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## How Can Resilience be Developed in UK Schools?

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## **How can resilience be developed in UK Schools?**

### **Introduction**

It seems obvious that resilience is a quality that we ought to develop among young people. It is a favoured term, too, in many different settings ranging from social work and health all the way through to the United States Army (Seligman, 2011). Even so, resilience has its limits. After persisting for years through multiple injuries to win two Olympic gold medals Dame Kelly Holmes recently disclosed her on-going struggle with post-athletic life and her deliberate self-harm. Similarly, in cycling, Sir Chris Hoy announced on retiring that he has used up 'every last ounce of energy and effort at London 2012', adding that despite wanting to go on for another year to win a seventh gold medal, he realised that he could not do so (BBC, 2013). It seems as if resilience can come and go; it can run out; and it can resist transfer from one domain of life to another even for the most talented and toughest.

The purpose of this paper is to examine two interventions that are being delivered in the name of resilience to find key points that might guide the development of resilience in UK schools. The first is the Penn Resiliency Programme which was trialled in 2007/8 in 22 UK schools and the second is the US military's scientifically based resiliency programme and associated literature.

### **What is resilience?**

Resilience makes a good companion to the positive psychology movement. This movement brings therapeutically based psychological methods to popular use. Preventing difficulty and promoting coping is the aim of positive psychology in contrast to traditional psychology's focus on problems. Resilience is most readily understood as a person's capacity to bounce back from trauma or to overcome difficulty. From the perspective of positive psychology, these are capacities that can be developed and improved in everyone. Resilience can be conceptualised in many different ways. Meredith et al (2011) categorise definitions of resilience into 3 different types: basic (a process), adaptation (coping) and growth (coping and more). A number of definitions of resilience are provided below:

Resilience is individual – a feature of personality or of disposition. It is 'hardiness' or the capacity to find meaning in life (Wadsworth, 2010:550).

It is familial – it involves shared beliefs and values among family members that shape their collective responses to difficult events (Walsh, 2007).

It is communal – It involves efforts at the level of communities to respond to traumatic events (Hobfoll et al., 2007).

It is 'normal development under difficult circumstances' (Fonagy et al., 1994:223).

'.. The outcome of negotiations between individuals and their environments to maintain a self-definition as healthy' (Ungar, 2004:352).

As a concept, resilience came to prominence over 20 years ago as an alternative to risk focused social or health work, mostly relating to children (Rutter, 1987 ; Turner, 1995). This was a promising line of study because some children appeared to thrive despite the harshest of conditions (Condly, 2006:212). This led to questions about how resilience might be developed in others together with a realisation that some children are naturally resilient. It is now well known that some factors promoting resilience are individual and immutable (Hill et al., 2007). For example, an easy going temperament (Werner, 1989 ; Werner, 1993) and high intelligence (Fergusson and Lynskey, 1996) are assets thought likely to promote good coping. Nevertheless, we also know that high intelligence may be fed or starved by circumstance (Hill, Stafford et al., 2007) and that most individual and intrinsic factors of resilience are susceptible to change. More than anything, these factors of resilience can be developed and improved in children by warm and sensitive parenting which is probably the single most important source of resilience (Masten, 2001 ; Masten and Powell, 2003). Based on significant prior research, a list of individual factors promoting resilience is provided by Hill, Stafford et al (2007). Vital developmental features are included in this list, such as: emotional security and attachment style for example. Overall, resilience among children results from an interaction between their genetic makeup and the types of circumstances and support they experience (Condly, 2006:216). Children may be doubly blessed or doubly hindered by circumstances outside of their control.

If warm and supportive parenting is the first social building block towards resilience, then the second most important building block is the ability to find realistic meaning in life. This is a recurrent theme in the literature and links to the advancement also of positive thinking and optimism. The Penn Resiliency Programme aims to banish pessimism in favour of objective and non-self-effacing thought patterns. Rather obviously, this is the main staple of positive psychology. Rooted in the philosophy of stoicism, this technique emerged from people in difficult times. For Stoics, the manipulations of thought in the face of adversity were pertinent skills and they are relevant to the resilient person.

In isolation, this kind of emotional intelligence (Goleman, 1995) is effective at ruling out problematic cognitive and behavioural responses to events; both those that are stressful and otherwise. The intention is to develop habits of positive thinking that are synonymous with a high view of oneself (self-esteem) and a centring of oneself in life (over the social or the greater good for example). Typically, this is less concerned with what a person ought to do since this is left to the individual.

Techniques of positive and objective thinking together with other more comprehensive systems of thought such as those found in different faiths are collectively called *compensatory* factors of resilience. This is in contrast to *challenging* or *protective* factors viewed from a dominant ecological or systems approach (Garmezy et al., 1984). Compensatory factors minimize the effects of a present risk. Protective factors on the other hand are associated with the possibility of growth in the face of a risk. They have the potential to cut off the risk at source in areas of well-known vulnerability such as poor parenting. In such a case, a protective factor might be sensitive parenting. *Challenge* factors are rather like training for future risks (Rutter, 1987). These include routine life events that gradually enhance a person's capacity to deal with adversity. Problems can occur, however, if risk is cumulative. A succession of difficult events might override a person's capacity to cope – in short, their resilience. This can happen either because a person becomes cognitively overwhelmed by cumulative happenings or because in coping they use up all of their mental and/or physical resources. 'Pile-up' is often used to describe this situation and Hobfoll (2007) argues that "loss spirals" can occur where depleted resources prompt additional losses and resilient people or families cease to be so.

Most treatments of resilience are concerned with equipping individuals with ways and means to counter stressors that may be personal, familial and environmental – they can be chronic or acute (Ungar, 2004). Resilience can be an outcome or a process. The unknown nature of unfolding events, however, and their magnitude makes human beings to a greater or lesser degree vulnerable. Capacities for coping and a belief that one will cope can become sedimented into habit and into a person's character. At a practical and common sense level, this is what we mean when we use the term resilience. It describes the person that we feel sure will habitually respond to difficult situations with energy, purpose and resolve. In schools, teachers and governors are focussed on how to develop resilience when it is otherwise lacking. Such questions arise on the basis of stimulating a persistence and motivation that can be applied to school work (Masten et al., 1995).

They refer, too, to helping children cope with set-back and failure in realistic and growth-oriented ways. Overall, resilience is both a property of the child and an interactional process and outcome. Wolf summarizes the many features of resilience that are relevant to school settings:

*Resilience is an enduring aspect of the person. Genetic and other constitutionally based qualities both determine and are in turn modified by life experiences. Good intelligence plays a major part, as does an easy, adaptable, sociable temperament that, together with an appealing appearance; attract positive responses from others which in turn contribute to that inner sense of self-worth, competence and self-efficacy that has repeatedly been identified as a vital component of resilience. The sources of such positive responses are threefold: primary relationships within the family; the network or relationships with adults and children outside the family; and competence and achievement (Wolff, 1995).*

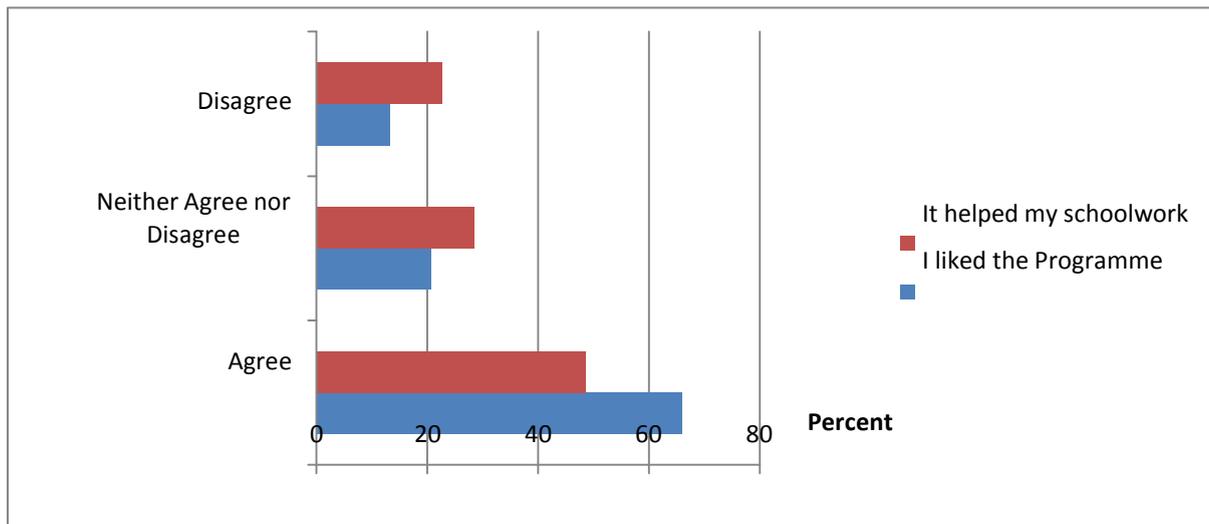
Let us now turn to more practical applications of resilience in two different settings: the military and the Penn Resiliency Programme in UK schools.

### **Learning from other contexts and interventions**

#### The Penn Resiliency Programme

The Penn Resiliency Programme, devised by USA psychologist Martin Seligman and others, was trialled in 22 UK schools with 1952 Year 7 pupils. The Programme aims to help children cope with common problems. It applies a cognitive behavioural approach and targets thinking patterns and techniques in a workshop setting. It teaches optimism, realistic and flexible thinking along with assertiveness, creativity, decision making and relaxation etc. Originally, it was designed to treat depression and in UK it has been evaluated using depression and anxiety scores. Information shown has been selected from official reports and presented here in different ways (Challen et al., 2010). UK trials of the Penn Resiliency Programme involved 18 hours of teaching and facilitation over a similar number of weeks. Evaluation was achieved by self-reporting questionnaires before and after the intervention, and a control group was surveyed too. Many facilitators reported that small group size (15), the development of emotional skills, and encouraging life skills were important features of the intervention.

Chart 1 – Participant satisfaction and effect on schoolwork



Pupil satisfaction with the programme was, on the whole, reportedly good (Chart 1). However, less satisfaction was claimed by children starting the 18 weeks, with higher levels of anxiety, depression or behaviour problems. Possibly this is because they found discussing personal problems distressing - perhaps more so when surrounded by pupils without such difficulties. Nearly 50% of pupils also claimed that participation helped their school work (Chart 1), and satisfaction levels were reportedly higher when the programme took place on a regular basis such as once a week.

Data were also collected from facilitators and most (73%) said that some groups of children benefitted more from the programme than others, especially those with high ability and those lacking in confidence or who were shy. Similarly, 65% of facilitators said that other groups of children benefitted less than others, notably those who were less able and those who had behaviour difficulties or were disengaged. Nevertheless, many pupils said that their problems were better after the intervention (Chart 2), with a small but still worrying number stating that things had gotten worse.

Participants also reported engagement in positive interactions during the workshops and felt, to some extent, understood by their teacher and fellow pupils (Chart 3). They also claimed comfort with the setting and style of workshop. Over 75% of pupils liked their class teacher and many claimed that what they had learned could make them happier (60%). Over 40% experienced

improved relationships with their family and approximately 50% disagreed with the statement that they did not learn anything to help them behave well.

Chart 2 – Perception of problems after participation

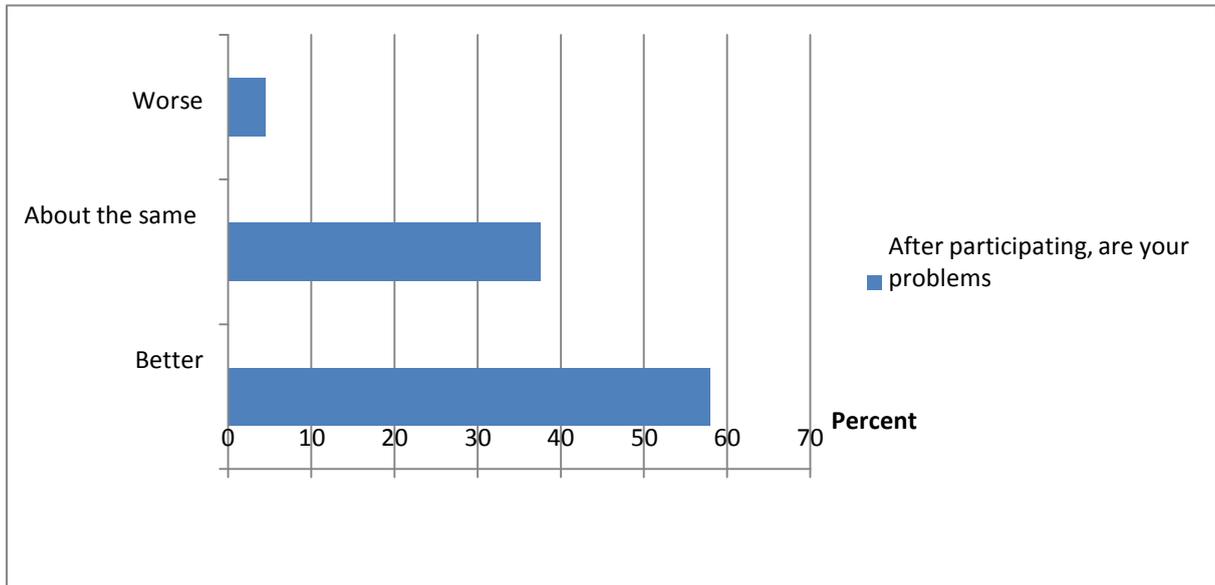
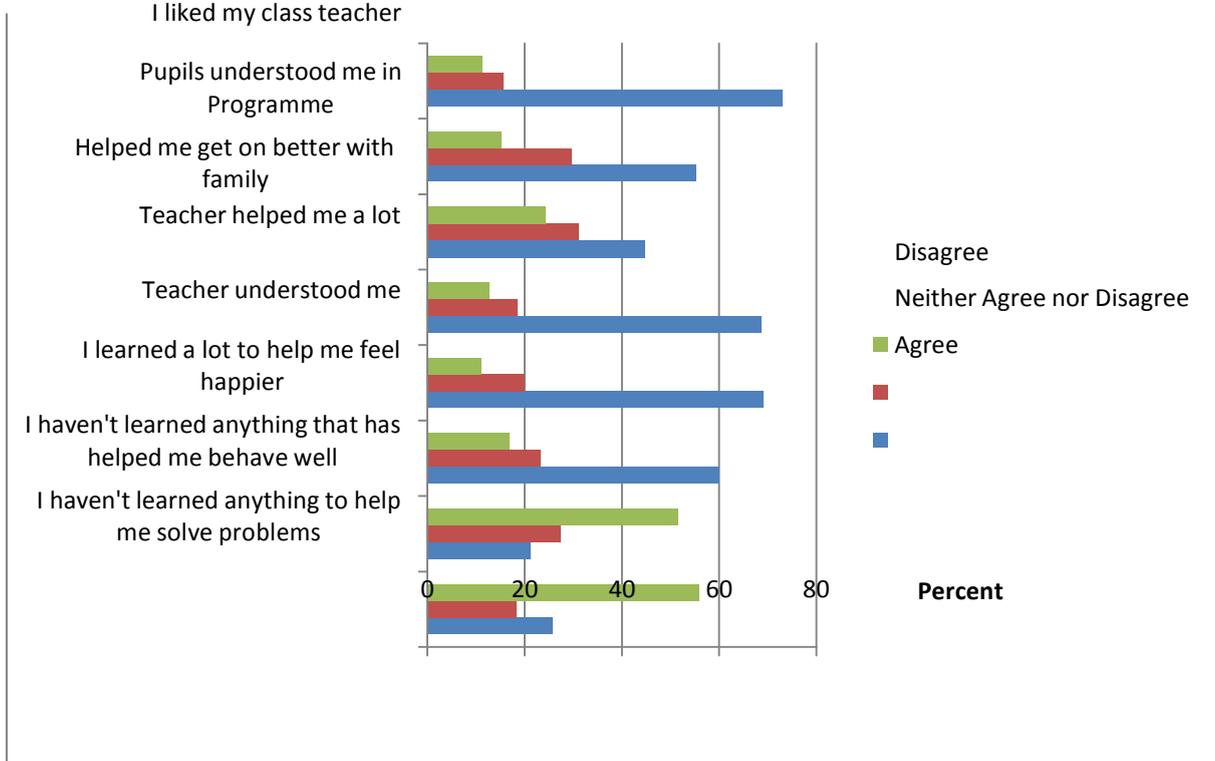
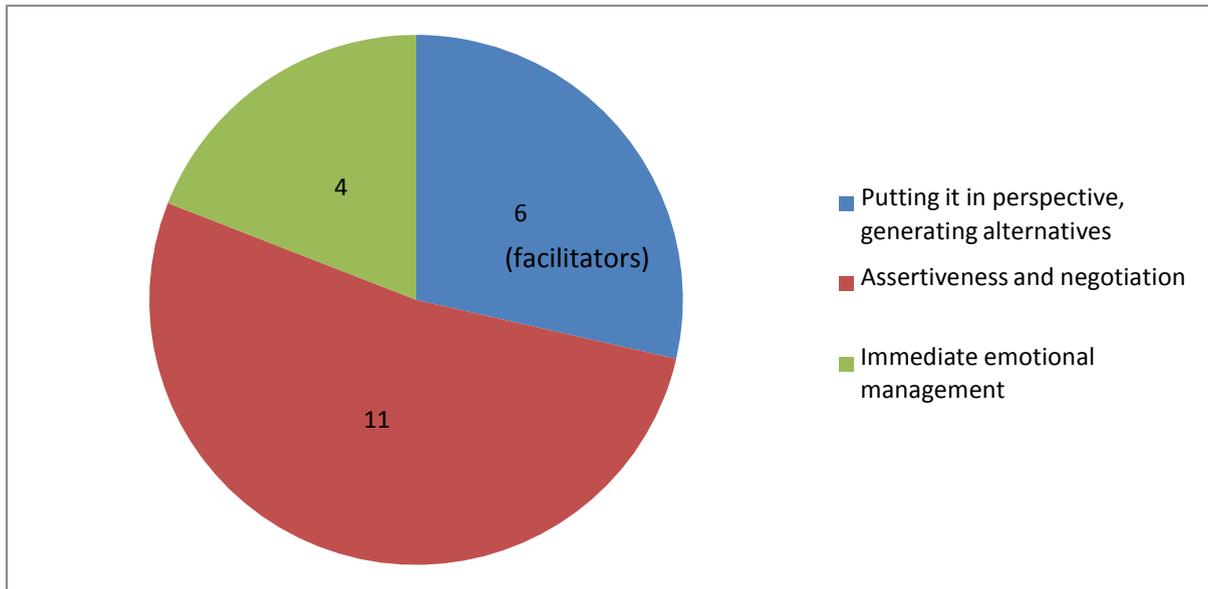


Chart 3 – Comfort, happiness, behaviour and problem solving



Collectively, facilitators interacted with many pupils. They emphasized three specific outcomes or improvements in terms of skills that were demonstrated by the pupils. The number of facilitators reporting each outcome is shown below (Chart 4).

Chart 4 – Skills demonstrated by pupils in other contexts



The facilitators claimed that these skills (putting in perspective, assertiveness and negotiation and emotional management) have been applied outside of the programme by the same pupils (Chart 5, below). In particular, these skills were reportedly applied to conflict management with family (6 facilitators) and peers (7 facilitators), and towards achieving positive social skills (3 facilitators).

Chart 5 – Areas of application for learnt skills



The Penn Resiliency Programme, as trialled in UK schools, was a didactic intervention that placed a heavy burden on facilitators. Some facilitators struggled with this style and others had difficulty dealing with personal disclosures made by a few pupils. On the whole, pupils were more welcoming of its style of delivery and enjoyed the chance to talk about themselves. They also appreciated that writing was not necessary and, as recorded above, described a number of positive outcomes and experiences.

Overall, short-term improvements are the most celebrated result. These were achieved on depression scores for participating pupils, on their school attendance and on some academic attainment in English. These effects, however, did not persist beyond the academic year although longer term improvements occurred among small numbers of lower achieving groups. The Programme had no impact on life satisfaction scores. The Penn Resiliency Programme will be revisited later in the paper after looking at resilience building in a military context.

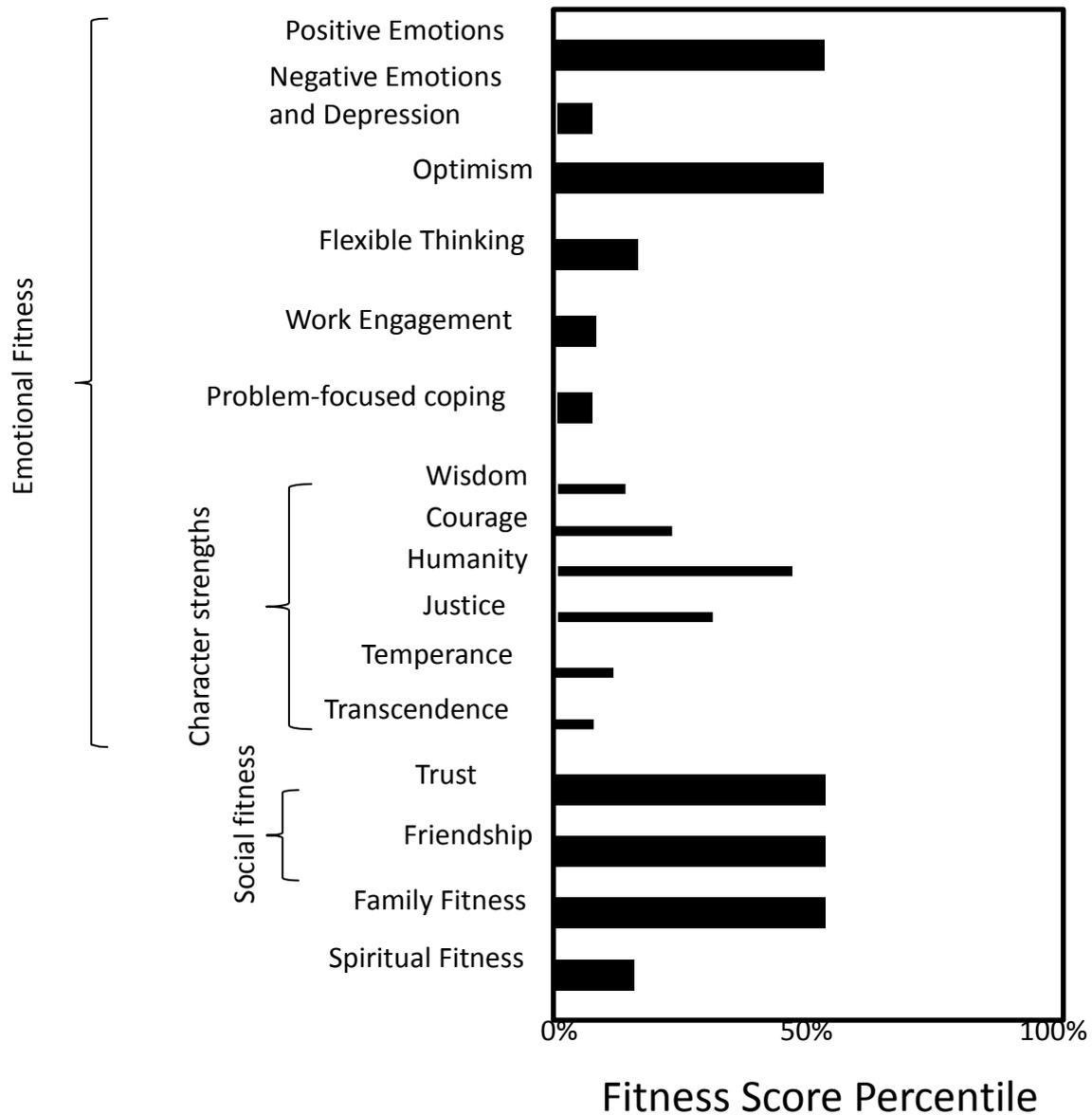
#### Building resilience in a military context

Resilience is chiselled into the fabric of military culture. Solomon's (1954) classic study shows how Army "self-conception is formed in personal interaction with others" (Solomon, 1954). Recruits internalised attributes required of them as a consequence of the way that they were progressively treated. In military environments, a sense of oneself as a resilient person is developed in mostly interactional, practical and experiential ways. Nevertheless, the collapse of military resilience is a regular occurrence (e.g. Post traumatic stress and problems associated with retirement (Walker, 2013).

The US Army has developed a new approach to building resilience based on positive psychology (Martin Seligman). The global assessment tool (Seligman, 2011:136) is central, compulsory, new and radical but has concerning reach into personal lives. An example of an individual assessment is reproduced in Chart 6 below to show which features of a person's life are believed conducive to maximising the chances that they will be resilient. The officer concerned is thought to be essentially resilient but would benefit, it is argued, from developing a stronger sense of purpose and better flexible thinking. This will improve his responses to - and recovery from - unfolding challenges.

Further training is suggested for this officer including a programme such as the Penn Resiliency Programme (for the military).

Chart 6 – Global Assessment Tool scores for a male lieutenant from Seligman’s book: ‘Flourish’



Resilience in military settings has also been systematically reviewed by a major research institute, RAND (Meredith, Sherbourne et al., 2011). They examined a vast literature and 23 existing military and civilian resilience interventions to identify factors for promoting psychological resilience in military settings. This work shifted emphasis from resilience as a substantive entity towards factors that may bring it about to claim that resilience is predominantly a by-product of other efforts and relationships. In military contexts, there are 4 levels where factors that promote resilience cluster: individual, family, unit and community.

Separating resilience into factors likely to bring it about helped the authors of this report realise that much of this is already being taught, developed or occasioned in military communities although it was not always being measured or recognised. One conclusion was to bolster and enhance this existing provision and to devise measurement instruments. Similarly, in schools, many of these factors are already being developed in different ways and mapping this sort of existing provision to the development of resilience might aid improvement and/or reveal gaps. Moreover, once 'unit' is removed, the remaining 3 factors map onto a school context (Table 1).

Table 1 – Factors Promoting Resilience

Individual	Family	Community
Positive coping Positive affect Positive thinking Realism Behavioural control Physical fitness Altruism	Emotional ties Communication, Support Closeness Nurturing Adaptability	Belongingness Cohesion Connectedness Collective Efficacy

## Conclusion

The aim of this paper is to generate ideas about how resilience might best be developed in UK schools based on a very brief review of two interventions in different contexts. Although the UK Penn Resiliency Programme achieved short term improvements, results did not persist. The intervention is short-term and reactionary. Based in cognitive developmental approaches, it champions mental agility in the face of difficulty. The reactionary nature of the programme - and to some extent of the concept of resilience - might lead to the teaching of 'resilient' techniques that in the short term are effective, but in the longer term may contribute to a poor way of life that is likely to attract further difficulty. This weakness of the programme - linked also to the amoral nature of resilience - is slightly less of a difficulty for the military Global Assessment Tool because it, at least, addresses the complete person including character strengths connected to a broader aim of a flourishing life, albeit in the context of a defined and clear military purpose that will obviously be absent from school or other settings. The much broader lessons that stand out from examining these two interventions and associated literatures are not all new but seem fundamental and are reiterated

below:

- Giving comfort, protection, love, support, clear standards and firm control is the first building block for resilient children. Schools should be prepared to provide this whether it is present or absent in families.
- Developing meaning in life is the second main building block towards resilience. This requires more than positive thinking techniques. Schools might help pupils to develop meaning for their lives as a whole – they can draw on religious, philosophical (e.g. flourishing), or other compensatory factors of resilience to achieve this.
- Traditionally, the military builds resilience through interaction in practical and experiential ways. Schools might do much more of this, although clearly there are significant limits to the extent that military ways can be applied in schools.
- Resilience is better understood as an overall record or judgement about the presence or absence of other factors known to contribute to individual capacities to cope and grow (see Table 1 and Hill et al for more individual factors).
- Possibly, many schools are already developing component factors for resilience. Identifying, measuring and monitoring these factors would improve the development of resilience in schools.
- Resilience is contextual. No one can be sure that a person will prove resilient if it is not entirely a property or possession of the person. Resilience transfers poorly between domains. Pupils ought to be helped to experience and deal with failure and risk.
- Workshop style interventions (Penn Resiliency Programme) may be popular and useful in the short-term for many pupils, but should be connected with wider systems of meaning and the school ethos. This kind of intervention can cause harm to some children and this needs to be prevented.

In common sense terms, resilience is synonymous with being robust, with persevering and failing to give up. It involves taking what life throws at us and fighting through it. UK schools need to motivate children daily to want to learn. They must help them to become good people and citizens capable of facing challenges. Resilience involves a contextual process. It has limits even for Olympic gold medal winners (Hoy and Holmes) and toughened soldiers. Schools will do well to provide school-wide experiences in line with the points made above so that habits likely to bring about resilience can become internalised in the pupils' embodied dispositions, perceptions and feelings. This needs to be nurtured within the umbrella of a wider morality, not only to determine how, why and when resilience is necessary but also to permit credible accounts of self-respect for individuals when resilience runs out or ceases to be physically possible.

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