

In this issue

- 2 Being sunsmart all year round
- 4 'You are us': redefining resilience together
- 6 New wellbeing resources from ERO



ON THE COVER:

P2: 'Slip, slop, slap and wrap' may be a cliché, but it's also a good way to remind children about being smart in the sun at school.



Ed's LETTER



From the outside, I can understand how confusing the role of 'teacher' must seem sometimes, to those actually on the front line of education.

How far can – or should – a teacher go when it's plain that they have in their class students facing significant challenges outside the classroom? Especially since those challenges and risks can often manifest in school at any point on a continuum from disengagement, to disruption, all the way up to downright destructive behaviour.

Teachers by nature are of course an empathetic lot; they have after all devoted their professional lives to helping young people attain the knowledge and maturity that will become the means to their future wellbeing. But surely teachers must at times feel underprepared and under-resourced to do the right thing by everybody.

Professors Robyn Munford and Jackie Sanders of Massey University are leading a fascinating – and critically necessary – research project that I think can help teachers feel more confident in their contributions to the wellbeing of students facing complex challenges and risks.

The project is called Pathways to Youth Resilience, and it's a vast undertaking. Its purpose is to understand how services that come into contact with vulnerable students – be they mental health services, youth justice, or education – can be most effective in helping young people to thrive. Historically, most studies have tended to focus on one service model, but Pathways to Youth Resilience applies an ecological approach: a term that comes up often when talking with Robyn. This means that Robyn and her team have sought to understand troubled young people in the context of their environment: most often this is characterised by the significant adults, or lack thereof, in the lives of young people.

Robyn would first like to adjust teachers' understanding of the term 'resilience': she believes that so much historical research into the subject has been limited by an inquiry into resilience that starts from the assumption that the word refers to an innate character trait, a genetic inheritance. Rather, says Robyn, we should look at resilience as a process: resources arrayed around a young person, like strong connections to community and significant adults, that allow a child to become resilient.

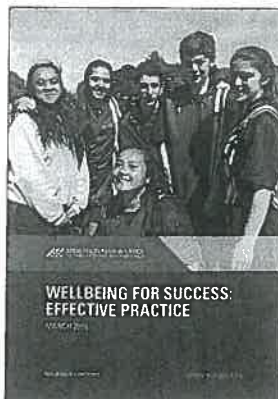
The upshot of course is, as many in education recognise, that society – including teachers – must work together to achieve the best outcomes. Robyn says that, from a teacher's point of view, it's as simple as seeing beyond behaviour to the young person who's simply reacting to the context they live day to day.

You can read more from my fascinating interview with Professor Munford on page 5.

In other news, this will be my last *Gazette Focus* as editor. I'd like to say that it's truly been a pleasure learning something of the work that teachers and others in and around education do to provide our young people with the tools that will help them become citizens we can all be proud of. I'd also like to thank all the teachers, researchers, service providers, and students themselves who have given me their time in helping me to understand something of education in New Zealand. I'm left with the sense that, while our system isn't perfect, and there will always be things to work on and new research that will challenge our thinking, we have an abundance of education personnel out there with an unquestionable passion and dedication for the furtherance of education's fundamental goals.

I know that my colleague Melissa Wastney – formerly of *New Zealand Science Teacher* – will apply that same dedication to the continuation of discussion on education. Good luck out there!

By Jaylan Boyle, Senior Journalist/Editor



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'YOU ARE US': REDEFINING RESILIENCE TOGETHER

A new Massey University study is intended to help teachers to contribute to the wellbeing of their students and enable them to become more engaged learners.

JAYLAN BOYLE
speaks with
research co-leader
Robyn Munford.

Pathways to Youth Resilience' and 'Long-term Successful Youth Transitions' are two facets of a longitudinal research programme funded by the Ministry for Business, Innovation and Employment (MBIE), that began in 2008 and will run until 2019. Its goal is to examine the ways in which services that come into contact with young people with complex needs can be successful in supporting them to thrive.

The programme began with a working definition of what is meant by 'young people with complex needs'. Robyn Munford, a professor of social work at Massey University and co-leader of the programme along with her colleague Professor Jackie Sanders, says this means young people who generally have a number of things in common.

"It's usually young people who've got disruptive attachments with their families and other positive adults. This is not just a socioeconomic thing – it's also things like transience around housing and not having strong relationships with adults."

The nationwide study involves 1,494 young people between the ages of 12 and 17, approximately 40 per cent of whom have been involved with two or more service systems that can include child welfare, juvenile justice, mental health and additional non-mainstream education systems.

The research programme is linked to its parent study at the Resilience Research Centre in Halifax, Canada, and both have been the first in the world to examine the links between service systems, and how experiences of them can influence outcomes for youth with complex needs. Instead of focusing on the success or otherwise of a particular service or service model, the study rather takes an ecological approach.

Robyn says that an ecological approach helps them to understand what's happening for vulnerable young people within their environment, which is why school is so important.

"School is a key domain," says Robyn. "Young people have a number of these domains, and school is crucial among them. If you're not in school, all sorts of things happen: you don't get access to the resources you need."

EVOLVING DEFINITIONS

Robyn believes that the word 'resilience' is often misused: we talk so often about a resilient individual, or a resilient community, when we're alluding to a person or group of people with the seemingly innate ability to withstand the challenges that life

and chance throw their way. Robyn says this definition simply doesn't go far enough, and actually prevents us from getting a clear understanding of what's required to foster resilience in young people.

The good news though, she says, is that research programmes like Pathways to Youth Resilience and Long-term Successful Youth Transitions are broadening our understanding of the concept of resilience and moving it away from a character trait to both a process and a function of the environment that has so much influence on the wellbeing of young people.

"A resilient person isn't someone who is born with the ability to bounce things off, it's someone who has resources arrayed around them. That's why we talk about 'negotiating and navigating to resilience'.

"One of the real cruxes of our study is that resilience isn't an outcome in itself. Everyone seems to be using the word resilience these days: resilient communities, resilient individuals. But resilience is a process, it's working toward positive wellbeing outcomes."

'HANDLING IT' ISN'T ENOUGH

Robyn believes also that we need to raise the bar in terms of the threshold at which we perceive a young person to be living with resilience. Simply 'handling it' cannot be seen as success, she says, and to do so is to fail young people who face these environmental challenges.

"We've previously said that 'young people have to be resilient to manage the risk in their environment'. But that's not appropriate is it? These are children we're talking about! Some of our subjects were 13 and 14 when we interviewed them. They need to be resilient to achieve good outcomes, not to manage risks. Risks that young people face need to be managed by communities.

"You can be resilient and still face risk and harm, because you've managed to survive those circumstances. But that's not actually good enough in New Zealand is it, that young people have, for example, dropped out of school to manage their risks, to look after their siblings or something similar. They need to be in school, they need to be enjoying sports and cultural events, and be able to participate in the normal and ordinary things in life that young people who are more fortunate than them are able to enjoy.

"Resilience shouldn't be separated from outcomes. It's about working with resilience to achieve good wellbeing outcomes."

LINKING UP

Robyn says that she and her team are hugely grateful to MBIE for funding such a vast project, and see it as an encouraging sign that both the state and academia are getting onto the same page and recognising that those services that deal with young people at risk must talk to each other. This, says Robyn, is one of her team's key findings so far.

"Often what you'll find is that a study will focus on just one service, but we've been allowed to focus on services overall: one of our key findings has been that, even when you have one good service, if some of the other service experiences aren't so positive, you don't necessarily get a good outcome. So it becomes about services working together. It's about mental health services working with care and protection, with justice, with education. A young person can have a fantastic service relationship with one provider, but if that's not lined up with other service interventions, it can undermine outcomes.

"That's what makes this research really exciting to be a part of – it's sector-wide. Government is saying at the moment – and education is part of that, of course – that we have to have joined-up, collaborative services.

"[Our research] is providing an evidential basis for change, people within these services can say, 'look, we have to talk to each other'."

"A resilient person isn't someone who is born with the ability to bounce things off, it's someone who has resources arrayed around them."

THE MESSAGE FOR TEACHERS

Robyn says that teachers shouldn't fear the weight of society's expectation, but should instead see themselves as a part of a child's ecology. It is society's responsibility to support teachers in helping young people to thrive.

"The message for education leaders and teachers is that keeping children in school is incredibly important, and that even if they need time out, or time in alternative education services, it's really important that they find and navigate pathways back.

She advises teachers with young people in their classes who they know have real challenges at home to "simply make sure you include them".

"It's really hard, because they may be really angry. But we do have to find a pathway in. Young people say to us, 'As soon as somebody found that pathway in, and looked past my anger, saw that my behaviour

was telling a story, which is, 'I'm pretty mad at the world', and they looked past my behaviour, and they saw me as a person, I felt like I wanted to engage. But when I was treated like I was a challenge, I didn't want to engage'.

"So we need to support teachers to be able to do that. What kind of environment do we want our school to have? Do we want our school to be an inclusive environment, where we acknowledge that we have young people with challenges, but we say, 'No young person should have to be stood down or expelled'? What are we going to do for the young people who find it hard to be in the classroom? Because the simple fact of the matter is that, if we can't do anything to provide a safe and supportive space for young people, they're going to end up in the criminal justice system. That's the almost inescapable trajectory."

This must be a schoolwide approach, says Robyn, for it to be successful.

"We have to give kids the idea that they're part of our team, part of our community – you are us. I heard a teacher the other day talking about a 'school clan', and I think that's just beautiful." ★



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