

# INTERVENTIONS FOR RESILIENCE IN EDUCATIONAL SETTINGS: CHALLENGING POLICY DISCOURSES OF RISK AND VULNERABILITY

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## ABSTRACT

*'Resilience' has become a popular goal in research, social policy, intervention design and implementation. Reinforced by its conceptual and political slipperiness, resilience has become a key construct in school-based, universal interventions that aim to develop it as part of social and emotional competence or emotional well-being. Drawing on a case study of a popular behavioural programme used widely in British and American primary schools, this paper uses a critical realist understanding that combines bio-scientific and social constructionist ideas in order to evaluate key challenges for policy, research and practice framed around resilience.*

*The paper argues that although critical social perspectives on resilience illuminate important contemporary manifestations of old problems with behavioural interventions, they often proceed without questioning the assumptions or evaluating the implications of prevailing and powerful discourses about 'risk' and 'vulnerability' that parallel and underpin those about resilience. One effect is that behavioural and critical social perspectives coalesce around arguments about what constitutes a progressive response to an expanding spectrum of risk and vulnerabilities. Instead, we argue for the need to challenge these discourses and to resist government responses to them through more sophisticated behavioural interventions that generate new forms of governance and subjectivity.*

## INTRODUCTION

'Resilience' has become a popular and political concern in growing numbers of countries, attracting much government and academic interest across diverse disciplines and policy settings (e.g. Durodie 2009, Furedi 2008, Aranda et al 2012). In Britain, government proposals for dealing with civic unrest and other potential crises that might affect the population depict resilience as the ability "at every relevant level to detect, prevent and if necessary, to handle and recover from disruptive challenges that can result in crisis" (Cabinet Office 2003). From a broad policy perspective, resilience is the ability of government and its agencies to plan effectively for emergencies in the form of any institutional or organisational attribute that contributes to the management of risk, and a rules-based understanding defines resilience as "the ability at every relevant level to detect, prevent, and if necessary to handle and recover from disruptive challenges that can result in crisis" (Cabinet Office 2003, 11).

High profile political attention focuses on how to engender individual and communal resilience in the face of risks such as terrorist attacks, foot and mouth epidemics, floods or pandemic infections. More widely, the idea that government should sponsor initiatives to develop individuals' and communities' resilience permeates the policy arenas of compulsory schooling, adult community education, child and family welfare, physical and mental health (e.g. Maguni and Bacon 2010). In response, a growing body of academic research from diverse perspectives

attempts to understand, define and explore resilience in different settings in order to improve interventions (e.g. Aranda et al 2012, Author 2 et al 2012).

The current prominence of resilience in policy texts, social research and everyday language belies slippery meanings that present it, simultaneously, as an increasingly important metaphor in the social and political sciences and in public policy making, a concept, a behavioural skill or capability, an attribute, a psychological construct, and a social responsibility or virtue (eg Furedi 2008, Aranda et al 2012, Walker and Broderick 2006, Maguni and Bacon 2010). As we show in this paper, these slippery notions fuel support for 'building resilience' in response to perceptions across different political ideologies that a growing range of risks creates unprecedented emotional and psychological vulnerabilities, and a corresponding increase in those depicted informally and formally by policy makers, researchers and practitioners as 'vulnerable' or 'at risk' (e.g. Furedi op cit, Eves 2009, McLaughlin 2011, Author 1 2012, McLeod 2012).

In educational settings, the notion of building resilience is intertwined with equally slippery discourses around 'well-being' where broader political and philosophical ideas about well-being have transmogrified as largely psychological interpretations (Author 1 2012, Pett 2012). Influenced strongly by positive psychology and Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT), resilience is one of several, inter-related constructs that comprise 'emotional well-being', including optimism, emotional literacy (especially self-awareness, empathy and emotional regulation), altruism, self-esteem and stoicism (see Seligman et al 2009, Sharples 2007). In interventions based on this understanding, resilience is a foundation for a broader set of desirable social and emotional competences. More recently, it has become a key construct in a politically-endorsed revival of an old discourse around 'character building' (see Author 1 2012; also Arthur 2012).

In response to such developments, a university-funded project explored whether a simple framework for understanding resilience in organisms might offer a basis for further theoretical and practical development, and for evaluating resilience interventions in social policy. The project combined insights from bio-science, trauma research, cognitive psychology and sociology to identify unifying 'rules' or guiding principles about the ability of organisms to develop resilience in different contexts. Drawing on the project, a parallel paper to this one adopts a broad conception of resilience as the process of managing and adapting to sources of stress or adversity, and outlined simple rules derived from examining natural entities such as cells, organisms or ecosystems which show high levels of resilience (Author 2 et al 2012). In relation to understanding resilience, we argued that resilient systems follow 4 rules: (A) have the capacity to detect changes which may perturb them (B) link this detection to a response (C) respond in a way which is appropriate, and which in some way either ameliorates the effects of the change or adapts the resilient system to withstand them and to recover from them and (D) end the response when the need is no longer present, since the response is one which will require resources. These rules are biologically adaptive because entities that possess them are more likely to survive, reproduce and reproduce these properties, than those that do not (ibid).

Of course, not only is the idea of identifying how the behaviour of natural organisms might illuminate that of social systems far from new, it is also strongly contested by sociologists from various critical standpoints. Historically, sociology has developed from positivist beginnings to broad acceptance of the need for social constructionist understandings. Critical realists, for

example, object to the application of natural laws to the study of social phenomena as epistemologically and politically naive and inappropriately empiricist (e.g. Bhaskar and Danermark 2006). From this perspective, we need to explore the ideological constructions of discourse by engaging with the dialectical processes through which the social world is constituted, and these insights need to inform truly inter-disciplinary, rather than multi-disciplinary, research in order to overcome reductionism and achieve fuller understandings (Bhaskar 2012; Bhaskar and Danermark 2006).

Taking account of enduring and important objections from a range of critical perspectives, our project explored whether combining rules for resilience from the natural sciences with a social constructionist perspective might enable researchers to achieve a multi-level understanding of the phenomenon, and provide a foundation for exploring better the “protective processes, or mechanisms through which protective factors operate” (Gerwitz and Edleson 2007: 158; Author 2 et al op cit). In the second half of the project, we used the rules to evaluate the Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies programme (PATHS) that teaches resilience as part of children’s broader social and emotional competence. Here we carried out an in-depth analysis of prescribed materials and activities and an in-depth accompanying focus group discussion with three experienced primary school teachers working as local authority advisers on a British city-wide, early prevention initiative to implement PATHS in primary schools (see Author 2 and Author 2012).

In this paper, we use our case study to evaluate whether critical perspectives provide a more coherent, educationally and socially-progressive basis for developing resilience than the behavioural model that dominates school-based interventions such as PATHS. In particular, we argue that, despite important progressive strands to critical understandings of resilience, they seem to overlook growing government and academic interest in more sophisticated applications of behavioural psychology to social policy that is blurring old differences between behavioural and critical perspectives. Instead, we argue that critical perspectives end up coalescing with behavioural ones around a search for better state-sponsored interventions around the common question of how to build resilience amongst ‘vulnerable’ or ‘at risk’ groups and individuals. We structure our arguments in the following way. First, we summarise key claims about resilience made by advocates of school-based behavioural interventions, highlighting that although such claims do not offer a coherent view of resilience, depictions and interventions are dominated by a bio-psychological, rules-based view. Second, we apply critical insights about resilience to PATHS, and draw out key arguments for more progressive approaches to policy and practice framed around resilience. Third, we aim to show that although critical social perspectives illuminate contemporary manifestations of old limitations to a behavioural approach, they often proceed without questioning the assumptions or evaluating the implications of prevailing discourses about ‘risk’ and ‘vulnerability’ that are parallel and underpin those of resilience. We conclude that critical sociologists need to challenge these discourses and their role in creating new subjectivities and new forms of governance.

## **1. BUILDING RESILIENCE IN SCHOOLS**

### **a. The powerful influence of behavioural and positive psychology**

The previous government's sponsorship of universal school-based programmes to enhance emotional well-being depicted resilience as integral to the social and emotional competences listed above and led to a large rise of initiatives to develop them (e.g. Sharples 2007, Coleman 2009, Author 1 2007). Since the late 1990s, a key imperative for interventions in schools framed around emotional well-being and/or emotional competence has been widespread political and public consensus that Britain faces an unprecedented crisis of emotional well-being (e.g. Palmer 2006, Claxton 2002, Johnson et al 2007, White 2007). According to policy-based, professional and popular commentators and global organisations such as UNICEF and the World Health Organisation (WHO), social and technological change, declining social networks and family structures, materialism and a test-driven curriculum have created deteriorating levels of well-being, mental health, and motivation for, and engagement in, formal education (e.g. Layard 2005, Sharples 2007, NEF 2010, Sodha and Gugleimi 2008).

In response, the Labour government between 1997 and 2010 presented educational settings working with other agencies as key sites for a range of activities that aimed to combat a vicious circle of emotional and psychological barriers to participation and success, and the social and emotional needs that ensue (e.g. Coleman op cit, Author 1 and colleague op cit, Gillies op cit, Williams 2009). One response was a marked shift from targeted, specialist interventions for those deemed to have specific problems to the rapid rise of state-funded universal programmes, most notably the Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning Strategy for Schools (SEAL) (e.g. DfES 2005, Hallam 2009, Humphries et al 2009, Lendrum et al 2009, Watson et al 2012, Craig 2007). More prescriptive training programmes require strict fidelity to aims, methods, teaching materials and assessment instruments, most notably the American Penn Resilience programme, piloted in 22 schools in 3 local authorities (South Shields, Hertfordshire and Manchester) and an American programme for Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies (PATHS) which some local authorities have invested in heavily as part of prevention and early intervention initiatives across family and educational settings (e.g. Challen et al 2009, 2011, Curtis and Northgate 2007). Less intensive programmes are also appearing in the form of 'resilience mindset workshops' that aim to help staff to 'cope better with' illness, stress and challenging behaviour amongst colleagues, promoted, for example, by some university human resource departments (eg THE 2013).

American education policy and practice over the past 20 years has been a powerful influence on high profile initiatives in British schools such as SEAL, PATHS and the Penn Resilience Programme. These offer an understanding of resilience dominated by positive psychology, a variation on behavioural psychology which combines insights and activities from various strands of philosophy, cognitive psychology, humanistic or person-centred counselling, popular guides for self-help and neuroscience (eg Peterson and Seligman 2004, Seligman 2011; see also Kavanagh et al 2012). Advocates claim that resilience is integral to a broader set of emotional and social 'competences and that these can be taught and then transferred successfully to numerous life and educational situations, with powerful positive effects. For example, in its evaluation of implementing the Penn Resilience Programme in local secondary schools, Hertfordshire local authority argues that *"developing resilience skills early can reduce anxiety and depression, promote effective decision making and enhance relationships and meaning"* (Bailey 2010, 1). Derived from Cognitive Behavioural Therapy, a highly structured series of 18 lessons aims to:

“Build a safe learning environment for young people to understand their thoughts and feelings, learn new skills and coping strategies and then to practice (sic) them through case studies, role play, investigation and talking games, worksheets...reinforced through homework. The 18 lessons build systematically to...develop a more sophisticated understanding about their thinking style and how this impacts both on how they *feel* and *what they do*.... (original emphasis). If students are able to think more accurately and flexibly about different or difficult situations then they will be more likely to solve problems effectively, keep things in perspective, not give up and enhance their optimism and confidence.... (Bailey 2010, 2).

In *ad hoc* ways, interventions framed around resilience and broader notions of well-being derive therapeutic activities and underlying claims for effectiveness from diverse strands in mental health, counselling, self-help, educational and clinical psychology (eg Author 1 and Colleague 2009, Gillies 2011, Author 1 2012). Similar therapeutic adaptations of behavioural psychology are also evident in other countries, most notably in America but also in Sweden and Finland (eg Dahlstedt et al 2011, Brunila 2011, 2012). Outside the sociological critiques of these developments cited here, there are attempts to counter a reductionist behavioural understanding of resilience and associated constructs by resurrecting spiritual and philosophical ideas about well-being and relating these to positive psychology (e.g. Pett 2012, Kristjansson 2012).

#### **b. The Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies programme (PATHS)**

Drawing strongly on CBT, PATHS offers a tightly-framed set of activities and accompanying materials that encourage children to become more aware of their own emotional arousal and to link this to a calm, considered, step-wise response, using an explicit vocabulary to regulate their emotions as a basis for better reasoning about action and problem-solving. Like other programmes to promote social and emotional learning (SEL), this intervention encourages children to explore their responses to environmental stressors that perturb them and teaches coping skills that might ameliorate their effects (see Curtis and Norgate, 2007, Author 2 and Author 1 2012). As with other resilience interventions, PATHS encompasses both an environmental and personal skills approach, fostering protective factors such as changes in school atmosphere and culture to encourage skills in emotional literacy, and “empathy and openness in dealing with emotional needs” (Kam et al, 2004: 67, also Mcgrath, 2000).

Acknowledging a need to connect behaviour and environment, PATHS encourages practitioners, participants and their parents and carers to identify environmental changes that might afford opportunities to use the skills being taught (Curtis and Norgate, 2007). Through a ‘whole school approach’, the programme involves all staff including playground supervisors and canteen assistants whilst also encouraging parents and carers to help children practise skills at home, thereby promoting their transfer and reinforcement. In addition to teaching certain response sequences, after which children are encouraged to ‘evaluate’, the programme aims to develop children’s longer term subjectivity and identity, rooted in an assumption that skills or competencies become embedded within ongoing ‘character development’. When viewed

through the lens of ‘resilience’, the programme embodies a view of the phenomenon as both a learned response which can be turned on and off, and a process with developmental and situational mechanisms (Mohaupt, 2008).

Supporters argue that PATHS adapts children, families, classrooms and schools as interactive systems that can withstand and recover from stressors or change, and, in turn, promotes ‘school improvement’ and better outcomes in relationships, education and health (e.g. Curtis and Norgate, 2007; Kam et al, 2004; Morpeth and Bywater, 2011). Proponents claim that ‘high fidelity’ by teachers and other professionals to prescribed activities and their underlying goals improves educational, social and health outcomes, thereby helping to address educational, social and health inequalities (see Morpeth and Bywater, 2011). Evaluators claim reduced levels of aggression, substance abuse and risky sexual behaviour, while practitioners perceive far-reaching effects on children’s educational and social skills, and through involving parents, on aspects of family life too (e.g. Curtis and Norgate op cit, Author 2 and Author 1 in press).

An alternative to centralised programmes is to embed a problem-based, behavioural approach in subject teaching. For example, an American teacher training programme in mathematics trains new teachers to make attention to resilience explicit by raising pupils’ awareness of their emotional fears and blocks to mathematics, and then changing the negative effects of these on motivation and achievement through a self-talk, problem-solving approach and lesson and assessment feedback that highlights examples of lack of resilience or successful uses of it (e.g. Swanson 2012). This approach echoes that promoted in other initiatives to embed affective and emotional aspects of learning in subjects, through notions such as ‘learning to learn’ or ‘learning power’ (e.g. Claxton 2002). Promoted as a key contribution to emotional well-being, subject-based initiatives aim to counter prescriptive, discrete programmes (Claxton in Sharples 2007).

### **c. A rules-based approach to resilience**

It is unsurprising that a simple rules-based understanding of resilience underpins the behavioural assumptions that permeate both policy texts and interventions such as PATHS. As we noted in the introduction, the notion of ‘bouncing back’ as a way of adapting to, and withstanding, some disruption is widely used in policy texts. These understandings simultaneously derive from and reinforce four strong interrelated claims: that teachers should switch explicit attention from subject-based curriculum content and associated skills, where resilience (and other constructs such as confidence, self-esteem etc) might be a by-product, to direct awareness-raising of, and interventions in, emotions and feelings that trigger problem-solving strategies; that resilience is a combination of skill, attitude and disposition and an essential precondition or foundation for learning; that children, young people and adults can be taught to be resilient; and that resilience endures and transfers between different contexts. More broadly, these arguments are used to advocate a dispositions-based curriculum (see Author 1 2013, Priestley and Biesta 2013).

At the micro level of behavioural intervention in PATHS, promotional literature, prescribed materials and activities, formal evaluations and our own case study also show the extent to which the resilience rules are embedded in the programme. In our framework, Rule A, the ability to detect, respond and adapt to potential or actual damage or threat, is reflected in

PATHS through a focus on everyday ‘uncomfortable’ feelings or emotional responses to situations (Domitrovich et al 2004). In initiatives such as SEAL, this rule reflects claims from advocates of emotional literacy and intelligence that an “ability to understand and discuss emotions is related to [an] ability to inhibit behaviour through verbal self-control” (Curtis and Norgate, 2007: 35, see also Weare 2004). According to teacher-advisers in our study, a virtuous circle emerges from children’s ability to recognise when they are having ‘uncomfortable’ or ‘comfortable’ feelings, identify what those feelings are like and label and communicate them. Here an ‘emotions vocabulary’ is a foundation for the skills of detecting feelings that create anxiety or worry, becoming calm and generating solutions and then evaluating them (see also Weare op cit). PATHS presents these skills as an essential preamble for bringing about effective change through an explicit, shared process, first by detecting a problem and its accompanying emotion as a first step in building resilience, then assisting peers to do the same before extending this eventually to explore the feelings and responses of significant contemporary and historical figures (Author 2 and Author 2012).

This systematic, structured approach also reflects Rule C (respond in a way which is appropriate, either to ameliorate the effects of the change or to adapt the resilient system to withstand and recover from it). Here, definitions of ‘appropriate’ reflect normative assumptions whilst avoiding constructing behaviours in overtly moralistic terms. Practitioners are not supposed to judge feelings but resulting behaviours which are depicted as ‘ok’ or ‘not ok’ (rather than good or bad (Domitrovich et al 2004: A-17). Lastly, Rule D (end the response when the need is no longer present, since the response requires resources) is indicated by the ‘evaluation’ stage, where reflection on the effectiveness of action taken to resolve a problem suggests that ending a redundant (or ineffective) response is both teachable and transferable to diverse situations.

Practitioners in our study regarded the rules framework as useful for aiding understanding and evaluation of resilience as an explicit rather than implicit target and because it breaks down the processes claimed to generate it into a series of steps (Author 1 and 2 op cit). From a wider contextual perspective, it is apparent that in an educational system dominated by targets, criteria and performance measures, a rules-based understanding of something as complex as resilience encourages and then controls responses to a social problem or perturbing situation whilst conforming to norms within the social system. Designed in response to social and political concerns about rising levels of disaffection, aggression and emotional and behavioural problems, rules-based interventions appear to respond to these problems by engineering actions and positive thinking as part of wider institutional policies on behaviour (see also Gillies op cit)<sup>1</sup>.

The perception of heightening social problems and pessimism about social and educational inequalities are therefore key dimensions in the rise of academic, public and professional concerns about people’s resilience and emotional well-being, from behaviourist and critical social perspectives alike, and have provided impetus for the development of many interventions. In the next section, we explore the proposals of different critical accounts for more socially-progressive interventions and approaches, before evaluating the limitations we perceive in these accounts.

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<sup>1</sup> A key imperative for accelerating the introduction of PATHS in American schools was the Columbine school massacre of 1999.

## **2. CRITICAL ACCOUNTS OF RESILIENCE**

### **a. Promoting a multi-level account of resilience**

Both bio-scientific and sociological conceptions view resilience as being generated by systems comprising components working interactively and at multiple levels (e.g. a cell, a body, a social network, or an ecological or social system). For sociologists, resilience resides within these interactions as well as within the individual as a socially situated being and, in turn, within social entities such as groups, communities and organisations and their associated systems (eg Resnick, 2011, Bacon et al 2010, Mguni and Bacon, 2010). In social scientific terms, resilience is a situated and relational phenomenon produced within and through social interaction with “multiple levels of influence” from the individual through to the social structural (Luthar and Cicchetti, 2000: 859; Mohaupt, 2008, Lewis, 2012a, 2012b; Burchardt and Huerta, 2008), and it is the interaction between these levels that is the key to explaining resilience (Hobcraft and Sigle-Rushton, 2008). Contexts may ‘afford’ resilience to individuals, groups, communities and organisations while, in turn, their experiences and actions generate resilience and the conditions for it (Edwards, 2007). From an inter-disciplinary perspective, at an individual level, explanatory mechanisms include physiological and psychological stress-response reactions (e.g. Karatsoreos and McEwen, 2011) and dimensions of embodied experience such as sense of self efficacy or ‘agency’ (e.g. Lewis, 2012a, 2012b), all of which need to be understood in relation to the operation of social inequalities (see Friedli, 2009; Marmot et al, 2010).

An inter-disciplinary, multi-level systems understanding of resilience and constructs associated with it therefore guards against the tendency to view them as fixed individual psychological ‘attributes’ or a set of trainable behaviours. Crucially, a critical social perspective recognises humans’ capacity to learn, adapt to and act upon environmental conditions. Here, recognising the interplay between context and individual highlights individual characteristics of resilience as shaped by people’s locations, circumstances and experiences and counters an interpretation that blames victims of adversity for outcomes (Mohaupt, 2008, Edwards, 2007; see also Schoon and Bynner, 2003). Resilience, then, becomes viewed as an on-going interaction and adaptation process while ‘risk’ remains dependant on circumstances and is open to change (Rutter, 1990; Mohaupt, 2008). A social constructionist account presents the discourse of resilience as historically and culturally situated, both producing and reproducing the phenomenon itself and our knowledge and understandings of it in and through social interactions (see Burr, 1995; Busfield, 1996).

### **b. Critical evaluations of behavioural management programmes**

Critical objections to a rules-based understanding of resilience illuminate important drawbacks to programmes such as PATHS. We highlight four here. First, Rule A in our framework, ‘detection’, focuses in PATHS on noticing emotions and feelings in immediate, everyday interactions and then developing ‘appropriate’ emotional reactions. Supporters might claim that empathy, the ability to share feelings and to help others enhance their detection and response skills can be a springboard for beginning to recognise the broader social context affecting people’s emotional states and responses. In contrast and in a Swedish context of school-based behavioural management programmes informed by CBT, Dahlstedt et al (2010) argue that such interventions

intensify what Foucault calls ‘the conduct of conduct’, where young people regulate their own behaviour whilst doing the same with and for peers. Behavioural interventions avoid engagement with the enduring social structures that attend the adversity that makes resilience necessary, thereby diverting efforts to confront the social inequalities which cause adversities, efforts which are ultimately necessary for the resilience of social systems (see Friedli, 2011b, 2011c; Marmot et al, 2010; Wilkinson and Pickett, 2009).

Second, although such interventions aim to help children formulate actions, thereby channelling anger and other ‘unhelpful’ responses in productive ways, the emphasis is on emotional regulation and control. Such programmes eschew the possibility of more ‘resistant’ types of resilience (Aranda et al, 2012, also Gillies op cit). Following a Foucauldian argument, confessional and therapeutic strategies require participants to account for and manage themselves as part of new forms of governance that shape desirable citizens (see Dahlstedt op cit, Brunila op cit). In an ethnographic study of SEAL in a primary school, Lisa Proctor illuminates the normative judgements that emerge amongst teachers and other children from one boy’s ‘anger management’ programme, where strategies for the right sort of behaviour are not only scripted but also made public whenever he displays ‘inappropriate’ anger (Proctor op cit). PATHS trains children as peer counsellors or mediators to help peers with identifying and using problem-solving strategies that have been taught in dedicated sessions. An unanticipated outcome revealed by both these examples is the subtle, new forms of peer power and inequality that emerge, where children deemed to be emotionally competent, literate and confident not only gain new advantages but are also deployed to manage other children (eg Lendrum et al 2011, see also Author and Colleague chapter 3, 2009).

Third, PATHS involves parents and other school staff in ways that can be seen as a further aid to adapting the family and child, not merely to general demands, but to the demands of the intervention itself. In an ironic twist to an intervention that aims to build resilience, PATHS offers materials and guidance for managing the negative feelings that might arise from not being selected as PATHS ‘child of the day’. This ‘threat’ to resilience within the intervention is another opportunity to develop and practise skills to deal with it and to draw peers and family members to do so.

Fourth, Rule D in our framework addresses the ‘costs’ of building resilience. Here, attempts to define and develop resilience in policy, research and practice are not accompanied with good understanding of the wider and longer-term implications of interventions (Gerwartz and Edleson, 2007; Morisson Gutman et al, 2010). In part, this arises from insufficient attention to the functional utility of skills taught within the social and cultural contexts of the lives of children and young people (Luthar and Cicchetti, 2000).

Finally, it is important to note here that although government evaluations of the Penn Resilience Programme drew positive conclusions about its efficacy and recommended its expansion, their own evidence is not only inconclusive but also reveals important examples of the negative effects of ‘strategies’ that young people learned in the programme (such as using these to manipulate others). Furthermore, following claims that such strategies are transferable, there were examples of children trying to use them for dealing with dangerous or

difficult situations such as parental domestic abuse. Although the report does not explore the results of this, potential dangers of strategies are not mentioned (see Challen et al 2009).<sup>2</sup>

### **c. Promoting more progressive approaches**

Cautions and objections summarised above illuminate not just the subtle and not-so-subtle normative aspects of such interventions, but also the ways in which they inhibit collective responses beyond the immediate school or family environment: even here, responses are framed largely around the intervention. Following critical objections, more progressive approaches replace individual resilience training that follows from behavioural and psychological depictions of deep social problems with more sophisticated insights that take account of structural inequalities and their emotional and psychological fall-out. Ensuing interventions aim to be more deeply embedded in groups and communities rather than individually-targeted, focus on contextual factors and on social and communal understandings of the ways in which vulnerability, risk and meanings of resilience interact in specific contexts, and then use more sensitive, subtle measures and strategies (e.g. Maguni and Bacon op cit, Friedli 2011 a, b). From a critical social perspective, resilience interventions need to position the gendered, classed or raced subject as able to act upon and change the conditions of their lives and not just to adjust their responses to these conditions (Edwards, 2007).

Many critical social perspectives on resilience argue for multi-layered approaches which do not just focus on individuals but also include action on contexts (Edwards, 2007). For example, Hobcraft and Sigle-Rushton (2008) argue that for children in care to avoid bad outcomes in adulthood requires a complex combination of individual and contextual factors (e.g. psychology and schooling). There are arguments that policy and practice should illuminate the ways in which both vulnerability and protective factors operate at multiple levels, such as home, school or in the wider community (Luthar and Cicchetti, 2000). For example, Mohaupt (2008) identifies 'protective' factors for children as comprising problem solving skills, aspirations, and self esteem, together with family, institutions and social support networks (see also Burchardt and Huerta 2008).

An account of resilience based on understanding interactions between biological, psychological, social and physical environmental influences means that studying the phenomenon requires "dynamic assessment over time" (Mohaupt, 2008: 65). In turn, some researchers argue that interventions need to be multi-pronged, multi-level, holistic and integrated into people's lives, (Luthar and Cicchetti, 2000; Burchardt and Huerta, 2008, Schoon and Bynner 2003). In mental health policy, for example, a more sophisticated approach suggests a shift from 'fixing individuals' to community development (Friedli, 2011a; see also Mguni and Bacon, 2010, Landau, 2007).

Resilience researchers in social policy and psychology have highlighted questions that remain, for example, whether 'resilience' is "a single quality or [whether] forms of resilience in different contexts and with respect to different outcomes [are] distinct" (Burchardt and Huerta, 2008: 59). They have also pointed to gaps in knowledge about the transferability of insights into the mechanisms of resilience across social groups experiencing different forms of vulnerability or

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<sup>2</sup> We are grateful to one of the journal's reviewers of this article for drawing these to our attention.

'risk', about how to make outcome indicators relevant to the risk encountered and whether findings about strategies for intervention are applicable across different areas such as health and education (ibid; Windle et al, 2011, Luthar and Cicchetti, 2000, Walsh et al, 2010).

Notwithstanding the important cautions and alternatives offered by critical perspectives, we turn next to two unanticipated foundations shared by behaviourist and social constructionist or critical approaches to building individual and communal resilience. We argue that these foundations draw together once distinct political and epistemological perspectives around questions of how best to develop resilience.

#### **4. THE LIMITATIONS OF CRITICAL APPROACHES**

##### **a. Hopes for more sophisticated forms of behavioural psychology**

Some radical or critical sociologists respond to criticisms that traditional behavioural approaches silence, or merely overlook, insights framed around complex psycho-social aspects of people's lives by looking to new developments in behavioural psychology which aim to change citizens' behaviour (e.g. Moseley and Stoker 2010, Sullivan 2011, John et al 2011). Responding to the work of the world's first behavioural insight team, formed in 2010 as part of the British government's Cabinet Office, and building on an initiative by the previous Labour government, some left-leaning social scientists hope to encourage policy makers to go beyond approaches such as 'nudge' and covert tactics for behavioural change by incorporating new ideas in behavioural psychology within radical, community-based traditions of political activism, thereby offering a different discourse to conservative ones of social responsibility, behaviour management and adaptation (see Sullivan, John et al op cit).

In this context, hopes for more socially progressive ways to develop communal and individual resilience fit well with growing political interest in new combinations of neuroscience, sociology, psychology and psychoanalysis. Here, social scientists currently popular with policy makers and think tanks in the UK and America argue that more nuanced understandings of the ways in which we are shaped by the interplay of genes, culture, upbringing and education, and the institutions and networks in which we live and work, might make it possible for us to influence at least some of these (e.g. Brooks 2011). Following such arguments, better knowledge of the unconscious enables us to do this because, while we cannot master these factors, the art of living well comes from knowing how to steer our natures, and slowly remodel our characters (ibid). These developments are encouraged by popular interest in psychoanalysis, self-help and self-awareness as part of what some sociologists call 'therapy (or therapeutic) culture' (e.g. Nolan 1998, Furedi 2004, Lau 2011). In the UK, policy-oriented bodies such as DEMOS and the Royal Society of Arts support arguments that social policies need to strengthen 'character' and life skills, especially for those left behind by deindustrialisation and rising inequality (ibid, Stoker and Moseley op cit, John et al op cit).

Calls for socially progressive, radically informed behavioural science encompass arguments that policy makers, researchers and practitioners need to understand the psycho-social dimensions of oppression and inequality. Yet, framed by sociology, radical or critical psychology and psychiatry, and reinforced by localism, there is a danger that pursuit of emancipatory political

goals through inter-agency support mechanisms that avoid stigmatising participants by building on communal assets do resist reductionist forms of behavioural skills training but, nevertheless, fit well with a new behavioural science agenda that is presented as progressive.

## **b. Discourses of 'risk' and 'vulnerability'**

The second foundation shared by behaviourist and some critical perspectives is agreement that policy makers, researchers and practitioners need to identify individual, social, communal and governmental 'risks' and 'vulnerabilities' in order to 'support' or 'develop' people's resilience. From government agencies under Labour and the Conservative-led coalition governments, to radical social groups and critical educators, the idea of identifying, supporting and enhancing resilience incorporates a vast and growing range of risks. In turn, this justifies calls from diverse perspectives for governments to make the enhancement of society's capacity to adapt to and manage multiple risks a key priority (eg. Cabinet Office, 2008a, b).

In terms of approaches, all mainstream political parties regard the development of resilience as not only requiring adaptive, self-reliant responses from communities but the resilience of individuals, families, organisations and neighbourhoods as pathways to resilience of the whole (Coaffee et al 2008b). In parallel, the drive towards localism moves resilience building from state institutions to networked responses, with governance distributed more widely across key stakeholders and sectors (Edwards, 2007). Some researchers argue that the complexity and spatial specificity of today's disruptive challenges test old forms of individual and communal resilience, thereby necessitating a broader historical and inter-cultural understanding of how individuals, communities and organisations respond to change by developing or adapting resilience (Coaffee et al op cit). This fits well with the critical understandings of resilience we outlined earlier.

As we noted in the introduction, American and British government texts and think tank reports from the 1990s onwards reflect fears about a growing range of risks, potential harms and ensuing vulnerabilities, simultaneously fuelling and reflecting preoccupation with resilience in the media, research, and more widely (Furedi 2008; see also Durodie op cit). Here and in America, the steady rise of fears about the vulnerability of government and populations after 9/11, possible pandemics, terrorist threats and growing psychological problems amongst more sections of the population, has made resilience the solution to the related problems of risk and vulnerability. This is evident in every area of policy that invokes resilience as a goal, where increasingly blurred notions of 'emergency', 'crisis' and 'risk' encompass equally blurred and diverse fears about vulnerability and harm. Arguments that serious civil unrest, terrorist attacks and pandemics need to be managed by building resilience parallel those in the schools-based interventions discussed above. The ensuing long lists of potential risks and harms, and vulnerability to them, offer a spectrum from the most intractable structural risks to the most mundane and commonplace. One outcome is agreement across political and ideological standpoints that people need to develop resilience in the face of a spectrum of risk, from unemployment, drug use, family breakdown and mental ill-health to everyday difficulties in learning maths, dealing with social relationships and interactions and coping with uncomfortable feelings. The increased blurring and widening of risk and vulnerability justifies universal intervention.

In response to depictions of risk and vulnerability, objections to the ways in which policy pathologises young people or adults 'at risk' of serious structural inequalities are hardly new (eg Wishart et al 2008, McLeod 2012). As Jackie Lumby observes, those responsible for ensuring young people's safe development to adulthood have long been anxious about their vulnerability, especially for those seen to be disadvantaged by their socio-economic or family status. She argues that:

*From Willis's (1977) seminal study of the educational roots of inequality to more recent explorations of the burgeoning mental health and behavioural issues among adolescents, or the effects of globalisation on at-risk youth... their fragility and degree of exposure has made many apprehensive. Education is depicted as a structural aspect of a risky environment, presenting perils which some young people fail to navigate successfully, with lasting detriment to their lives. (Lumby 2011, 261)*

In her analysis of 'vulnerability' as a guiding concern for Australian policy in relation to 'marginalised' and 'at risk' youth, Julie McLeod shows how particular interpretations of 'social justice' recast vulnerability as a progressive attribute of an understanding, empathetic citizenship. Here vulnerability is no longer seen as a negative attribute of particular marginalised groups, but is, instead, part of the '*fragile and contingent nature of personhood*' where we are all '*potentially vulnerable*' and where vulnerability is a '*universal*' dimension of human experience and identity (Beckett quoted by McLeod 2012, 22). From this perspective, the universal acceptance of vulnerability becomes a human right, where everyone can claim their right to '*be protected from the effects of potential vulnerabilities [whilst] defending the rights of others to receive support in the light of their actual vulnerability*' (Beckett op cit, 22).

As McLeod points out, this appears to offer an expanded, humane and socially just account of vulnerability: '*Vulnerability as openness to others evokes the possibility of vulnerability as tenderness, and points to the compassionate dispositions of fellow citizens. It is an aspirational, even utopian argument, looking beyond the current politics and practices of exclusion to the possibility that greater awareness of vulnerability could recast rights-based citizenship*' (2012, 25.) Yet, from a critical perspective, she cautions that an existential sense of vulnerability overlooks profound structural differences and real vulnerabilities that generate more powerful, damaging and unequal exclusions than others (op cit). Not only is reconfiguring vulnerability as a universal emotion unlikely to interrupt such processes, but it is associated with interventions that pathologise individuals and set out to convert them (ibid).

More broadly, the expansion and recasting of vulnerability reflects a view that resilience as part of well-being, and positive affective states in general, are both a human right and a cornerstone of educational and social justice (see Lumby op cit). As Dahlstedt et al show in a Swedish context, even those who object to lack of attention to structural explanations of risk of vulnerability are in danger of being drawn into the discourses offered by psychological accounts, fuelled by perceptions that the nature of 'risk' has expanded from specific minority groups to everyone (Dahlstedt et al op cit; see also Author 1 2012).

#### **4. IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE**

##### **a. A wider agenda of vulnerabilities and risks**

Our review of social research on resilience for this paper reveals little challenge to the fundamental validity and effects of discourses of vulnerability and risk. Instead, critical social perspectives seek to understand the context-specific nature of vulnerability and corresponding protective effects as a way of countering the generalised extrapolations that underpin behavioural interventions. Some researchers argue that it is important to “underscore [understanding of vulnerability] by findings that forces [which] appear to be unequivocally beneficial can have negative ramifications in some circumstances as well as the converse” (Luthar and Cicchetti, 2000: 860). In turn, applying a resilience framework ‘*implies attention ... to empirically derived knowledge about vulnerability and protective mechanisms that are salient within, and possibly unique to, particular risk conditions*’ (ibid: 861). This requires interventions to be rooted in theory and research on the group being targeted and therefore sensitive to gender, class and cultural diversity (Gerwitz and Edleson, 2007; Palma et al, 2007).

A formal redefining of vulnerability and the criteria to assess it on the one hand, and the radicalising of vulnerability as a socially progressive attribute on the other, have led to a marked expansion in those seen to need ‘support’ or intervention. In formal policy, the Law Commission’s 1997 definition of a vulnerable person was someone ‘*who is or may be in need of community care services by reason of mental or other disability, of age or illness and who is or may be unable to take care of him or herself, or unable to protect him or herself against significant harm or exploitation*’ (Law Commission quoted by Furedi op cit; see also Eves 2006, McLaughlin 2011). As Furedi notes, the Care Standards Act of 2000 widened this definition significantly to include those ‘*for whom prescribed services are provided by an independent hospital, independent clinic, independent agency or National Health Service body*’ (Furedi 2008, 256). This diffusion of vulnerability now includes anyone in counselling or palliative care alongside other forms of prescribed support. It also informs political drives to create better forms of regulation in response to ‘poverty related vulnerability, location related vulnerability, [and] technology related vulnerability’ (Better Regulation Task Force 2000, v).

An unchallenged view that vulnerability defines many more people’s everyday experiences than in the past has a number of effects, revealed by our study of PATHS and other interventions. First, it draws in a growing range of mundane, everyday incidents and feelings as threats or risks to emotional well-being and mental health and presents them as needing professionally-led intervention. Second, it encourages casual references to someone being vulnerable or at risk, or even whole categories of ‘the vulnerable’. In everyday educational settings, such categories and labels apply just as easily to someone facing very serious social and personal difficulties as they do to someone on the brink of a relationship crisis, someone stressed by tests or examinations, risking failure in a module assignment, seeking or being deemed to need ‘learning support’. Third, a significant expansion of risks and ensuing vulnerabilities seen to need universal support or intervention diverts resources from targeted initiatives to address serious problems for a minority. Fourth, although policy interpretations and attempts to recast vulnerability in progressive ways acknowledge structural forms, they end up being preoccupied with vulnerability as predominantly psychological or emotional, and, from some perspectives, a cultural norm.

The twin expansions of vulnerability and risk as largely psychological or emotional are fuelled by alarming estimates of a widening spectrum of emotional and mental health problems amongst more and more young people and children, and a parallel phenomenon in formal assessments

of special educational needs (see Myers 2012, Author 1 2012, Tomlinson 2012). The blurring of activities and assessments between learning support, special educational needs, specialist psychological interventions with particular children or groups, and other counselling support systems is another significant factor in the recasting of vulnerability in practice (Author 1 and Colleague op cit, Tomlinson op cit). Although measures and definitions have changed dramatically over decades, and estimates of contemporary problems vary hugely, these fears are largely unchallenged (Myers, Author 1 op cit).

According to Frank Furedi, social policies respond, not by aiming to solve problems but to support disempowered clients to face diverse vulnerabilities. This is encouraged by policy experts who argue that ‘risk analysis’ needs to be underpinned by ‘vulnerability analysis’ of the various forms of psychological, physical, economic, social and cultural “harms to which individuals and modern societies might be susceptible” (Slovic 2002 quoted by Furedi op cit, 651). In this context, political responses to vulnerability for extreme crisis and risks are seen as ineffective unless they include a “wider agenda of vulnerabilities” (O’Brien and Read quoted by Furedi, op cit, 649). He also argues that discourses of empowerment used to justify expansions of vulnerability and risk are belied by their lack of faith in the public’s ability to be resilient. Instead, he claims that an attribution of a defeatist, vulnerable mentality and lack of ability to cope with harm, risk and crisis without expert help reflects uncertainties amongst academics, policy makers and many social policy professionals about the future and how to deal with it (ibid; see also Bauman, 2012).

Following this argument, notions of ‘being at risk of harm’ replace more optimistic ones of ‘taking a risk’, where people might make choices or choose to experiment (what has, in progressive mental health circles become termed reactively as ‘positive risk taking’). Instead, vulnerability itself becomes a risk and “resilience is presented as a kind of preventative vaccine injected into the body politic from the outside” (Furedi, op cit, 649). This resonates powerfully with claims from positive psychology that interventions where resilience is a key construct in emotional well-being depict them as ‘emotional inoculation’ (e.g. Huppert 2007).

## **b. The moralising of resilience**

The underlying normative aspects, explored above, arise in part from a contemporary depiction of children and young people as, simultaneously, objects of fear, pity and concern (e.g. Myers 2012). As historians Kevin Myers and Thomas Dixon both argue, this perception resonates with older perceptions and also like older perceptions, leads to calls for intervention in emotional and character development (Myers 2012, Dixon 2012). At the levels of both policy and practice, normative dimensions of resilience appear in its depiction as attribute or “quality of individuals, groups, organisations and systems as a whole to respond productively to significant changes that *disrupt the expected pattern of behaviour without engaging in an extended period of regressive behaviour*’ (Horne and Orr 1998, 31, our emphasis). In this context, the normative aims of behaviour management and control observed earlier in relation to PATHs and other initiatives enable an easy slippage to resilience as a ‘responsibility’ where government sees the serious harm that would come from an emergency and the ability to “respond, minimise or absorb damage and recover [as being] the responsibility of a ‘resilience community’ engaging practitioners at all levels...” (Mann 2007, quoted by Furedi 2008, 647). In PATHs, notions of crisis and emergency have a much more mundane, everyday focus but are used, nevertheless,

to train children to co-counsel peers in helpful emotional strategies as part of mutual social responsibility and citizenship.

### **c. Aligning behavioural and critical perspectives**

One unanticipated effect of a wider agenda of vulnerabilities and risks is to align behavioural and critical accounts in a search for vulnerabilities. We have aimed to show that this search becomes preoccupied by the emotional or psychological risks or harms caused by diverse structural and mundane or everyday threats. Arguably, then, the discovery of more risks that require expert-led strategies is as much a foundation in PATHS through its attention to everyday sources of anxiety, as it is in critical accounts of psychosocial harm created by diverse individual and social problems and subsequent calls for more sophisticated, holistic, community-based approaches.

In this context, although critical social perspectives draw attention to structural and economic causes and remedies, attention seems to turn from potential and actual sources of communal resilience into preoccupation with emotional and psychological vulnerabilities and weaknesses amongst those defined 'at risk'. The danger here is that 'vulnerability-led social policy' moves from supporting its targets to highly interventionist forms of behaviour management in the name of 'early prevention' (Furedi 2008, 656).

Following our arguments here, a growing view that human powerlessness and vulnerability require some form of expert-led psycho-emotional intervention unites very different political and epistemological perspectives around arguments about the respective reductionism or sophistication and progressiveness of interventions, measures and outcomes. Neither critical perspectives or behavioural psychologists appear to challenge underlying assumptions that growing numbers of vulnerable people need government-sponsored interventions.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

In evaluating the direction that policy and practice in this area might take, it is worth noting that the Conservative-led coalition government shows little enthusiasm for centralised programmes, encouraging schools instead to find their own approaches (see Watson et al 2012, Bywater and Sharples 2012). One outcome of the slipperiness of constructs such as resilience and their appeal to diverse social and educational concerns is that they are likely to remain a target for children's emotional well-being or social and emotional competence in schools but may well transmogrify as 'character building' (see Author 2 2012). In other arenas, such as adult and community learning, educational programmes focused on wellbeing and for building resilience as part of mental health look set to continue (e.g Lewis, 2012a).

In the face of enthusiasm for interventions dominated by rules-based, behavioural interpretations of resilience, such as PATHS, the contemporary relevance and potency of enduring sociological observations is evident. Crucially, critical understandings and accounts of resilience illuminate the effects of psychologising complex social problems, and the implicit normative assumptions that accompany activities to raise awareness of potential or actual threats to resilience and then to teach 'appropriate' thought patterns and behaviours. In an essential challenge to the powerful discourse of trainable, transferable dispositions, critical

social accounts object to the individualisation of resilience and the marginalising of social and welfare responses. Instead, they call for more sophisticated, politically informed and communally-based responses to a growing range of perceived threats to resilience.

Notwithstanding the important benefits such programmes may offer in areas such as adult community education (Lewis op cit), there is a need to examine critically their effects in educational contexts on content and on the kinds of provision they displace. More crucially, there is a need to evaluate the subtle and not-so-subtle ways in which they shape social subjects through implicit and explicit normative assumptions, new ways of self and peer governance, and new constructions of the self as an emotionally or psychologically vulnerable subject. In this context, the salient question is how to understand emerging subjectivities and their educational and political implications, and how to challenge the assumptions of vulnerability and risk that dominate policy and social research, and the new responses to these assumptions coming from radical behaviourism.

In relation to contemporary discourses of crisis, Clarke and Newman argue that social scientists need to understand what discourses emerge, and how some policy ideas '*become dominant and others residual* (2010, 709). We would argue that their injunction to '*start with the existing: the residual and emergent forms, imaginaries and practices that tend to be rendered invisible or marginal (or are dismissed as unrealistic) by the dominant discourses*' (ibid, 714) invokes this challenge. Without it, government agencies, institutions, researchers and experts with vested interests in promoting interventions depict the characteristics of resilient communities and individuals simultaneously and misleadingly as virtues, a form of social responsibility with an associated set of teachable and measurable behaviours, skills and attitudes.

Finally, unchallenged assumptions about psychological vulnerability to actual and potential risks and harms, not only amongst particular individuals, groups and communities but also more widely, encourages attempts from different ideological perspectives to use behavioural science in more subtle and sophisticated ways. We have aimed to show that critical realists need to resist attempts to govern people's behavioural and emotional responses to assumed vulnerabilities and risks and the new forms of behaviour management and subjectification they create.

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