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BRIEFING PAPER

Resilience and character

Introduction

Supporting children to thrive and safeguarding their future is an important goal for any society and any government. There is a debate about how a child's resilience and character contributes to achieving that goal and what the government's role in developing them should be. Psychologists who work with children and study character and resilience are concerned about how these terms are used and how well the concepts are understood. This policy briefing sets out the latest psychological evidence to support the creation of more effective policies.

POLICY CONTEXT

In 2014, Nicky Morgan (then Secretary of State for Education) announced a multi-million pound scheme to improve character education. In 2017, this national push was replaced by an Essential Life Skills programme, which focussed on twelve opportunity areas. It aimed to develop wider skills such as resilience, emotional wellbeing and employability.

In 2019, the DfE launched a consultation on *Character and resilience: A call for evidence*, showing that these concepts are very much on the agenda at the department.¹



BRIEFING PAPER

Defining resilience and character

Members of the British Psychological Society are concerned that subsequent government policies have been based on a narrow definition of character. In the DfE's consultation *Character and resilience: A call for evidence*, character was defined as: 'believing that you can achieve; being able to stick with the task in hand; seeing a link between effort today and payback in the future, and being able to bounce back from the knocks that life inevitably brings to all of us.' The Government's focus on children being able to 'bounce back' if they do not succeed at something first time is not appropriate for many children and young people. It does not account for their wider socio-economic context and its impact on their wellbeing.

Resilience and character are not traits that are purely situated within individual children and young people which respond to individual interventions with children. The characteristics of the systems around young people are what determine how resilient they are and how resilient they become.²

There are positive factors which enable children to grow up well, to cope and sometimes even flourish, despite significant adversity. The challenge is to use our knowledge and understanding of these factors to both prevent children from suffering serious harm and harness the protective factors that contribute to resilience. Rather than focus on what 'characteristics' we want individual children to have we should be considering what we can do, as a society to support children to be psychologically healthy, able to enjoy productive lives and manage the difficulties and challenges which will inevitably occur.³

RESILIENCE

The concept of resilience lacks a unifying definition.⁴ Most definitions see resilience as reduced vulnerability to environmental risk, the overcoming of stress or adversity, or a relatively good outcome despite risk experiences. There are wide ranging variations in individual responses to adverse events and environments.⁵ Resilience is not the preserve of 'extraordinary people' but more ordinary things such as: '*... a healthy human brain in good working order; close relationships with competent caring adults; committed families; effective schools and communities; opportunities to succeed; and beliefs in the self, nurtured by positive interactions with the world.*'⁶

Policies need to consider not just resilient people but also resilient places and resilient communities. (Friedli & Carlin 2009). Policy interventions can include:

- 1 those that strengthen social relationships and opportunities for community connection for individuals and families, e.g. parents.
- 2 those that build and enable social support, social networks and social capital within and between communities, e.g. reducing material inequalities, tackling discrimination and improving the physical environment, especially for children and young people.
- 3 those that strengthen and/or repair relationships between communities and health and social care agencies, e.g. enhancing community control through co-production.
- 4 those that improve the quality of the social relationships of care between individuals and professionals, e.g. practice that avoids social disparagement.^{3,7}

Resilience is a dynamic interaction between individuals and their ecology, or environment. Over time it enables a different approach to psychological interventions and how we develop mental health services.

Economic policy can have a far-reaching ripple effect on a child's physical and mental wellbeing. Psychologists advocate for the adoption of a 'social justice' lens to developing resilience, which means that it is important that interventions:

- 1 promote people's ability to understand the relationship between political and psychological factors that promote or reduce wellbeing;
- 2 educate participants to overcome oppression;
- 3 empower participants to address inequalities and social injustice;
- 4 promote alliances and coalitions with groups facing similar issues; and
- 5 account for the subjectivity and psychological limitations of change.

While these measures are ambitious, there is already evidence of some projects delivering them in real world settings.

MAC-UK (www.mac-uk.org) works with marginalised groups of young people in inner city London – their philosophy fits closely with that of radical resilience building models. They aim to work at all levels of the system – from working with individuals to campaigning to change government policy, and co-production is central to everything they do. They have shown it is possible to do this at a small local level – the next challenge is to apply these principles in the mainstream and at scale.⁸

CHARACTER

In education it is important to consider the role of character in three ways:

Intrapersonal (how children and young people see themselves and use character to propel themselves forward);

Interpersonal (how someone may build appropriate relationships with peers and significant adults); and

Intellectual (how character strengths enables the individual to manage expectations of education and the system).

Character in education enables young people to think about how they feel and behave to perform/achieve their best. Character strengths that are related strongly to school include:

Love of learning;

Zest;

Perseverance; and

Social intelligence.

The teaching of character can further propel academic learning. Schools are well placed to assist learners in seeing what they have done well and how this can be improved to enable further learning. Knowing your character strengths decreases the likelihood of distress and dysfunction whilst encouraging tangible outcomes i.e. academic records.

BEST PRACTICE: A PSYCHOLOGICALLY INFORMED APPROACH TO DEVELOPING CHARACTER AND RESILIENCE

Policy makers, commissioners and education settings can draw on examples of best practice in this area. For example:

Geelong Grammar school in Victoria, Australia (<https://ggsint.ggs.vic.edu.au>) has launched a major four-year project examining how Positive Education programmes can enhance adolescent mental health. Their approach 'brings together the science of Positive Psychology with best practice teaching to encourage and support individuals, schools and communities to flourish'. This approach focuses on specific skills that help students strengthen relationships, create positive emotions, enhance resilience, promote mindfulness and support a healthy lifestyle.

An alternative to the Department's definitions of character are described by the VIA Institute: www.viacharacter.org/character-strengths

The six character strength domains are:

wisdom, thus being able to master new things and thinking in ways that may be helpful;

courage, so being brave and persevering through difficult scenarios;

humanity, of which are key character strengths of kindness and love;

justice, which ensures that pupils develop teamwork and leadership;

temperance, to include forgiveness and prudence; and

transcendence, to include hope and gratitude.

At St Swithun's school, Winchester, the whole school is developing a positive education curriculum. Their Happy Classrooms approach encompasses character, mindfulness and positive education, to good effect.⁹

The school agrees this is a win-win situation as pupils and teachers benefit from a more positive and less stressful environment. Good wellbeing is associated with higher levels of academic performance. This model of positive psychology is more about living it, embedding it and learning it. The main focus is that positive education is a whole school commitment to wellbeing.

The school focusses on two elements of positive education:

Hedonic ('I' - individual wellbeing – how many more positive emotions do you experience); and

Eudemonic ('we' - wellbeing – doing good for other people).

Both are important to the development of the programme – you cannot have one without the other. The model for positive education is visually depicted as six leaves coming together with a circle that is supported by character strengths, with flourishing as the core. The leaves represent the six domains of positive education. Each domain has a set of skills and evidence informed concepts. Underpinning the domains are character strengths which act as the supporting pathways to the domains.

Recommendations

The Government, and particularly the Department of Education, should expand its definition of what is meant by 'character', using psychological evidence. At the same time it should set out a clear, dynamic definition of 'resilience' that recognises its fluidity and enables schools to take a whole school approach to supporting pupils and move away from viewing resilience as a fixed characteristic of individuals.

The Department should use examples of best practice of how psychological evidence and work to implement whole school approaches can embed a more holistic interpretation of character and resilience into an education setting and improve outcomes for children and young people.

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Notes

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St Andrews House,
48 Princess Road East,
Leicester LE1 7DR, UK

 0116 254 9568  www.bps.org.uk  info@bps.org.uk