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Is Resilience Possible? Prospects after Reintegration into Regular School

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After formal or informal exclusion from mainstream primary schools in the Brisbane area, 300 students with learning difficulties and behaviour problems have been referred to Tennyson Special School (TSS) between 1973 and 2003. Archival analysis of records kept at Tennyson Special School has been supplemented by analysis of files held by Department of Families Services (DFS). About 75% of TSS students also have a file at DFS, which, in some cases, continues to age 18. Data obtained from TSS files have permitted coding for 200 variables covering seven areas (student's familial, psychosocial, cognitive, and health profiles; sending schools' disciplinary strategies; preplacement programs and support history; and academic history and progress at exit). Data obtained from DFS includes child protection notifications, placement, and proven juvenile offending histories. Data is also being obtained from Queensland Police Services (QPS) files, which cover all contacts with the criminal justice system during childhood, adolescence, and adulthood. Relationships among the archives are considered, and preliminary aggregate across-archive findings on the educational and social trajectories of this seriously at risk population are reported. The complex journey toward reintegration or further social exclusion is illustrated by thematic features of file data, which reflects on resilience as a developmental process.

Failure of ordinary magic

The "ordinary magic" of human adaptational systems enables a positive developmental trajectory (Masten, 1991; Masten & Powell, 2003). These systems provide protective processes for the growing competence of children, through contextual support, cognitive development and learning, and developing self-regulation of attentional drift, affective lability, and aggressive behaviour (Masten & Coatsworth, 1998). Recent efforts to reconceptualise effective coping with problems in child development have been focused increasingly on protective interventions (e.g., resourcing early in development, building skills progressively, constructing and maintaining supportive relationships with a positive teacher, and programming systematic educational supports in natural school context). These protections shift the odds for good developmental outcomes in more favourable directions (Pianta & Walsh, 1998; Pianta, 1999). For some children, however, their accumulated vulnerabilities to stress from within-child risks, environmental adversities, or both in interaction over time, can pose overwhelming threats to the development of ordinary competence.

Educational interest in the developmental construct of resilience remains strong because there are many children living and developing in adversity today (Pianta &

Walsh, 1998). Global expectations about some children being either invulnerable to stress (Anthony & Cohler, 1987) or having vulnerable but invincible personal characteristics (Werner & Smith, 1992) have been tempered into a more realistic assessment of the benefits of introducing developmental supportive curriculum into schools (Henderson & Milstein, 2003; Goldstein, 2002) and more sobering awareness of the need for ongoing research (Clarke & Clarke, 2003). Improving research and theory has led to continued efforts to develop and deliver programs to promote success in high-risk individuals and to provide buffers against developmental failure (Doll & Lyons, 1998; Doll, Zucker, & Brehm, 2004).

However, understanding of this construct has continued to be quite vague and poorly articulated in education and into other child-helping professions. The child's capacity to resist, repel, and "bounce back" from stress has remained a primitive belief underlying energetic efforts to provide piecemeal service delivery to children at risk, which are focused on single-skill and short-term "pull-out" training out of the school context (Pianta & Walsh, 1998; Luther & Cicchetti, 2000). Consistent with the historical misunderstanding of developmental concepts in education, this kind of intervention has failed to comprehend the transactional and snowballing nature of risks in negative developmental trajectories and has failed to accommodate the role of multicontextual and multisystemic sources of failure—and of success—in intervention planning.

Risk is a probabilistic term in development, which means that the presence of risk and adversity increases the likelihood of developmental problems in one or more developmental domains (Luther & Cicchetti, 2000). For children with multiple risk indicators, protective contextual redundancies of developmental support are stripped away (Masten & Coatsworth, 1998). The small statistical risk of poor outcomes from the presence of any single risk indicator is likely to become real risk for children who have accumulated multiple risks in their lives. For example, a premature infant with access to a supportive family has a constitutionally based statistical risk that is counterbalanced by other socially protective influences, whereas a similar infant in a drug-dependent family has a real, unbuffered risk of a negative outcome. The presence of more stress than available protections tips the scales towards a negative outcome.

Risk pathways are susceptible to protective influences (i.e., the developmental trajectory can be changed towards a more positive direction). Protections reduce risk impact, reduce negative chain reactions, increase self-efficacy, open up opportunities, and reframe negative experiences positively (Braet & Verhofstadt-Denève, 1998). Luther and Cicchetti (2004) have emphasised that resilience presents in the trajectory or profile of developmental adaptation rather than in the individual child. The inherent appeal of this optimistic construct to educational stakeholders has stimulated a range of resilience programs in schools designed, however, with little awareness of "process" and "system" assumptions underlying the construct. Intervention, to be effective, must be aimed to foster resiliency in trajectory or outcome, not to expect to inject resilient attributes into a child.

Students at risk are students who bring previously existing problems into a classroom setting in which they are coping poorly. These children have persistent interpersonal problems. They might have either environmental problems (e.g., parent with psychiatric

disorder), or interpersonal problems in affect, cognition, and behaviour, or both contextual and personal risks. For some children, risks accumulate across organic, intrapersonal, interpersonal, and superordinate levels (Braet & Verhofstadt-Denève, 1998). Garcia-Coll et al. (1998) identified eight high-risk categories for minority children (viz., social position variables such as race and gender, racism and discrimination, residential and psychological segregation, inhibiting environment in school and health system, adaptive value of cultural traditions and legacies to current environment, family values and beliefs, child characteristics such as age and temperament, and the child's current developmental competencies).

Resilience is an unlikely, unexpected, or improbable positive outcome in the presence of risk. The true meaning of resilience, therefore, is a reflection of normal human adaptation and maladaptation. The more risks that child encounters, the less resilience overall (Dodge & Petit, 2003; Sameroff, Gutman, & Peck, 2003). The total number of risks could become so large that a child could not be expected to acquire normal developmental competence (Sameroff et al., 2003). The criteria for life success can be set to different levels, according to the quantity and intensity of risks to which the child is exposed. For example, a trajectory may show resilience if the domain and child are doing well in the presence of moderate risks (i.e., "thriving"). Alternatively, an already compromised trajectory may be considered successful if the domain or child shows evidence of reaching normal function or avoiding bad outcomes in the presence of severe risks (i.e., surviving).

The developmental and educational trajectory is compromised when a child's problems are multicontextual (e.g., school and home) and multisystemic (school systems and family services). A child's lifespan prospects are closely linked to that of family members (Elder, 1998; Macmillan, McMorris, & Kruttschnitt, 2004) within surrounding contexts such as social class and economic standing in the community (Bronfenbrenner, 1999). When the child goes to school, salient and emerging tasks of childhood are not only academic but also getting along with peers and with teachers (Masten & Coatsworth, 1998; Masten, Coatsworth, & Tellegen, 2004). The child who is excluded from regular school is likely to have compromised competencies across domains (see Bouhours et al., 2003).

Current exclusionary practices might be expected to be most disadvantageous to students who need the most help (Howard, 2003). Overseas data on which students are excluded from school has identified a range of risk indicators such as many behavioural control problems, three-quarters involved in social services, welfare agencies, and psychiatric issues in family members (Howard, 2003). Moreover, UK exclusion in the primary school years has been shown to lead to negative consequences in the secondary school years (Howard, 2003). In Australia, there are limited data on the types of students most at-risk of Student Disciplinary Absence (SDA), and there is a significant gap in the information available on primary school students. However, available data does suggest that Australian students at disproportionate risk tend to be male, of indigenous background, from either low socio-economic or unstable family backgrounds (or both), resident in government care facilities, or exhibiting low achievement in numeracy and literacy (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Employment, Education, and Training, 1996).

This study examines the links between the educational and social trajectory of a cohort of "pull-out" students who spent some educational time at Tennyson Special School, a small facility that has a focus on students with behavioural and learning problems that did not attract the educational support generally provided to students with various developmental disabilities. Ongoing archival analysis of the school files (Bouhours et al., 2003) was extended to search for files on these students kept in the Department of Family Services (DFS) and, in the longer term, in the Queensland Police Service (QPS). Archival analysis involves a lengthy process, in which the task is to locate and code information recorded about a specific student before, during, and after the TSS pull-out. The aim of this study is to reveal the extent of links between TSS and DFS, in particular, and to indicate how the DFS files can sometimes fill in some gaps in the TSS educational archive.

Method

Coding of paper files at TSS is in progress. Electronic and paper records at DFS are being coded. Searching for files and data within and across files can be likened to a detective's job. Assembling information about a student can be likened to construction of a "jigsaw puzzle", in which some "pieces" (i.e., files and entries in files) are missing at TSS, DFS, and QPS, respectively.

From the original 300 TSS students, the status of 39 cases, in terms of presence or absence of contact with DFS, has not yet been established. These students were born before 1988. Any contact with DFS ending before 1988 would only be recorded in a paper file, and the paper file search for these 39 cases has not been conducted yet. The reported analyses are based, therefore, on 261 cases (87% of TSS historical student population).

Criminal histories from Queensland Police Services (QPS) have not yet been accessed. These records will provide the entire criminal history, if any, from the age of criminal responsibility (viz., 10 years of age) to the present (i.e., juvenile and adult criminal history for relevant cases). They include any contact with the Criminal Justice System (CJS) whether offending was subsequently "proven" or not.

TSS records 1973–2003

From the TSS enrolment book, the complete picture of TSS student history included 300 individual pieces (Bouhours et al., 2003). The enrolment book can be likened to the original puzzle box. On the cover of the "box", there is a broad description of the 300 pieces (i.e., student names and surnames, date of birth, entry date, exit date, receiving school, and carer's name and address at entry). Inside the box, there are only 200 pieces left. Of 300 original files, 92 files have been definitely destroyed, and 18 are missing. From 20/03/1973 (paper file 1) to 04/02/85 (paper file 92), all the pieces were irremediably lost a few years ago, when these 92 files were sent to the district office and subsequently destroyed. Another 18 pieces could not be found in the TSS archive room. These files may have been misplaced or sent to the district, a receiving school, or a particular office or agency within Queensland Education. Some of them may be retrievable following a systematic search of their likely whereabouts.

TSS individual records, therefore, started with File 93 (25/03/1985) and ended with File 300 (25/08/2003). Apart from the 18 missing pieces, filing for this 19-year period was nearly intact. Following an initial in-depth analysis of a random sample of 19 available files (one from each year between 1985 and 2003), a codebook and a coding form were designed in order to collect student data on 200 variables articulated within six domains (viz., student's familial background; psychosocial, cognitive, and health profiles; sending school's disciplinary strategies; preplacement programs and support history; academic history; and progress at exit). In terms of the developmental history of each student, TSS records sometimes included information on the student starting from birth but essentially ending at the time of TSS exit.

The entire data collection process on each file involves (a) "cleaning" the file (i.e., chronologically ordering the documents in the file so the file can be read as a developing story, in which pre-placement/placement/post-placement periods can be distinguished, and duplicates can be discarded to facilitate the second stage of the process. The second stage is (b) reading the file, which involves highlighting and colour coding the relevant information in the file according to the seven domains to be coded. The third stage is (c) coding, which involves chronologically reading the highlighted information in the file and, while referring to the codebook, entering the data into the coding form, which has been designed like a survey questionnaire and which includes 200 variables within the seven domains. Additionally, qualitative notes (coder's comments and verbatim quotes from the file) are taken about the specific reintegration process, problems, and particular pedagogies, strategies, and events as they apply to each student.

To date, 97 files have been fully coded. Six files belonging to the period 1997–2002 have been coded, as they were part of the initial random sample of 19 files from which the coding frame (codebook and coding form) was developed. Also, 91 files have been coded from the period 1985 (file 93) to 1996 (file 200). Sixteen of the 18 missing files (therefore not currently "codable") belong to the period 1985–1992. At this stage, any reported analysis in which TSS student data is included essentially refers to the period 1985–1996 or "TSS second decade" (see Bouhours et al., 2003).

DFS files

The information recorded in TSS enrolment book (i.e., student's identity) made it feasible to attempt to match TSS records with potential records at DFS and to explore the unfolding developmental trajectory of some TSS students. Contact with DFS potentially has included events such as DFS notification of the need for child protection against neglect and against emotional, physical, and sexual harm; placement outside the natural family; and juvenile offending. DFS may become involved at any stage of an individual's development, from birth to the time of this individual's legal majority when the client reaches 18 years of age. Sometimes, involvement with DFS is short-lived. Sometimes, it starts at birth. In the case of children who become wards of the state, it only ends when they reach 18.

For every DFS client, a paper file is opened when the first contact with the department occurs. Since 1988, an electronic file is also created, which more or less standardises some of the information contained in the paper file. In terms of quantity

and quality of information, a paper file is the better source. In terms of easiness of data collection process, the electronic file is better. However, because systematic electronic recording only began in 1988, any contact with DFS that started and ended before 1988 would not have a corresponding electronic record. If the case record continued after 1987, the electronic record would only include information pertaining to events after 1987. Potentially, this data trail meant that, for any TSS student born before 1988, a search for a potential paper file would have to be considered. Although DFS has agreed to give free access to electronic records, access to paper records necessarily incurs an administrative search cost. Although paper files contain the best information, requests for potential paper files have been limited to TSS students born before 1988 (200 cases), in order to reduce this search cost and the time involved in data collection.

Electronic records at DFS

The search for a potential file in DFS electronic records is not a straightforward process. The main reason derives from one of the characteristics of TSS student population. Surnames of many TSS students can change over the years, because there are many large reconstructed families: Multiple searches often have to be done to ascertain whether or not there is an electronic record.

Electronic records generally contain four kinds of standardised information: (a) the demographics of the client, family members, and other individuals involved in the case; (b) child protection notifications, with their dates and nature, and their outcomes, substantiated or not; (c) placement history, with dates and locations; and (d) proven (i.e., adjudicated in court) juvenile offending history, with dates, nature, and sentences. They also contain information about clients at risk of suicide, with dates and sometimes nature of events warranting the "at risk" category. It is also possible to access the files, if any, of family member (e.g., siblings) from the client's electronic file.

Since 1998, written reports by social workers in relation to child protection notifications are also frequently electronically available. Their content varies, but the record sometimes contains qualitative information about the circumstances and the nature of the notifications, the identity of the "maltreater", familial characteristics, and client characteristics such as health and schooling.

Between 1989 and 1997, the equivalent of these electronic written reports were in paper format. However, these paper records only contain semi-standardised accounts of child protection notifications and not the whole case history, which is found in the paper files. Overall, the data in these documents were better than the written electronic reports, and they were also consulted for the data collection. At the time of writing, the search has been completed for electronic files and paper records of child protection notifications and subsequent data collection.

Paper files at DFS

The search for potential paper files is in process and involves 200 cases. It is not yet possible to determine how many such files actually exist. At the time of writing, a search for 104 files has located 62 (60%).

Paper files can contain a great variety of documentation originating from different sources: (a) departmental staff and systems such as DFS caseworkers' notes and child

protection notifications; (b) other agencies such as the criminal justice system (CJS); schools, health, and child care institutions; and (c) the client and client's family, such as records of their correspondence. Files sizes ranged from just a few pages (rarely) to a metre high of documentation (often), depending on the complexity of the case and the duration of departmental involvement.

Results

The absence of any records at DFS and later on at QPS does not mean that the corresponding case had no contact with either family services or the CJS, or both. It only means that there were no such contacts in Queensland. Extreme mobility, and associated instability in a child's circumstances, is a characteristic of the TSS student population. Some students could have been involved with equivalent agencies in other Australian jurisdictions. Moreover, the present results are based on a preliminary analysis of only half of TSS student available files for the period 1985–1996, of DFS electronic records starting only in 1988 but up to the present, and of nearly half of potentially existing DFS paper files covering events occurring before 1987.

A search of files held in Queensland Department of Community Services (DOCS; previously DFS) has identified TSS students with a DOCS file; students with child protection notification (physical, emotional, sexual harms, and neglect categories); students with proven juvenile offending history (i.e., went to court on matters relating to property, criminal damage, "good order", traffic, violent, and sexual offending categories); students with both child protection notification and proven juvenile offending history; students placed outside natural family; and students with suicidal ideation or attempted suicide.

These files have indicated accumulation of multiple risks. There were many cases of domestic violence, single mothers under great stress, financial and accommodation difficulties; either large and reconstructed or large and dysfunctional families, teenage pregnancies involving mothers and sisters; intergenerational cycle of abuse, violence, and educational deprivation; criminal background involving parents, siblings, or other relatives; health problems and prescribed medication of the student, parents, or siblings; alcohol and drug abuse involving students, parents, and siblings.

These data also reveal the high frequency of further exclusion from primary and secondary schools. Moreover, there are many students in care with multiple placements and associated schooling disruptions (CREATE Foundation, 2003; Queensland Government, 2003; Zima, Bussing, Freeman, Yang, Belin, & Forness, 2000). An exceptional case of a child in care was reconstructed from TSS and DFS files, in which DFS, Education Queensland, and the local school coordinated their efforts to keep the child in the same school from Years 1 to 7, despite changes in foster placements. The child's behaviour remained challenging to the school, but he managed to "close" an initially serious academic delay. When eventually excluded for 3 months before the end of Year 7 and referred to TSS, his academic performance was at year level. Although he did get involved in delinquent activities, his juvenile offending history was not extensive, and he managed to pursue his education up to Year 12, usually a rare occurrence in other, similar cases.

Students with a file at DFS

The DFS search included 87% of the historical TSS student population (i.e., 261 out of 300 cases), as 39 cases have not yet been fully searched. This search revealed that nearly 80% (i.e., 206 out of 261 cases) had a recorded contact with DFS in Queensland. The other 55 students did not have a DFS file.

Maltreatment

Out of these 206 students with DFS contact, at least 151 (73%) had child protection notifications for physical harm, 159 (77%) for emotional harm, 135 (65%) for neglect, and 55 (27%) for sexual harm. These figures indicate that many of these children have not only experienced repeated maltreatment (often over several years and well before and after placement at TSS) but also multiple forms of maltreatment.

Placements

Out of these 206 students with DFS contact, at least 134 (65%) have been placed at some stage outside their natural family. Duration of placement ranged from short-time respite care to long-term institutionalisation. The number of placements ranged from 1 to 75. The average of 13 different placements per child provides an indication of the precariousness of many of these placements and the resulting emotional, relational, and educational chaos experienced by these children. Stability in placement can be considered in terms of placement in home (e.g., long-term foster care) and school (e.g., no exclusionary sanctions from school). At this stage of our analysis, it is not yet possible to supply exact figures about the effect of relative stability or instability; however, a few files indicated that, when efforts were made to maintain some stability in placement, individuals who otherwise shared relatively similar original circumstances to their constantly "displaced" peers, have achieved better social and educational outcomes (e.g., no or minor offending history, schooling continued after Year 10). However, for many individuals among these 206 students, the "normal" educational trajectory is marked by ongoing school exclusion, before and after placement at TSS. For many students, successful Year 10 completion is an unachievable "feast." In those exceptional stories of stability, resilience appears to be situated in a more supportive ecology rather than in the children's particular characteristics and origins.

Juvenile offending

Out of these 206 students with DFS contact, at least 104 (50%) had an official juvenile offending history. Many were systematically and heavily medicated with psychoactive drugs, often starting at around 5-year-old when schooling began. Their later records showed progression to abuse of alcohol and illegal drugs (marijuana, speed, heroin), misuse of "legal" substances such as glue and petrol sniffing, and thoughts of, or attempted acts of, suicide. Consistent with the "early onset" categorisation of delinquent trajectories identified by Moffitt (1993), many of the TSS students started offending behaviour when young (usually between 10 and 12 years of age and sometimes even before) and did not desist in late adolescence. They often began with charges covering relatively minor property offences and moved into far more serious offending, including assaults with bodily harm, robbery, rape, and even murder.

Aberrant child or aberrant ecology?

Such high levels of child abuse and adversity have occurred in a sociocultural context. TSS has essentially been a facility for the children of the underclass. In Marxian terminology, they fit the "lumpen proletariat", who are the forgotten and rejected people at the bottom of the social hierarchy. These files reveal stories that otherwise remain hidden under the concept of social exclusion. What is striking about these stories is not so much the aberrant behaviour of an isolated child but instead it is the similarity of the aberrant context or ecological milieu in which these children have developed (Bronfenbrenner, 1999). This milieu is characterised by systemic material, emotional, and cognitive deprivation, in which the number of intergenerational stories of abuse and social exclusion suggests little upward social mobility. Many parents of these TSS students have been maltreated in childhood, have been in care, and have been institutionalised. Many were and are living in poverty. These parents were poorly educated, sometimes illiterate, and often unemployed. Many mothers were teenage mothers, were deserted by their partners, and were victims of domestic violence. Many sisters of TSS students appeared to follow the same path. Alcoholism, drug abuse, illness, disabilities, and early death were common themes.

Criminality among the parents, the many siblings, and relatives was quite frequent. Prostitution, drug dealing, and property offences often appeared to be a means of economic survival. Fathers, brothers, and even mothers in jail were not extremely rare events. The stories contained in these files leave a paradoxical overall impression. On one hand, these children have been excluded from supposedly caring and nurturing institutions such as the family, the school, and the community. On the other hand, they have frequently ended in controlling and punishing institutions such as either a boys' home or a youth detention centre. As adolescents and young adults, they were "included" but captured. After such a level and extent of damaging treatment documented in the DFS files, it would seem that the social trajectory of very few individuals, taken together with their educational trajectory, could support resilience.

Discussion

Strong linkages between school and DFS archives show that a purely educational solution is insufficient for high-risk children, who have multiple problems in multiple aspects of their lives (e.g., organic, intrapersonal, interpersonal, and superordinate). "The proverbial magic bullet may turn out to be as multidimensional as the modern army. The major implication of multiple-risk models is that interventions need to be as complex as development itself" (Sameroff et al., 2003, p. 388). The TSS story of educational exclusion is also a story about social exclusion in the underclass, the education of the underclass, and the meaning and purpose of education for the underclass.

The 30-year history of Tennyson Special School has documented a small and alternative effort to provide an educational service to highly challenged students in a "natural" classroom context. However, TSS and DFS data have revealed the limitations of an approach that is a brief interruption in the longer school and family experience. In the real world, developmental change is improbable without multisystemic and long-term support to improve the child's inner resilience building strategies and to improve the

external resources. These children make extremely high demands on educational systems that cannot be resolved without serious commitment to practice changes. For schools, the issue is whether practice models can make the shift to programmatic curriculum delivery models that address these realities throughout the school years (e.g., Doll et al., 2004; Thomson, 2002) rather than continuing to hope that the child at risk can be repaired and returned to regular classrooms without ongoing adaptation.

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