How to Develop Student Resilience? Advice and Recommendations for Schools

Chuyun Wang

University of Melbourne, Melbourne, Australia

chuyunw1@student.unimelb.edu.au

Abstract. This paper explores the concept of student resilience and how it can be promoted in schools. Resilience is defined as the ability of students to recover and persist in academic engagement and achievement after experiencing negative events. The understanding of resilience has shifted over time, moving away from an individualistic perspective to a social-ecological perspective that recognizes the role of personal and sociodemographic characteristics and social factors such as family life, community settings, social networks, and access to resources. Resilience is not a single psychological mechanism, but rather a pattern of interactions between individuals and their environment. The paper then presents evidence-based methods for promoting student resilience in schools, which can be broadly categorized into teacher-promoting resilience and whole-school support for resilience. Teacher-promoting resilience involves positive interactions between students and school staff, setting attainable goals for student achievement, and maintaining a positive student-teacher relationship. Whole-school support for resilience involves meeting students' basic needs for food, health, and safety, promoting a positive school culture and climate, and providing access to resources and support services.

Keywords: Student Resilience; social-ecological theory; Student Well-being

1   Introduction

Since the 1970s, research has illuminated the factors that enhance youth resilience in the face of adverse circumstances. These studies have shown that promoting resilience in youth can prevent them from engaging in antisocial and criminal behavior, reducing the likelihood of depression and suicidal thoughts, and in some instances, reducing the risk of early school dropout and academic failure[1]. Thus, it is beneficial for schools to provide accessible and effective resources to promote student resilience.

According to Theron, resilience is defined as a successful adaptation to severe stressors and the process is both dynamic and complex[1]. It is typically understood as the capacity of an individual, group, community, or ecosystem to return to normal functioning following exposure to a stressful event[2]. Within the context of education, resilience refers to a student's ability to recover and persist in academic engagement and

achievement after experiencing negative events, such as the loss of a family member or a mental or physical illness [2].

The understanding of resilience has shifted over time, moving away from a solely individualistic perspective to one that recognizes the role of personal and sociodemographic characteristics, as well as social factors such as family life, worksites, community settings, social networks, and access to resources[3]. More recent studies in sociology view resilience as a process in which an individual obtains support and resources from their environment, a perspective known as the social-ecological theory of resilience. In this context, resilience in schools, for example, is not solely dependent on a student's own characteristics but is also shaped by the school environment, social policies, and legal framework that provide the necessary resources to overcome stressors, such as bullying[3].

Resilience should not be understood as a single psychological mechanism, but rather as the pattern of interactions between individuals and their environment, where individuals obtain the skills and resources required to function well under stress [4]. In this socio-ecological understanding of resilience, students are not solely responsible for their own resilience, and it is the responsibility of schools, families, and communities to actively support resilience processes [3].

The subsequent section of this essay will present some evidence-based methods for improving student resilience in schools, followed by recommendations.

2   How to promote student resilience

Multiple efforts to promote students' resilience have been made in schools. These efforts can be broadly categorized into two categories: teacher-promoting resilience and whole-school support for resilience.

2.1   Teacher promoting resilience

Interactions between students and school counselors or staff can foster emotional development and benefit student resilience [5]. School psychologists play a crucial role in building social-ecological resilience, particularly for disadvantaged students[1]. For example, a study of Southern Australian students from disadvantaged backgrounds found that 9-12-year-old students perceived school counselors as helpful in coping with the difficulties in their lives [6]. In another study, students from African American low-income urban families with poor school engagement and behavioral problems reported that school psychologists provided emotional support and guidance, helped resolve challenging peer interactions, and facilitated abilities that supported resilience. These students felt that they could talk to their counselors and that the counselors helped them better understand themselves and cope with their emotions, leading to an improvement in their self-awareness, self-regulation skills, and resilience [5].

However, this source of resilience is not available to students in places without school counselors, such as in less developed countries like South Africa. Maintaining a

warm and respectful relationship between students and teachers can also promote resilience. A study of unsheltered children in South Africa found that their resilience was enhanced by teachers who were caring and motivated their classmates to be friendly[8]. When students feel a strong connection to their teachers and school, they develop social skills such as the willingness to ask for help and the desire to help others, which serve as intrinsic resilient qualities [7].

On the other hand, students who experience bullying or verbal abuse from teachers or peers have higher rates of disruptive behaviors, depression, hopelessness, and lower levels of trust, which negatively impact their resilience and academic achievement [9]. Thus, a positive student-teacher relationship is crucial for promoting resilience, while a negative one is detrimental[13].

Teachers can also promote resilience by setting clear and attainable goals for student achievement and communicating them to students. A study of 951 South African youth found that students' resilience was encouraged when teachers helped them understand the value of education and encouraged ambitions of a better future[11]. For example, one orphan participant said that her teachers were crucial in helping her see the value of education and that "If it wasn't for them, I would have been a futureless child with no idea of what the world has for me" [10].

2.2 Whole-school support for resilience

Apart from the individual teacher's contribution, the school community as a whole can collaborate with teachers to enhance student resilience. One fundamental aspect that schools can address to foster student resilience is to meet their basic needs for food, health, and safety[12]. Studies have indicated that students with access to these essential resources tend to exhibit greater resilience compared to those who lack these resources [14]. In a study by Hojer & Johansson in Sweden, which explored the resilience factors of at-risk students, the schools involved provided meals to children who had no food at home. These schools also served as a source of structure, calmness, and supportive adults for these students. For instance, one participant, Anna, who was being raised by a single mother in toxic and abusive relationships, found solace in her school, which provided her with a safe haven from her chaotic home [12].

Mulloy reported similar observations in a study where participating schools provided extended day and residential programs. The students who participated in these programs reported that the extended day and residential programs not only provided them with a safe haven from outside pressures but also the necessary structure and supervision to improve their school attendance and academic performance [14]. One student, who had a troubled family situation, described how staying at the residence provided her with shelter from her difficulties and helped her build a strong bond with her residential counselor, further strengthening her positive relationship with school staff [15].

In addition to this, school-based non-academic activities play a crucial role in fostering student resilience. For example, sports days, cultural events, concerts, animal care, part-time jobs, Model United Nations, and others (Gillian, 2000). These activities have been proven to reinforce resilience by providing students with opportunities to

form positive relationships, gain experience, and develop skills (Gillian, 2000). For instance, a young person in foster care, who had a troubled family background, discovered a passion for badminton and became so skilled in it that it boosted his self-esteem, confidence, and social abilities, promoting his resilience (Gillian, 2000). Another example is students who developed a love for hiking and gardening through trips organized by the school. These experiences touched their hearts and spirits and helped them build positive relationships with each other, thus strengthening their resilience (Theron & Theron, 2014). Other non-academic areas of interest, such as pop culture, dance, music, animals, and others, can also promote a sense of belonging, positive teacher-student relationships, physical well-being, and bring purpose and goals to life (Gillian, 2000). Cultural events based on traditions can be especially effective in promoting resilience among immigrant and ethnic minority students by fostering a tolerant and multicultural school environment (Ungar & Liebenberg, 2013).

Finally, a warm and welcoming school environment that promotes student involvement and success can enhance student resilience. This type of environment consists of safe and healthy relationships with teachers, students, and peers; clear rules and boundaries; opportunities and expectations for success; and a sense of trust, respect, and care. A positive school atmosphere fosters a sense of belonging and identity for all members of the school community [16]. By appreciating and valuing cultural diversity, this environment supports students' personal growth and creates a sense of community.

Welcoming environments are particularly crucial for resilience building among immigrant and underprivileged students, as they increase school engagement and promote cultural experiences and community involvement. Studies have shown that schools that respect the cultural and ethnic identities of their students are associated with higher levels of reported resilience among students [16]. For instance, a comparative study of adolescent resilience in Canada, New Zealand, and South Africa found that young people were more likely to perceive enabling resources for resilience, such as peer or educational support, when they felt respected for their culture, race, and spiritual beliefs by teachers. This was true regardless of the location of the study.

3   Recommendations for the school

Building upon the previous discussion, this section provides several suggestions for promoting student resilience in a public school in the United States where the majority of students come from marginalized families, such as low-income families, and where there are a significant number of immigrants and refugees.

The first recommendation is for teachers and schools to organize field trips or hiking tours. As previously noted, field trips and outdoor activities have been shown to improve students' physical fitness and well-being, as well as strengthen the bond between teachers and students[16]. This can enhance the overall school climate and promote a sense of community and belonging, ultimately increasing students' resilience (Ungar & Liebenberg, 2013). These activities are cost-effective and do not put a financial strain on either students or schools, making them suitable for students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

The second recommendation is to hold cultural events that promote understanding of different cultures and create a more culturally inclusive school environment. This has been shown to be effective in promoting resilience and school engagement among immigrant and ethnic minority students [15]. By valuing and respecting students' cultures and traditions, the school creates a welcoming atmosphere, which is a key predictor of resilience for immigrant students[6]. Although the study referenced was conducted in Canada, the findings are still highly generalizable and similar results could be expected in other countries with similar cultural backgrounds, such as the U.S. [16].The third recommendation is to offer an optional residential program with meals, especially for underprivileged students. The school can provide a structured environment and dependable adult supervision for students from chaotic families[16]. The residential program can also offer basic necessities such as accommodation and food, which has been shown to positively correlate with student resilience. Additionally, the program can provide students with supervision to prevent them from getting into trouble and minimize exposure to negative influences that could impact their academic performance and attendance. This recommendation is particularly relevant in light of data showing that African American students have lower attendance rates, are more likely to drop out of school, and have lower math and English scores than their Caucasian peers in high school.

The fourth recommendation is for the school to have supervisors and counselors available to support students. School psychologists have been shown to be helpful in improving student resilience. Counselors can provide emotional support, guidance for peer and family interactions, and help students develop self-regulation skills. The relationship with the counselor can also serve as a positive relationship with school staff and a confidential partner for students to turn to in times of confusion and difficulty [14].

4   Conclusion

In conclusion, student resilience is crucial for successful academic engagement and achievement, as well as personal well-being. It is a dynamic and complex process that is influenced by a combination of personal and sociodemographic characteristics, as well as social factors such as family life, community, and access to resources. The school environment, social policies, and legal framework also play a crucial role in shaping resilience. Teachers can promote resilience by maintaining a positive student-teacher relationship, setting clear goals, and promoting emotional development. On the other hand, negative relationships with teachers or peers can have negative effects on resilience. Schools can enhance student resilience by addressing basic needs, promoting positive school culture, and creating supportive and inclusive learning environments. The role of school counselors and psychologists is also vital in promoting resilience, particularly for disadvantaged students. In light of these findings, it is recommended that schools take a comprehensive and holistic approach to promoting student resilience.

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