

Donald Stewart

School of Public Health, Griffith University, Australia

Implementing Mental Health Promotion in Schools: A Process Evaluation

Keywords: resilience; health-promoting school; process evaluation

Introduction

Existing evidence, although limited, shows that the health-promoting school (HPS) approach can provide an effective framework for implementing mental health promotion in school (Lister-Sharp *et al*, 1999). However, evaluation poses a challenge for researchers, given the broad, multi-faceted nature of the HPS concept (Rowling & Jeffreys, 2006; Stewart *et al*, 2004). A key question concerns how schools operationalise a comprehensive, integrated approach to promoting mental health in children in school settings. This is a

significant issue, since lessons learnt about implementation at a practical level are essential for schools.

The challenge for researchers in evaluating the effectiveness of mental health promotion initiatives is to find appropriate methods to track the ways in which schools are transforming HPS principles into practice. For this to occur, an exploration of the processes involved in developing and implementing the HPS approach at school level is critical to our understanding of how schools exert influence on intermediate health outcomes (such as the school environment) by applying HPS principles. This paper uses qualitative research methods to assess the processes involved in developing and implementing a holistic mental health promotion strategy in primary schools.

A B S T R A C T

Recognition of the increasing burden of mental illness and the need for mental health promotion is leading researchers to explore ways of assessing the impact of mental health promotion initiatives. In particular, among young people, the impact of mental health promotion in the school setting is being investigated in terms of achieving change that is sustained. This paper argues that potential indicators of success associated with process need to be identified as a way to support schools and project teams as they implement mental health promotion initiatives. A process evaluation of a project to promote resilience in children and primary school communities using a health promotion school (HPS) approach was conducted in Brisbane, Australia, in 2004 and 2005. Aside from

differences in the way in which the participating schools structured and implemented their health-promoting school projects, several critical themes emerged that have relevance to mental health promotion projects in school settings. They include the importance of time, the school context and supportive organisational structures, ethos and environment, and building resilience into the curriculum. Other themes indicated the importance of the engagement of the whole school community and of developing partnerships and services, and the usefulness of the health-promoting school framework. Such key factors should be considered in relation to the challenges facing schools that wish to promote resilience, or other concepts related to mental health.

The evidence for this paper is drawn from a three-year project designed to promote resilience in children of primary school age in Queensland, Australia. Ten schools (eight state schools and two Catholic schools) were enrolled in the Resilient Children and Communities Project ('the Project') over a two-year period (2004–2006). Full details of the Project are reported elsewhere (Sun & Stewart, 2007a, 2007b). The concept of 'resilience' was employed as a means of helping schools to focus on mental health promotion, and a comprehensive, whole-school (HPS) approach was adopted. Resilience was defined as:

'the capability of individuals, schools, families and communities to cope successfully with everyday challenges including life transitions, times of cumulative stress and significant adversity or risk'.

The Project conceptualised resilience as the capacity to bounce back or recover from a disappointment, obstacle or setback (Masten & Reed, 2002; Rutter, 1987). Resilient children were seen as those who are able to cope with life's stresses and adversities. Such children build on characteristics that facilitate development of personal strengths to cope with life stresses, rather than being unable to cope with such adversities or challenges and thus being more vulnerable to developing adverse health behaviours such as depression, difficult temperament and poor social skills.

Methods

This paper focuses on some of the barriers and facilitators that either hindered or assisted the Project. The evidence is drawn from a number of evaluation activities and instruments that provided qualitative data during the Project. The objective of the evaluation was to identify the processes underlying achievements and highlight gaps and opportunities for improvement relating to the Project in schools, in order to inform future application or expansion of this and similar projects.

In particular, a case study process evaluation was used, based on data collected from face-to-face interviews from two phases of research, in 2004 and 2005. The research involved data collection from key contacts (KCs) such as a principal, deputy principal, curriculum co-ordinator and project officer, and from teachers, parents and students. Both the 2004 and the 2005 phases were from three metropolitan schools in the Northern urban corridor of Brisbane. The HPS framework, on which the key objectives of the Project were developed, was used as the structure for the evaluation.

Current health promotion theory highlights the importance of involving all stakeholders and practitioners in a given community in project development and implementation process. Accordingly, schools did not follow a pre-designed intervention protocol. Instead, in collaboration with local communities, they determined their own priorities for action, based on each initial needs assessment. The rationale for this approach is that it should promote a sense of ownership, enhancing sustainability through the mechanism of perceived competence or an 'I can do it' attitude to change. **Box 1**, below, provides examples to illustrate how schools developed and implemented their Projects.

A multiple case study approach was employed to evaluate the initiatives, the unit of intervention being the school. Parallel with a quantitative component (Sun & Stewart, 2007a, 2007b), qualitative methods were used to enable the evaluators to trace the process of development and implementation in each school. The broad focus of this evaluation was to identify:

- factors that contributed to the success of the Project
- challenges that became barriers to the school achieving success
- key stages for schools in moving towards a 'resilient school' HPS status.

Acknowledging the dynamic context in which this Resilience Project was located, process evaluation was triangulated in

BOX 1 *Examples of Activities Undertaken Through the Resilience Project*

- Active promotion of the resilience of students
- Student councils
- Peer group and mentor systems
- Student representations on school Resilience Project team
- Use of every opportunity to improve the physical and social environment of the school
- Redecoration and re-organisation of school wall, garden and building
- Improvements to playground environment
- Setting up a quiet place for students and staff
- Consideration of embedding resilience into school key learning areas:
 - music
 - sports
 - literacy
 - drama
- Forming partnerships with local communities, city councils, parent groups

a number of ways. Aside from the case studies, data were derived from documentary reporting and completion of workshop activity by school resilience committees. This included observations and reports from six-monthly workshops plus quarterly reports from the participating schools and a reflective final report. Finally, observation and documentary reporting by Project staff across the intervention period (all intervention schools; case studies of each school) were used. Observations and reports were logged by the project co-ordinator and the project officer, who were in daily contact with the schools.

Procedure

The specific population groups involved in the three schools included six focus groups of 6–10 children from Years 5, 6 & 7; in-depth interviews were conducted with nine parents, ten teachers and the KCs outlined above. These KCs had held critical roles through the life of the Project, and five KCs were interviewed in depth at each school. All interviews and group discussions were conducted by the principal researcher and were tape-recorded and transcribed in full. Data were subsequently analysed thematically by hand, using the HPS concept as a theoretical framework for analysis. Interview transcripts were scrutinised for significant statements that related to the themes that had been previously developed. The significant statements for each interview were then applied to a matrix with the themes as headings. The data from these matrices were then organised according to the stakeholder group, and analysed with that group as the unit of analysis. The data from each interview matrix were then re-organised into schools and analysed with the schools as the unit of analysis.

In addition to identifying significant statements of individuals and stakeholder groups that highlight priorities and challenges important to them, analysing the data in this way enabled cross-checking of significant statements and/or factors with regard to the impact that they might have on the outcome of the Project in different schools.

Findings and discussion

The outcomes of the 2005 interview analysis were examined against the outcomes of the 2004 interview analysis, to track the process of change and the factors that facilitate or prevent positive as well as negative changes that can be linked to the Project in the schools. *Table 1*, below, provides a summary of the themes and sub-themes derived from the data. These themes are then presented from the perspective of each stakeholder group in the school communities as they relate to Project objectives.

The importance of time

Time for planning and implementation

The 2004 interviews were characterised by discussions that were cautious about plans, possibilities, uncertainties and challenges. One teacher described the difficulty of:

‘... just thinking outside the box for a lot of people. Just realizing that this is beneficial for the kids and that it is going to last for the rest of their life if we can get these things happening. But it just... it just doesn’t seem to be happening’.

The tone of 2005 interviews was generally much more positive and optimistic, characterised by discussion that focused on accomplishments and outcomes.

Time emerged as a very real factor in identifying outcomes of this comprehensive multi-strategy project. Evidence of this emerged and was reported by key stakeholders and teachers who had been integrally involved and were in a position to identify changes at all time points throughout the Project.

Time for embedding sustainability

Time also emerged as a key factor in the sustainability of the Project. As the Project employed a multi-strategy, whole-school, comprehensive model, it was necessary to make changes beyond a superficial level within and across the school community. Time for effective implementation

TABLE 1 Summary of Evaluation Outcomes

The importance of time	Time for planning and implementation Time for embedding sustainability
The school context and supportive organisational structures	Committee structure Leadership
Creating a supportive school ethos and environment	Building resilience in the curriculum Whole school community engagement
Developing partnerships and services	Use of the health-promoting school framework Sustainability
Enabling factors	Structural factors that enable implementation of the Resilience Project
Challenges	Factors that enable and promote ongoing development of resilience in students as beneficial outcomes of the Resilience Project

was clearly needed in order to bring about changes in the ethos or social environment that promote and support resilience, to the point where it becomes embedded in the school culture and therefore sustainable. The importance of this was expressed by a KC who explained, for example, that:

'People would like to see things happen a little more quickly and they get a little bit frustrated that the grounds don't get done – keeping them focused on the fact that it is building resiliency and not just a grounds improvement exercise is a challenge'.

The school context and supportive organisational structures

Committee structures

At both interview time points there was a general consensus about the value of supportive structures. Central to these structures was the establishment of committees to deal with the business of the Project within schools: student committees and councils, and committees with representatives from all groups in the school community that directed the Project initiatives and represented the school at a district level.

The value of the Project meetings incorporating stakeholders at a district level was widely recognised. The KCs all suggested that a good supporting structure for Project initiatives was important. The important role played by committees was an ongoing reference point for all the KCs. Their roles varied with these committees. One KC commented that:

'... it was kind of easier if I kept it going, I'm in control, running it but I try and keep everyone involved and find out what [they] want'.

Leadership

The approach to leadership taken by KCs differed, particularly on views about levels of leadership required to facilitate the Project. They ranged from the need for total overall direction by school leaders, to quite a significant level of delegation. This did not change significantly over time, but in the second interviews a KC reported realisation of the need to 'step back' and let other people direct, and the personal challenge that this posed.

The teachers acknowledged the value of supporting structures such as committees, but did not see them as central. Rather, the importance of good leadership and a supportive administration was articulated by most teachers in all the

schools over the time. Parents acknowledged the value of representation on committees and the importance of leadership roles in the schools, especially the role of teachers in implementing the Project initiatives.

The focus of students was more reflective. They reported on supporting structures, such as committees and representing the school at a district level, in terms of the value of their contribution to the development and implementation of Project initiatives. One student described this saying that:

'It's good that the principal and all the kids come to the meetings and put in ideas – that would help because they have a different point of view of the school'.

Creating a supportive school ethos and environment

Despite the different approaches of the three schools to the Project, a common objective for all was to create a supportive school ethos and environment. While the physical environment was a focus for all the schools to a degree, in one of the schools it became the 'vehicle' or 'catalyst' for the whole Project once it had been identified as a priority in a school-wide survey. The development of a positive ethos and environment was attested to by parents in each school, who described an improvement in a child or children who had come from another school, or the difference between siblings at other schools and those at one of the schools in the Project.

The KCs were all very aware of the importance of school ethos and environment. This was expressed strongly in the beginning as aspirations and objectives, but most of their strategies at the time were focused on implementation. Over time, however, all KCs described the improved ethos and environment in the school with enthusiasm. Terms used to describe the ethos and environment at this time included 'improved school culture', 'common language' developing, 'connectedness' and 'calmness'.

Teachers also considered the ethos and environment of the schools to be a key objective of the Project. A major initiative implemented by a teacher in the school that had used the physical environment as a vehicle for the Project was a very innovative peer mentoring programme where younger children could come to a specific location and share problems or 'chill out' with older 'mentors' from the higher grades. This created a very strong social support network across the school that became embedded in the fabric of the school as a symbol of ongoing positive ethos and environment in the school.

Parents had expressed positive views about the ethos and environment in schools early in the evaluation, more than one parent making links between the activities and development of resilience. This view was reinforced over time in the evaluation, and expanded on with reports of a ‘feeling’ within the school. There was a strong expression of the need to emphasise the association between levels and stages of application towards achievement within initiatives, and development of resilience, rather than simple gratification at the outcomes.

The greatest contrast over the time of the evaluation with regard to ethos and environment was among students. Initially, feedback about ethos and environment (not always expressed in those terms) in the schools had a negative bias, reports of pressure, bullying that was not addressed and lack of support being echoed in schools. The contrast over time was marked, with no negative comments from students in any of the schools. Reports about ethos and environment by students at this time were similar to those of teachers and KCs, and demonstrated a maturity not evident in the earlier interviews, with clear links articulated between curriculum components, school activities and development of resilience in individuals. The peer mentoring programme described in the section above had, in fact, been the suggestion of a student in that school, and the excitement generated in students by development of this initiative was overwhelming, with reports that the younger grades (who were not interviewed) were equally excited.

Building resilience in the curriculum

The consensus across schools was that the concept of resilience is a difficult one to explain, and to develop and foster it required input at curriculum level. All the schools used a package called You Can Do It (YCDI), also known as ‘Program Achieve’, as the basis of their curriculum component to support other resilience initiatives in the schools. In some schools it was accompanied by other programmes, but this was the main curriculum-based programme.

The level to which it was integrated into the formal curriculum varied significantly between schools and, to a small extent, over time. At the most integrated level, in the school that identified the curriculum component of the HPS framework as the lynchpin of their Project, it was embedded in several units of the formal curriculum and was the pivotal component of the whole Project. This school had a curriculum co-ordinator who worked, with the support of another staff member, on integrating resilience into the curriculum and developing assessment criteria. In

addition, teachers received ongoing teacher in-servicing, professional development and curriculum resource provision and planning time with the curriculum co-ordinator. At other schools, YCDI was used at the discretion of the teachers as a classroom component to support other Project initiatives in the school, and the level of use changed slightly over the time.

The level of curriculum integration of the YCDI programme was largely dictated by the value placed on it by the KCs. In the school where the curriculum was central to the Project, monitoring it was the ongoing task of one KC. For the others, the responsibility of monitoring implementation once the initial training was complete was delegated to the teachers. The substantial effect of this variation in monitoring curriculum on the Project in schools emerged over time. A trade-off of curriculum focus for innovation was evident, levels of innovation and enthusiasm by all groups in the schools where the curriculum was **not** central to the whole Project becoming distinctly more evident over time. This highlights the need for awareness of the importance of maintaining a balance between innovation and ‘routine’ curriculum-based learning.

The approach of teachers to curriculum integration of resilience largely reflected that of the KCs in their school – with two notable contradictory exceptions over time. Teachers involved in a school that, through innovation across a range of activities and groups in the school, had achieved significant outcomes, expressed the opinion that a more formal and consistent implementation of the YCDI programme in that school would be valuable in reinforcing the message of resilience that had been generated innovatively in the school. Conversely, in another school where the curriculum was a significant component, a teacher felt that more could be achieved in developing resilience in the children by reducing the focus on curriculum and increasing the focus on community involvement. This teacher viewed emphasis on the curriculum as a strategy to give responsibility for the Project to teachers.

There was a marked difference over time in parents’ attitudes to building resilience into the curriculum. At the first time period, parents did not generally appear to give much consideration to curriculum development. However, over time, parents expressed clear opinions about the importance of the YCDI programme and the need to balance curriculum and other activities in schools

Students demonstrated a marked change in attitudes to the curriculum component, more specifically its relevance to development of resilience. Initially classroom activities were not generally received favourably, but over time the students demonstrated their understanding of a clear link

between the YCDI programme, other initiatives in the school and developing resilience. This outcome was supported by a survey on students carried out by a teacher, who found that this link had been made by 80% of the students, despite the school's failure continually to emphasise it from the outset.

Whole-school community engagement

It is in the area of whole-school engagement that the changes over the time and in different schools were most obvious, demonstrated in different ways by different groups in the schools.

KCs expressed clear objectives about involving the whole school community as a central strategy in implementing the Project. The value and importance of this strategy were emphasised consistently over time. To a considerable extent this was perceived, paradoxically, from a top-down perspective, KCs expressing the view that, as long as the infrastructure had been established to involve the whole school community, it would undoubtedly happen. Notions of community engagement ranged from including input from all groups, to varying degrees of involvement in Project initiatives and activities, described by one KC as:

'Engaging and getting people to be in the same place at the same time'.

Significant emphasis was placed on creating councils and committees where all groups within the school community were represented. In particular, considerable value was placed on representation by students at the university-organised workshops. Aside from this, the perceived level of involvement of students varied from a model of empowerment where they drove the Project, to a situation where the students had input within a hierarchy, but played a more prescriptive role in implementation.

Similarly, teachers and parents' levels of involvement from the KC perspective varied, as did interpretations of this involvement. Teachers were generally viewed as the main vehicle for implementation, with input and consultation about the Project rather than decision making about initiatives. However, in one school the decision to become involved in the Project was largely left to teachers. Levels of support to facilitate involvement of teachers varied among KCs from very high levels of professional development and provision of resources to an almost secondary role as a support mechanism for the students. One KC noted that teachers:

'would have to go outside their comfort zones'.

Teachers and parents in all the schools had a more consistent approach to whole-school community engagement. Teachers perceived parents' involvement as vital to successful Project outcomes, through both support at the school and being able to reinforce resilience concepts and skills at home. Teachers acknowledged the challenges involved in engaging parents, but remained optimistic, as demonstrated by one teacher who stated that:

'the way that it's got parents having different strategies to use at home – it's not necessarily stuff that you obviously see'.

Conversely, parents were consistent in their view of the vital role played by teachers in achieving successful outcomes with Project initiatives. Both groups expressed difficulty, in some cases, with the level of input and support that they experienced, although this was decidedly more evident in the first time period of the evaluation, with the notable exception of one parent at the second time period who strongly expressed the futility of attempting to have input. This parent was from the school where the infrastructure was very tightly controlled, with an almost prescriptive approach to initiatives and activities.

Student perspectives on involvement in the Project centred on themselves and their interaction in the process of developing and implementing Project initiatives. There was a marked difference between the completely positive way this was expressed towards the end of the Project, with no negative comments voiced, and the considerable number of negative issues expressed earlier in the Project.

Developing partnerships and services

Developing partnerships and services and connecting with the wider community were interpreted in a variety of ways by different groups across the schools, and this did not change significantly over the evaluation period. At one level, a broad definition of community partnerships and services was seen as pivotal to the Project, and community-based activities were an opportunity for exposing students to the knowledge, skills and expertise of community individuals and organisations as another facet of knowledge and skill development. It was also regarded as a means to create connectedness, a key component in a supportive environment to foster resilience. At the opposite level, the term 'wider community' was interpreted as parents.

The approach to partnerships and services and connecting with the wider community adopted by the KCs spanned the spectrum of total commitment to external but related community groups, to individual participation of members of the local community, by invitation, within an ordered infrastructure. At one school, the KC argued that the community and school should be a cohesive and integrated entity. At this school the central Project initiative was based on the Options programme, the focus of which is connecting with community and creating partnerships. The outcomes, in terms of this vision, were positive, and generated an optimism that led to the initiatives being repeated, and development of a number of ongoing partnerships and relationships where students were given opportunities to excel in areas to which they would not have otherwise been exposed. The perceived value of this Project strengthened over the time period. The KCs at the other two schools also acknowledged the value of community partnerships and services. One supported a number of contacts with community organisations, largely to support activities in the school, which proved valuable and ongoing. The third had a more structured and ordered approach to community partnerships and services.

Teachers' views of community partnerships and services were influenced quite strongly by the approach of the KCs in their school. They had a more varied interpretation, both viewing parents as the wider community and seeing the school as at the centre of the community, everything in the school being related to the wider community. Parents were fairly neutral on the issue of wider community partnerships and services. The over-riding view was that community organisations and services had value as resource providers for the school.

The attitude to community partnerships and services varied over time in students more than in other stakeholders, especially in the school where it was a pivotal component of the Project. The reason appeared to be the extensive exposure to community partnerships and services and the ongoing relationships that developed as a result. A significant factor is that the views of students on this topic were not influenced by the Project, and comments were quite spontaneous. While the source of metropolitan school students' knowledge about resilience was reported as school, class, teacher, assembly, etc, even over the time, many of the rural students identified home and community as sources of knowledge about resilience.

Use of the Health Promoting Schools framework

Areas of the HPS framework were open to a range of inter-

pretations and were emphasised according to the needs and priorities of the schools. They did not change over time in any stakeholder groups or schools. One school reported that a comprehensive needs assessment had been carried out in the whole school community before any decisions were made on the direction that the Project would take at the first time point. This typifies the HPS framework. The other schools obtained feedback from groups in the school community, and in some cases the wider community, following initial decisions on the direction of the Project.

The KCs in each of the three schools focused very specifically on different areas of the HPS framework as 'vehicles' or 'catalysts' for Project initiatives. These KCs were stakeholder groups in the schools, and were most informed and aware of the value of the HPS framework. While each had one area of the framework as the central component of their Project, the need to maintain a balance between all three areas of the framework was clearly articulated. Generally the HPS framework appeared to be regarded as a valuable reference point for the duration of the Project. However, the concept of activity and initiative links to the HPS framework did not appear to be disseminated to other groups in the school.

Teachers, on the other hand, appeared not to be entirely familiar with the HPS framework and the role that it played in structure and direction of the Project, except for a small number who had been involved on committees and as representatives for the school. They were able to relate activities in the schools to different areas of the framework, following explanation and discussion of this point. Parents who had not been on committees, were, like the teachers, not familiar with the HPS framework and had difficulty in relating the concept to the Project initiatives. Similarly, students did not indicate a clear concept of the HPS framework and therefore could not relate it to Project initiatives.

Enabling factors

Structural factors that enable implementation of the Project

Before the introduction of the Project, one of the schools had already been developing and implementing resilience-type initiatives. In the initial evaluation, this was perceived both by this school and others as an enabling factor, in that the school was able to capitalise and build on an existing foundation to make early progress in developing and implementing initiatives and strategies for their Project. Over time, in the follow-up evaluation, it became evident that progress had been made by the schools that had not had the 'head start', and that the difference was less

discernable in the achievements of the schools. Early gains by the more prepared schools had levelled off, while in the others innovation, dedication and enthusiasm had flourished, with the result that these schools accomplished some major achievements. It is possible that in the prepared schools innovation had been lost to a more routine operation. The learning from this is that maintaining innovation and enthusiasm should remain a priority.

Factors that enable and promote ongoing development of resilience in students as beneficial outcomes of the Project

Over the time of the evaluation, many beneficial outcomes were identified by all schools. The most widely expressed were the improved relationships and interactions between different groups, sometimes described as ‘unifying’ the school. The benefits for developing student resilience in the long term were continually emphasised. Proximity to resources and networks was a key enabling factor in implementing Project initiatives.

Sustainability

The area where there was the greatest increase in focus and consideration over the time of the evaluation was the sustainability of the initiatives and perceptions of positive outcomes. There was a very positive attitude to sustainability across the board. The relationship between the time, levels of support and sustainability became evident in developments in schools over the time period, and was supported by observations by teachers and KCs, that implementing initiatives to develop resilience requires a complex combination of knowledge, attitudes and skills in students, together with long-term commitment. Changes and gains only became evident over time when the cultures and values in school groups had changed and become embedded to support resilience. It was at this point that sustainability became an important and viable consideration.

Funding was a significant point of discussion with regard to sustainability. Initially the attitude to funding was expressed as a feeling that there was a responsibility to use the funding wisely. The contrast over the time of the evaluation was demonstrated by the shift in concern from recognition of the value of funding in initiating the Project strategies, to concern about sources of funding when Project funds were no longer available. The overwhelming attitude was that the resilience initiatives which had proved valuable and effective would be sustained and evolve, and that funding would be sourced or strategies modified to ensure sustainability.

Factors perceived to facilitate sustainability differed slightly from school to school. At two schools it was the fact that it was embedded in the curriculum. In all schools there was a perception that more resilient behaviour had become part of the culture of the school. A significant amount of discussion on sustainability was related to future strategies that would underpin it. One such strategy was initiation of all newcomers – staff, students and parents – into the culture of resilience and common language. In addition it was recognised as important to ensure a clear understanding of the processes implemented in the school and the principles that underpin and support them. The need to maintain the support and enthusiasm of teachers through ongoing in-servicing and professional development was also widely emphasised.

Teachers in the school that demonstrated innovative and enthusiastic application of initiatives to support resilience emphasised the need to maintain excitement and passion in students and staff by regular exposure to new initiatives for sustainability.

Challenges

This qualitative evaluation clearly found that many challenges had been experienced by all schools and stakeholder groups. Such challenges were expressed either in the context of maintaining or achieving an objective in the future, or as learning or an immediate barrier to be overcome. The most common and significant challenge for all groups except students was time. However, its impact on initiatives varied according to individual perspectives on the Project.

Challenges identified by KCs focused largely on the difficulty and importance of gaining and maintaining support from all parties, especially staff, to support Project initiatives. Early in the evaluation the perception of KCs was that strategies should be integrated into day-to-day activities, but it was widely acknowledged that teachers largely perceived the Project initiatives as increased workload. Strategies to address this were important to KCs, and this was still evident over time, but from a more optimistic perspective. Over time the perspective on challenges became a focus on the future, with challenges to maintain the momentum of the initiatives, ownership by and empowerment of staff and students.

The biggest challenge expressed by all teachers was time and the perception of extra workload as a result of the Project. Theoretically this workload should be addressed by integration of the resilience strategies into the day-to-day activities and curriculum, but this was not generally the perception of teachers – although some expressed more

optimism than others. Maintaining teacher resilience was a perceived challenge in all the schools.

The challenges for parents were in some cases quite similar to those experienced by teachers. The most significant was getting and maintaining the support of parents, and there was a consensus that it was always:

'the same group of parents that became involved'.

The importance of prioritising and providing opportunities for students to put into practice resilience strategies that they had learned was expressed, with agreement that parents could play a valuable role in facilitating them. The challenge of being able to facilitate understanding of the concept of resilience for students was expressed by teachers. Over time, a focus on future challenges increased, as distinct from immediate barriers to be overcome. Both teachers and parents felt that, for future consideration, improved communication was a challenge, especially early in the Project. Clear communication was considered essential to inform key groups about the imminent implementation of a Project and then report on the progress of the Project and specific roles and expectations before beginning initiatives with ongoing feedback. A broad challenge was presented that focused on the dubious value of 'one-off' projects to schools, and the need to use learning and findings from the Project at structural level to develop resources for use and application in ongoing implementation of these and other similar projects.

Students expressed few challenges, especially in the later evaluation, when their approach was more positive and constructive. Challenges were expressed as goals for the future and whole-school inclusion. They included the value of whole-school initiatives, involvement of lower grades and interaction across grades. This demonstrated students' appreciation of the value of such practices in the school and highlighted the need to involve and empower them.

Limitations

This Project was conducted in a broadly low socio-economic catchment area in the Northern corridor of Queensland's capital city. The characteristics of this area, including its cultural and ethnic mix, do not necessarily reflect those of other Australian cities or rural country towns. However, quantitative analysis of the demographics with a control group of schools in the Southern Brisbane corridor indicates that it is similar in many ways to the Northern corridor.

The sample was selected according to standard qualita-

tive requirements that interviews should be purposive and be designed to offer insight into the issues involved. Interviewing continued until saturation was achieved.

Conclusion

It is often assumed that an intervention will lead to immediate, measurable health improvements or to positive educational outcomes. Indeed, a common approach to school-based health promotion has been to focus on specific, individual-level student health-related behavioural change. Such initiatives do not fully embrace the principles underlying the HPS, which recognise longer-term health improvements and accept that such improvements will appear only if initiatives are integrated into a multi-disciplinary, multi-faceted health promotion strategy that supports sustained change. Such a strategy must move beyond the individual, to encompass the school organisation, structural issues and organisational practice.

The Resilient Children and Communities Project was designed to build individual skills, to enhance the quality of children's extended social networks such as peer groups and the school, and to strengthen the capacity of the community in which the child and family operate to support its members. The process evaluation described above indicates that the three metropolitan schools included in both time points each identified a different component of the HPS framework as a vehicle for their Project initiatives. As a result, the strategies varied considerably, but other components of the HPS framework were drawn on and applied as secondary strategies to support the major focus/component.

Significantly, despite the range of approaches and the focus on different issues, changes in all groups over time suggested that implementation of the Project had been successful in all the schools, within the parameters of each school. Results suggest that every school is unique, and that prescribed strategies would not be appropriate beyond adoption of a framework within which to operate and the collective will and commitment to a common goal. This is summed up by a KC who expressed the view that:

'... resiliency has to be in an environment where it is not just taught, it is practised'.

In the final analysis, the enabling factors and challenges identified do not appear necessarily to be constrained by the particular characteristics of schools, but rather by factors that transcend day-to-day operation. The factors identified above have contributed to successful implementation of the

Project in schools. The qualitative evaluation objective, which was to identify the processes underlying achievements and highlight gaps and opportunities for improvement relating to the Project in schools, has been achieved. In terms of the broader context of implementing this type of project, potential challenges have been flagged and significant enabling factors identified that may be modified and applied constructively in a range of schools, every one of which has the potential to become environments where resilience in children will flourish. The last words can, perhaps, be left to one of the principals.

'The most important benefit has been that of discovering our own potential as a school community. The strong sense of community spirit and ownership of the Tranquillity Garden as it finally came together was very powerful. The long-term benefits of this will be realised in terms of lasting positive links with the community, strengthening relationships between parents and children and school.'

Address for correspondence

Professor Donald Stewart, School of Public Health, Logan Campus, Griffith University, University Drive, Meadowbrook, Queensland 4131, Australia. Email: Donald.Stewart@griffith.edu.au.

References

- Lister-Sharp D, Chapman S, Stewart-Brown S & Sowden A (1999) Health promoting schools and health promoting in schools: two systematic review. *Health Technology Assessment* **3** 1–207.
- Masten AS & Reed MJ (2002) Resilience in development. In: CR Snyder & SJ Lopez (Eds) *Handbook of Positive Psychology*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Rowling L & Jeffreys V (2006) Capturing complexity: integrating health and education research to inform health-promoting schools policy and practice. *Health Education Research* **21** (5) 705–18.
- Rutter M (1987) Psychosocial resilience and protective mechanisms. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* **57** 316–31.
- Stewart D, Sun J, Patterson C, Lemerle K & Hardie M (2004) Promoting and building resilience in primary school communities: evidence from a comprehensive 'health promoting school' approach. *International Journal of Mental Health Promotion* **6** (3) 26–33.
- Sun J & Stewart D (2007a) Development of population based resilience measures in the primary school setting. *Health Education* **107** (6) 575–99.
- Sun J & Stewart D (2007b) How effective is the health promoting school approach in building social capital in primary schools? *Health Education* **107** (6) 556–74.