outside the traditional academic areas (e.g., reading, math, science), resulting in little opportunities for certain types of students to excel in what they are good at (e.g., sports, arts). Unfortunately, sports and arts programs are often the first considered when cutting programs. Moreover, schools frequently fail to ignite the spark of interest for certain disciplines such as science.

Teachers work with a variety of students in their classrooms, each student exhibiting a different profile of skills, capacities, interests, motivation, and beliefs. Despite this large individual variability, practitioners often use the same teaching, assessment, and evaluation methods for all students in a standardized way, an approach that does not do justice to the student as an individual. Suzan Bacher, director of the Institute for School

Development in Baden-Württemberg in Germany, introduced a new approach to learning, recently developed at said Institute. In this approach teachers are trained to 1. *observe*, 2. *describe*, 3. *assess*, and 4. *promote* the individual child, making the shift from standardized teaching to focusing on the individual as a learner. In order to engage children and youth as learners in a positive way and to awaken their interest, the right conditions for motivation need to be created. Teachers need to support each learner's specific competences, present the learning content in a way that is relevant for students, and give students autonomy in the learning process. To provide a further example, Ingrid Ahlring, the principal of a comprehensive school in Wiesbaden which recently won the German School Award, demonstrated a successful approach of fostering positive social and academic development in students through a learning model that includes social responsibility, self-directed learning, and project-based learning. Students in this school are being taught by the same team of teachers throughout the entire duration of their involvement at the school (six years), giving teachers ample opportunity to get to know their students' strengths, talents and potential, and to form a strong relationship with each individual. The students, in turn, are invited to set class rules and regulations and are permitted a voice in resolving class conflict on a regular basis. Besides the classical academic curriculum, students take on the responsibility of working in several social institutions in their community for a significant amount of time, such as kindergartens and nursing homes. Large student projects, such as theatre projects, are annually presented to an audience of parents, family members and friends. This philosophy of education ties together the individual learner with its family, community, and society, providing a successful example for fostering resilience.

Some of the current challenges for school systems are limited time and training resources for educators, little independence for teachers and schools in the curriculum, the large number of students in the classroom, and little establishment of partnerships in the community (e.g., health services, social services). Despite these limitations, society and individuals have high expectations and demands on educators, contributing to a situation in which many teachers work under a lot of stress and pressure. From a policy making view, Jean-Vianney Auclair, Assistant Deputy Minister in the Manitoba Department of Education, Citizenship and Youth, pointed out the need for a child- and

family-centered approach to child well-being. Such an approach ensures that departments and sectors which follow the same larger goal, namely enhancing children's well-being, collaborate in their work instead of competing for resources.

4. Recommended strategies to promote resilience in children and youth

In order to move towards a holistic strengths-based approach to education in schools, practitioners need to be equipped with resources on multiple levels, parents have to be invited and encouraged to participate in their children's life as learners, and partnerships need to be formed between schools and the community. For instance, schools should provide opportunities for the teachers to attend professional development programs to learn how to practice with a focus on student assets. Furthermore, structures have to be put in place to enable parents to participate in their children's school life in a positive way. In addition, evidence-based programs that foster resilience should be implemented at a school level, tied into the regular school practices and its philosophy, connecting schools with the community. Ideally, a resilience-enhancing approach to teaching would be transferred to future teachers during their teacher-training program, to entirely embed teaching in a strengths-based model. Kathy Marshall, Executive Director of the National Resilience Resource Centre in Minneapolis, clarified that teachers alone cannot be held responsible for promoting health and competence in children and youth by focusing on their strengths. With little freedom and choice in what and how they teach, teachers practice within the education system that requires them to adhere to a given curriculum, assess students' performance with grades, and to focus on those competences specified within the school's educational approach.

4.1. The role of schools and teachers

Tuppett Yates summarized the significant role teachers and schools have in enhancing resilience in children in one key sentence: "Parents are children's first teachers, and teachers are children's second parents." A positive and close relationship with a teacher has been identified as one crucial protective factor that can contribute to positive adjustment in children and youth at risk. The following are basic elements for schools and teachers that contribute to children's and youth's healthy development as recommended by Wayne Hammond, President of the Resilience Initiative in Canada:

- Schools need to be safe places with a climate of care;

- Schools to act not as an institution but as a community hub with the community taking more ownership;
- School culture and school values have to reflect an assets-based model to learning;
- Teachers have to create opportunities for individuals to succeed;
- Teachers should have high expectations of achievement for every student;
- Teachers to consider the point of view of student as opposed to only the adult point of view; and
- Learning has to take place in a way that fosters intrinsic strengths (e.g., self-esteem).

Suzan Bacher recommends inserting the resilience factor into what the school is already doing well:

- Besides the classical academic skills, children and youth have to learn social and emotional skills such as empathy, social responsibility, social justice; and
- Schools have to be accepting of and incorporate the cultural practices of a community.

4.2. *The need for mentors*

Children and youth need to be given an opportunity to establish positive relationships with mentors. Mentors can be teachers, older students in the school, or adults in the community. Not only does the concept of mentoring provide support for the individual student, it also fosters the value of social responsibility in schools and communities. An example for a successful mentoring program is “Change your Future,” an initiative that was designed by the Toronto Board of Education for youth who belong to an ethnic minority and are considered at risk to increase their levels of educational achievement. The core of the intervention is individual and group counseling with trained counselors. A second successful intervention introduced by Ian Manion, Professor in the Provincial Centre of Excellence for Child and Youth Mental Health at the Children’s Hospital of Eastern Ontario, is “Youth Net,” a mental health promotion and intervention program that involves group mentoring run by youth for youth. There are general key factors that need to be considered in mentoring initiatives:

- Mentors need to give culturally appropriate guidance (e.g., First Nations students need mentors from their own cultural community);
- Mentors need to be trained in a strengths-based model;
- Mentors need their own support system within the educational context (e.g., supervisors who follow up on their mentoring activities, giving advice if needed); and
- Students need to be matched with the right mentor in order to facilitate a positive relationship.

4.3. Reaching families

Parents and families have to be included in their children's education in a positive and constructive way. There are several ways to achieving parental participation. Helle Tosine from The Learning Partnership, Canada, presented the program "Welcome to Kindergarten," an initiative developed and evaluated at The Learning Partnership that provides pre-school children and their families with support, resources and experiences to begin their formal education. The program reaches out to parents, extended family members, and family friends, inviting them into the school and giving them an opportunity to get to know their child's future school life from the beginning on. Furthermore, Klaus Fröhlich-Gildhoff, Director of the Centre for Childhood and Adolescence Research in Freiburg, Germany, introduced "Empower Children," a program for kindergarten children and their families developed at the Centre for Childhood and Adolescence Research. The program fosters resilience through four pillars:

1. Work with the children (training, individual support, target groups);
2. Training of early childhood educators (integrating of the resilience concept into daily routine in the kindergarten, strengths-based case supervision);
3. Work with parents (counseling hours, parenting courses); and
4. Community networking (collaboration with educational counseling centers and social workers).

In general, there was agreement among the experts that getting parents to participate in educational programs or their children's day-to-day life at school can be challenging and needs to be facilitated in multiple ways.

- Incentives have to be created in society for parents to be part of their children's education (such as a day off from work in order to attend school events and meetings with teachers);
- Parents need to be included in their children's success at school (for example, communicating children's strengths to parents instead of an exclusive focus on weaknesses);
- Opportunities for parents to discuss with other parents the class issues of common concern;
- There is a current gap addressing the development of children before pre-school; parents need to have access to parenting classes and counseling services throughout the first few years of parenting; and
- Encourage both parents to participate in their children's education.

4.4. *The importance of partnership and public policy*

Creating partnerships between the education system and communities has the potential of moving toward a holistic child-centered approach. Following the example of the "Healthy Child Strategy Manitoba," initiatives for family and child well-being need to be created *across* the currently vertically existing departments and sectors concerned with family and child well-being, enabling a horizontal integration of sectors that supports a child-centered public policy. There is a need for more voices from outside government such as civil society to engage policy-makers.

- Different sectors concerning child well-being need to collaborate instead of compete;
- Partnerships in resilience initiatives have to be supported by the leadership;
- Partnerships between schools and the community can enhance the social connectedness of families, children and youth;
- Partnerships require constant nurturing, if not, they will fail over time;
- We train teachers and doctors, we may also need to train partnerships;
- Government and the private sector all have to play a part in initiatives to foster resilience;
- A cross-party committee should be used as opposed to a cross-ministerial one, as it will transcend all parties in power; and

- Monetary incentives could be created in the form of tax incentives to bring attention to new programs (for example car insurance rates decrease if youth has taken the driver's education program).

4.5. Programs and evaluation

To ensure the quality of prevention and intervention programs, and educational practices, systematic research needs to be conducted to be certain that the initiatives are in line with the program goals. Steve Dinham, Research Director of the Australian Council for Educational Research Programs, illustrated the importance for programs to be evidence-based and developmentally and culturally appropriate. According to him, "good" prevention and intervention programs have to be:

- Rooted in the community and reflect community values,
- Sustainable,
- Appropriate for the given developmental level,
- Appropriate for the particular group (e.g., cultural background),
- Asking the right questions by determining what one is trying to measure and how often, what one is trying to achieve, and when to communicate results,
- Built with a view to assessment,
- Based on research evidence, evaluated with psychometrically sound quantitative and qualitative methods, and
- Evaluated longitudinally to determine long-term effects.

Evaluations should be based on current research knowledge, but also include child, parent, community and teacher voices. One part of the evaluation needs to ask the focus group what works for them, following the motto: "Nothing about us without us." School-based outcome evaluations have to be communicated in a responsible and strengths-based way avoiding practices such as the public ranking of schools.

5. Conclusions

An African proverb says "It takes a village to raise a child." In alignment with this message, healthy communities with healthy adults and mentors are needed in order to raise healthy children. Educational practices take place within communities, and schools need to be actively linked to their community network, encouraging collaboration and

partnership between the school system and the community. Each community has its own champions and heroes, and those positive examples and role models are the key in fostering strengths in children and youth, giving them a positive outlook on life. Learning is more than just education; it is a complete cultural shift to include the greater community.

Ingrid Hamm, CEO of the Robert Bosch Foundation, summed it as such, “The product for a teacher is a successful student, the measure of that success is resilience.” Resilience has been referred to as ordinary magic that can be facilitated in all individuals at any time in any context by creating opportunities for positive successful experiences. Resilience thus is a *secondary outcome* that is enhanced indirectly through primary conditions. The task of society and communities therefore is to create the primary conditions (e.g., safe and healthy environments for children, positive relationships with caring adults, opportunities to succeed, strengths-based education) that enhance and foster resilience. In the end, the child is the actor of his own change; we as members of the community have to provide children with the tools and skills to make changes toward positive outcomes in their lives (e.g., self regulation, good decision-making, ability to connect with others, autonomy, positive view of the future).

A concern in the roundtable discussion was the variety of definitions used for resilience. Formulating specific strategies for practitioners requires consensus of how exactly the resilience construct is defined. Furthermore, there was ambiguity of whether the resilience initiatives should reach exclusively children and youth at risk, or whether they should be broad enough to reach out to all children. The advantage of focusing on a small group is that initiatives can be specifically tailored to a particular population. However, at the same time, practitioners want all children and youth to benefit from resilience initiatives, requiring a broad and more general approach that may be more difficult to plan, maintain, and evaluate. Wolfgang Meyer-Hesemann, Former State Secretary of the Ministry of Education and Women’s Issues of Schleswig-Holstein, emphasized that a crucial, overarching factor in fostering strengths and positive development is a society, a community and an education system that reflects values, beliefs and an outlook on life aligned with the strengths- and opportunity-based concept

of resilience, reaching all children and youth. A final conclusion by Tuppet Yates was that we do not want to produce geniuses, but rather just ordinary healthy kids, raised within, and forming a healthy community and society.

Appendix A

Roundtable Participant List

Ingrid Ahlring	Headmistress, Helene-Lange-Schule Wiesbaden	i.ahlring@helene-lange-schule.de
Jean-Vianney Auclair	Assistant Deputy Minister, Manitoba Department of Education, Citizenship and Youth	Jean-vianney.auclair@gov.mb.ca
Suzan Bacher	Director, Institute for School Development, Baden-Württemberg	Suzan.bacher@ls.kv.bwl.de
Paul Cappon	President and CEO, Canadian Council on Learning	pcappon@ccl-cca.ca
Natalia de Savigny	Administrator, Canadian Council on Learning	ndesavigny@ccl-cca.ca
Stephen Dinham	Research Director, Australian Council for Educational Research	dinham@acer.edu.au
Christina Distler	Program Assistant for the German School Award, Heidehof Foundation	Christina.distler@bosch-stiftung.de
Greg Enion	Superintendent of Instruction and School Services, Regina Public School Division	Greg.enion@rbe.sk.ca
Klaus Fröhlich-Gildhoff	Director, Centre for Childhood and Adolescence Research Freiburg	Froehlich-gildhoff@efh-freiburg.de
Ingrid Hamm	CEO, Robert Bosch Foundation	Ingrid.hamm@bosch-stiftung.de
Wayne Hammond	President, Resiliency Initiative	wh@resil.ca
Douglas Hodgkinson	Director, Stakeholder Relations, Canadian Council on Learning	dhodgkinson@ccl-cca.ca
Ian Manion	Professor, Provincial Centre of Excellence for Child and Youth Mental Health at CHEO (Children's Hospital of Eastern Ontario)	manion@cheo.on.ca
Kathy Marshall	Executive Director, National Resilience Resource Center (Minneapolis)	Marsh008@umn.edu

Wolfgang Meyer-Hesemann	Former State Secretary, Ministry of Education and Women's Issues of Land Schleswig-Holstein	Meyer-hesemann@web.de
Marc Lachance	Director, Monitoring and Reporting, Canadian Council on Learning	mlachance@ccl-cca.ca
Eva Oberle	Doctoral Student, University of British Columbia	Eva_oberle@yahoo.de
Günther Opp	Professor, Martin-Luther-University Halle-Wittenberg	opp@paedagogik.uni-halle.de
Manfred Prenzel	Dean, TUM School of Education	Manfred.prenzel@tum.de
Roman Roesch	Program Director, Robert Bosch Foundation	Roman.roesch@bosch-stiftung.de
Bernard Terrisse	Professor, Université du Québec à Montréal	Terrisse.bernard@uqam.ca
Helle Tosine	Principal, Strategic Consultants	Helle.tosine@gmail.com
Tuppett Yates	Assistant Professor, University of California (Riverside)	tuppett@ucr.edu